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# Hindutva Abroad

## The California Textbook Controversy

Purnima Bose

### ABSTRACT

This essay traces the ideological transformations that accompany Hinduism's passage to the United States. Specifically, the essay analyzes the 2005-2006 California textbook controversy in which some members of two diasporic groups, the Vedic Foundation and the Hindu Educational Foundation, lobbied to change the content of the sections on Hinduism and ancient Indian in sixth-grade history-social science textbooks. Their intervention in the textbook certification process was challenged by secular Hindus, South Asian progressives, and academics specializing in South Asian studies. In addition to outlining the relationship between these groups and militant Hindu groups in India, the essay considers how the arguments in favor of changing textbook content draw simultaneously on forms of cultural nationalism associated with the Civil Rights movement and with the dominant forms of religiosity in the United States. The HEF's and VF's attempts to alter textbook content reveal deep ideological fissures over historical knowledge in the Indian American diaspora between, on the one hand, those Hindus purporting to speak on behalf of the larger community, and, on the other hand, secular Hindus, South Asian progressives, and academics with a South Asia focus. At the same time, however, the ensuing debates underscore the importance of religion in staking epistemological claims about ancient history, the status of memory, and the construction of a collective diasporic identity.

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### INTRODUCTION

In this article I will consider the ideological transformations that accompany Hinduism's passage to the United States by using the 2005-2006 California textbook controversy for my observations on this particular brand of cultural nationalism.<sup>1</sup> During the certification process for sixth-grade history-social science textbooks in California, two organizations with ties to militant Hindu nationalist groups in India, the Hindu Educational Foundation (HEF) and

the Vedic Foundation (VF), complained vociferously about the educational content of the sections on Hinduism and ancient Indian history in these books. To correct what they perceived as stereotypical and inaccurate information on these topics, the two religious organizations submitted lists of revisions to the California State Board of Education (SBE). Many of the HEF's and VF's suggested additions to and deletions from the instructional materials were at odds with prevailing scholarship on these topics. Yet these organizations were able to mobilize their constituencies to lobby against the original textbooks and for their own modifications.

The HEF's and VF's attempts to alter textbook content reveal deep ideological fissures over historical knowledge in the Indian American diaspora between, on the one hand, those Hindus purporting to speak on behalf of the larger community, and, on the other hand, secular Hindus, Indian progressives, and academics with a South Asia focus. At the same time, however, the ensuing debates underscore the importance of religion in staking epistemological claims about ancient history, the status of memory, and the construction of a collective diasporic identity.

While religion has "no necessary political connotation," as Stuart Hall argues, it represents "a continuing force in modern life of cultural forms which have a prehistory long predating that of our rational systems" and can sometimes constitute "the only cultural resources which human beings have to make sense of their world" (Grossberg 143). As Terry Eagleton observes, religion offers a compelling ideological framework to interpret experience for a number of reasons: it speaks to our deepest existential fears about human suffering and death (often within a narrative structure of causality). It operates more through "image, symbol, habit, ritual, and mythology" than through "explicit concepts and formulated doctrines," creating an affective bond between believers. Religious truth claims cannot be ultimately verified, and thus are absolute in their assertions. Religion traverses social class by offering different kinds of engagement; for instance, it provides intellectual stimulation and theological exegesis for the intellectual elite while offering more pietistic practices for non-elite groups. As a result, religion has the capacity to act as a social adhesive by fusing different class segments within a single organization. Finally, it has a participatory dimension insofar as religion actualizes faith through material practices such as the Eucharist, the lighting of the menorah, ritual prayer at prescribed times of the day, or the distribution of prasad following puja (Eagleton 20). Given these characteristics, it is hardly surprising that Hinduism has become an identitarian outlet for Indians experiencing the cultural, social, and geographical dislocations associated with immigration, particularly in the last two decades.

