



HINDU
AMERICAN
FOUNDATION

**MEDIA
TOOL
KIT**



OMISSIONS
&
OVERSIGHTS

The **Hindu American Foundation** (HAF) is a human rights group whose purpose is to provide a voice for the 2 million strong Hindu American community. HAF interacts with and educates government, media, think tanks, academia and public fora about Hinduism and issues of concern to Hindus locally and globally. Promoting the Hindu and American ideals of understanding, tolerance and pluralism, HAF stands strong against hate, discrimination, defamation and terror.

The Hindu American Foundation is **not** affiliated with any religious or political organizations or entities. HAF seeks to serve Hindu Americans across all sampradayas (Hindu religious traditions).

FREQUENT ERRORS IN MEDIA COVERAGE OF HINDUISM

Hindu Americans comprise one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. The Hindu American population currently numbers around **2 million**, but this does not include the estimated **32 million** others who derive inspiration from Hindu spirituality and practice Hindu teachings such as yoga and meditation. With growing numbers comes an increasing awareness of a place in American dialogue and with rising alarm Hindu Americans note the dichotomy between their perception of the faith they practice and the faith that is described in mainstream media. Too often, media coverage of Hinduism relies on stereotypical fallacies and the analyses of Hindu “experts” who are rarely practicing Hindus themselves and lack insight into the faith that comes from such practice.

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) presents herein, some of the common omissions and oversights in media coverage of Hinduism. Each typical error, derived from actual references in print and broadcast media, is followed by elaborations and alternative suggestions in a collaborative effort to correct these inaccuracies. We sincerely hope these will be useful. Misrepresentations are not limited to this list.

MISREPRESENTATION #1: HINDUS ARE POLYTHEISTIC

"Hindus, for example, generally reject the idea of a vindictive god bringing destruction to the world, said Ariel Glucklich, an associate professor of theology at Georgetown University and a specialist in Hinduism. Krishna and other major gods who participate in human history are "always unfailingly on the side of good," he said." (Washington Post, January 8, 2005)

There are three common errors in this report. **Firstly**, Hindus worship one Supreme Being through many different names. Different regional beliefs, traditions and languages have created what appear to be many Gods understood in distinct ways. All forms of life are sacred. The implication of a community of many equal "major gods" is inaccurate. The Vedas, the scriptures sacred to all Hindus, speak of "Ekam sat vipraha bahudha vadanti" (Truth is one; the wise call it by many names). **Secondly**, describing the Hindu perception of God with a small 'g' is insulting to most Hindus, just as it is rarely found in association with depictions of the Judeo-Christian God. **Lastly**, the Gods are rarely referred to by their first names; Hindus would preface "Krishna" with the word, "Lord" or "God" purely out of respect.



MISREPRESENTATION #2: COW WORSHIP



"Some trace cow worship back to Lord Krishna, who is said to have first appeared as a cowherd and protector of cattle. Several other gods also lived for a time as cows, and the animals remain a powerful symbol of the religion." (The Associated Press, May 14, 2005)

Although Hindus respect and honor the cow, they **do not** worship them in the same sense in which they worship God. Hindus consider all living things to be sacred, an attitude reflected in reverence for the cow.

In Hinduism, the cow is seen as a generous, ever-giving source, which takes nothing but that which is necessary for its own sustenance in return. Hindus treat the cow with the same respect accorded to the mother, as the cow is a vital sustainer of life, providing milk and a means of ploughing the earth to grow crops. The cow received such status as a result of the historical need of early agrarian Hindu civilization. The Rig Veda (4.28.1;6) recorded, "The cows have come and have brought us good fortune. In our stalls, contented may they stay! May they bring forth calves for us, many-colored, giving milk for Indra each day. You make, O cows, the thick man sleek; to the unlovely you bring beauty. Rejoice our homestead with pleasant lowing. In our assemblies we laud your vigor."

The cow thus **represents** Hindu values of selfless service, strength, dignity, and ahimsa, or non-violence. For this reason, although not all Hindus are vegetarian, they traditionally abstain from eating beef.