Additionally, most contemporary cultural critics acknowledge the necessity of historicizing "the tendential lines of force" that articulate the religious

formation to political, economic, and ideological structures (Grossberg 142). Hall has stressed the permeable nature of religion and the ways its political and ideological meanings are not transhistorical, but arise from their specific conjuncture with progressive, mainstream, or reactionary cultural logics. In its transcontinental journey, Hinduism, which has a long tradition of theological pluralism on the subcontinent, has become increasingly weighted and encumbered with the baggage of militant religious nationalism. Dubbed “Yankee Hindutva” by Vijay Prasad, diasporic militant Hinduism in the United States has also been shaped by its encounters with cultural nationalism and identity politics in the United States, as well as the pervasive religiosity of contemporary North American life (133).<sup>2</sup> Leaving aside for now the links between Hindu diaspora organizations and militant Hindu groups in India, I want to situate Yankee Hindutva within its simultaneous articulation through two discursive formations in the US, which are evident in the textbook debate, one progressive and the other reactive: the rhetoric of civil rights and cultural nationalism, and mainstream religious fundamentalism. In articulating its project with these cultural logics, Yankee Hindutva promotes a conservative strand of Hinduism, aligned with the traditional elite, patriarchal elements of Indian society. Because of its success in mobilizing civil rights and cultural nationalist discourses, Yankee Hindutva has managed, in spite of its conservative social agenda, to win a sympathetic hearing from well-meaning North American liberals, who are rightly concerned with multiculturalism and the politics of representation in the United States.

## **DESI DIASPORA: TRENDS IN RECENT INDIAN IMMIGRATION**

Without rehearsing the entire history of Indian immigration to the United States since the first sighting of the “Man from Madras” in Salem, Massachusetts, by Reverend William Bentley in 1790, it is significant to note the demographic change in the nature of Indian immigration from the early and later halves of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Largely from rural backgrounds, Indian immigrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century primarily settled on the west coast and took up farming or construction as occupations.<sup>3</sup> Between 1820 and 1965, as a result of restrictive immigration laws aimed at limiting the number of non-Anglo migrants, less than 17,000 Indians immigrated and settled in the United States (Bhola 40). The composition of Indian immigration altered radically and increased dramatically after the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which abolished country-of-origin quotas, awarding instead visas on the basis of familial relationships or occupational skills. The latter category responded to the Cold War imperative to increase research and development of science and technology in the interests of national defense. These Cold War exigencies transformed the profile of Indian immigrants; unlike their counterparts in other parts

of the world who had migrated because of a demand for indentured workers following emancipation or in response to labor shortages after World War II, Indian immigrants to the United States were now highly educated and often members of the professional-managerial class (Lal 106-107).

Since 1965, there have been three major waves of Indian immigration to the United States. The first wave, 1965-1980, featured significant numbers of professional and technical immigrants; the second wave, from 1980-1995, consisted of corporate and entrepreneurial immigrants; and the third wave, from 1995-2007, marks the arrival of those employed in the software and information technology industries. In 2004, the US Census Bureau estimates that people of Indian origin—Indian Americans as well as Green Card holders—numbered 1,678,765. Of this population, roughly 72.3% are employed: 43.6% are in managerial and professional positions; 33.2% work in technical, sales and service jobs; and the remaining 23.3% are employed as skilled workers. People of Indian origin are primarily represented in the following occupations: medicine, engineering, law, information technology, international finance and management, higher education, and mainstream media (High Level 169-171). Given their representation in these professions, it is not surprising that they constitute the wealthiest immigrant group in the United States, earning a median family income roughly \$20,000 more than other families.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it is this profile that has led to the construction of Indian Americans as a monolithic class formation that embodies the model minority. Notwithstanding the economic success of the majority of Indian immigrants, according to the 2000 US Census, in reality 9.8% of them live below the poverty level. Indian taxi drivers, factory workers, newsstand hawkers, convenience store clerks, and farmers also populate the US workforce and have a tenuous economic status relative to the more visible elite segments of the Indian diaspora.<sup>5</sup>

Most Indian immigrants are geographically concentrated among the perimeter states, with significant populations in California (314,819), New York (251,724), New Jersey (169,180), and Texas (129,365) (US-India). In spite of concentrated populations in these states, Indian immigrants are the most geographically dispersed of all Asian immigrant groups in the United States. But they have generally shied away from settling in six states: two states report fewer than 500 residents who are of Indian descent: Montana (379) and Wyoming (354); and four other states have fewer than 1,000: Alaska (723), North Dakota (822), South Dakota (611), and Vermont (858). While metropolitan areas such as Chicago and New York City have “Little Indias,” Devon Street (Indianized as “Diwan Street” by immigrants) and Jackson Heights respectively, which act as cultural and consumer hubs for Indians in surrounding areas, immigrants in the less-heavily populated states tend to form “reference communities” rather than cluster into ethnic neighborhoods. For Indian immigrants in non urban areas, community formation occurs through member-

ship and participation in a variety of overlapping secular, cultural, linguistic, and religious groups and associations (Bhola 45).

## HINDUTVA AT HOME AND ABROAD

That debates about the representation of Indian history in textbooks should surface in California does not seem unusual given that the state has the largest and oldest Indian immigrant community in the country, along with the general importance of religious and cultural associations in the diaspora. As I have suggested, Indian Americans are not a monolithic group. Yet in the debate regarding the certification of sixth-grade history books, the most conservative Hindu elements among them have had some success in claiming to represent the whole community. For these sectarian Indian Americans, the controversy is one step in the march to insert a narrow interpretation of Hinduism and ancient Indian history into textbooks in other states.

Every six years, the California State Board of Education (SBE) reviews educational materials for its core subjects (History-Social Science, Mathematics, Reading/Language Arts, Science). In 2005, the history-social science texts were up for evaluation. As mandated, the SBE makes the proposed textbooks available for public scrutiny and commentary. During public hearings at the end of September 2005, representatives of several Islamic, Jewish, and Hindu organizations testified to problematic aspects of the educational materials. The HEF and VF charged that the textbooks' representations of Hinduism and ancient Indian history were demeaning and stereotypical, and offered lists of suggested corrective additions to and deletions from the instructional materials.<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, the textbooks contained some inaccurate and insensitive material, which understandably raised the ire of Hindus and required correction. For instance, one textbook explained that Hindi is written in the 18-letter Arabic script. Another cheekily titled a section on vegetarianism, "Where's the Beef?" A third described Hanuman, a simian character from the *Ramayana*, as "a monkey king," who "loved Ram so much that it is said that he is present every time the *Ramayana* is told." This book instructed students to "Look around--see any monkeys?" While complaints about the textbooks' references to Wendy's commercials and royal monkeys are legitimate, the HEF and VF sought to interject more problematic content in the texts, proposing over 200 edits that promoted their understanding of Indian history and a parochial view of Hinduism at odds with the ways in which the fabric of Indian culture has been historically constituted by multiculturalism and religious pluralism. The majority of their edits gloss over unsavory aspects of the religion and attempt to make Hinduism more palatable for American sensibilities.

Among the HEF's and VF's alterations are the ideas that speakers of Indo-European languages ("Aryans") should be represented as indigenous to India

instead of migrating from elsewhere; the caste system should be explained in more benign terms as an institution based on a division of labor; the word “Dalits” (the name for groups formerly known as “untouchables”) should be excised from textbooks; Hinduism should be described as a monotheistic faith; and references to women’s oppression should be omitted.<sup>7</sup> Combined, these changes equate the history of ancient India with the history of Hinduism, and reduce a diverse set of religious practices and beliefs to those associated with the patriarchal, Brahmanical perspective while marginalizing the vital contributions of religious minorities, women, Adivasis (tribals) and Dalits to Indian history.