MISREPRESENTATION #3: HOLY BOOKS

"The Bhagavad Gita is not as nice a book as some Americans think. Throughout the Mahabharata...Krishna goads human beings into all sorts of murderous and self-destructive behaviors such as war...The Gita is a dishonest book; it justifies war." (The Philadelphia Inquirer, November 19, 2000)

The Bhagavad Gita, perhaps Hinduism's most popularly revered text, is essentially a conversation between Lord Krishna and the great warrior Arjuna on the eve of the great battle depicted in the epic Mahabharata. Lord Krishna, a



manifestation of God, delivers a philosophical discourse on aspects of living the spiritual life towards attaining moksha, freedom from cycles of birth and death and living as one with God. Hinduism extols ahimsa, non-violence, and in more than 5,000 years of recorded history, Hindu rulers have never attacked a land in the name of religion or with the goal of conversion. Although considered a sacred text, the Gita does not claim ultimate authority on religious ideals, as, for example, the Christian Bible does for Christianity. The Vedas, a series of four ancient scriptures are treated as more authoritative texts.

Written in Sankrit the Vedas impart knowledge for living. The oldest portions date back as far as **6000 BCE**, making them the **oldest scriptures in the world**. The four Vedas are Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva. Each Veda has four sections, Samhitas – hymn collections, Brahmanas – priestly manuals, Aranyakas – forest treatises on philosophy and Upanishads – enlightened discourse.

MISREPRESENTATION #4: IDOL WORSHIP

"A Hindu temple houses idols of goddesses and gods, which are typically carved in stone or marble from India." (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, September 5, 2000)

The use of the word "idol" to refer to the representations Hindus use in worshiping God is inaccurate. There is **no** Sanskrit (the medium of Hindu scriptures) equivalent to the word "idol," and by definition, "idol" means a false god and "idol worship" refers to the worship of graven images. The correct term is *murti* and refers to a

powerful visual tool for contemplating the nature of God. In English, the closest word would be "deity."



Followers of Hinduism **do not** blindly worship idols, but use divine images, *murtis*, as focal points designed to be aides in meditation and prayer. Hindus **do not** consider God to be limited to the *murti*, but it is a sacred symbol that offers a medium for worship. Indeed, Hindus perceive only one God who is infinite and can be addressed in infinite ways and the multiple Gods and Goddesses are a manifestation of that infinite.

MISREPRESENTATION #5: KARMA

"At Mr. K's Party Shoppe in Utica, producer of one of the winning tickets, many of the unlucky were back at the counter today, hoping to ride good karma to victory in next week's drawing. "I guess they think we're the good luck store," said Melvin Kassab, son of the convenience store's owner." (Washington Post, May 11, 2000)

Karma is often misinterpreted to mean "luck" or "fate," something over which one has no control. However, the Vedas explain that every person is responsible for and in control of their own actions. Karma is the universal principle of action and reaction on physical, mental, and spiritual levels; our thoughts and actions will return to us in the future. Since each action has a reaction, the cycle of karma is endless. To avoid being trapped in this cycle Hindus endeavor to become unattached to the results of their thoughts and actions. When a person can act without thought of reward they are free of the cycle of karma.



MISREPRESENTATION #6: DOWRY

"Pooja's case was the latest in a series of well-publicized incidents in which brides have balked at dowry demands, suggesting that some young women are losing patience with the age-old Hindu tradition."
(The Washington Post, March 27, 2005)

Dowry is the practice of payment to the bridegroom's family by the bride's family along with the giving away of the bride during the marriage ceremony. The practice originated as a means of helping with marriage expenses and became a form of insurance against mistreatment by a bride's in-laws. Dowry was outlawed in 1961, but remains a social evil that is practiced across several religious traditions throughout South Asia. Dowry is **not** a part of Hindu tradition.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

HAF remains available to actively assist in obtaining information pertaining to Hinduism, offering Hindu perspectives on contemporary issues and providing access to a vast network of well-respected Hindu spiritual leaders and academics.

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