There are two major problems with the HEF’s and VF’s edits. First, they are not consistent with prevailing scholarship on Indian history. Second, they represent a sectarian perspective aligned with extremist Hindu groups in India such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), which have been responsible for numerous violations of civil liberties and human rights against religious minorities, women, Dalits, and Adivasis. Both the RSS and VHP belong to the militant Hindu conglomerate known as the Sangh Parivar, which champions the transformation of India’s secular democracy into a Hindu nation. At the ideological level, militant Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva, has evolved into a distinct form of fascism that creates an opposition between “insiders” and “outsiders,” seeking to assert Hindu religious identity in nationalist and culturalist terms.<sup>8</sup> In the 1930s, Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, a founding figure of the RSS revered as “Guruji,” ominously declared that “The non-Hindu peoples of Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu race and culture... [In] a word they must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen’s rights” (qtd. in Bhatt 130). Golwalkar’s statement offers limited options for non-Hindus, ranging from assimilation to second-class status to expulsion from the Indian polity. These choices tally with Hindutva’s complex classification of religious minorities. At times some groups, such as the Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains, are understood as Hindus, or other times as non-Hindus and made into “objects of integration.” Groups who have been historically oppressed by the upper castes, such as Dalits and Adivasis, are claimed as Hindu. Yet other groups including Muslims, Christians, Parsis, and Jews are posited as outside the nation, because their origins are deemed to be territorially external despite their centuries-long presence on the subcontinent (Sabrang). This view is also ironic insofar as many Muslims and Christians were once Hindus, as conversion to these religions has historically been a means of social mobility for the lower castes.

Golwalkar and other RSS leaders found valuable pedagogical models in fascism. While he was not fixated on racial purity, Golwalkar was clearly en-



amored with Nazism as an exemplum. “To keep up the purity of the race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic races—the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here,” he approvingly noted, “Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by” (35). Italian fascism also provided a valuable pedagogical model for the RSS. According to Marzia Casolari, Balkrishna Shivram Moonje, one of the chief architects of the RSS’s organizational structure, visited Italian educational institutions and military schools and met with Mussolini in 1931. A diary entry of his dwells enthusiastically on the “military regeneration of Italy” and the parallels between Italians and Indians as “ease-loving and non-martial” peoples (qtd. in Casolari 220). His diary explains that

Mussolini saw the essential weakness of his country and conceived the idea of the Balilla organization... Nothing better could have been conceived for the military organization of Italy... The idea of fascism vividly brings out the conception of unity amongst people... India and particularly Hindu India need some such institution for the military regeneration of the Hindus. (qtd. in Casolari 220)

Patterned on these lines, the RSS cell structure also emphasized physical training for young people and glorified militarism.

Although the current leadership of the Sangh Parivar is more circumspect in expressing admiration for the Third Reich and Mussolini, their ideology draws from these earlier antecedents. Chauvinistic values and contempt for religious minorities, Dalits, and women are expressed in a muscular, patriarchal vocabulary that casts Hindus as victims of aggression, justifying violence against others as a form of self-defense. The Sangh Parivar perceives women as both goddesses and harlots, who require either protection or punishment. Hindu masculinity is figured through the idiom of a higher-caste warrior (Kshatriya) identity that valorizes the male body and physical culture (Ahmad 13).<sup>9</sup>

These beliefs have been actualized in pogroms against religious minorities, in which women have been subjected to gender-specific forms of violence. In its 2003 report on religious freedom in India, the US State Department suggests that the “institutionalization” of Hindutva has led to human rights abuses against Christians, Adivasis, Sikhs, and Muslims and a curtailment of religious freedom (US Department). Some of the most widespread attacks have been against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, and more recently in Orissa against religious minorities.<sup>10</sup> In February 2002, 58 people, including many women and children, died when two train carriages carrying Hindu activists caught fire.<sup>11</sup> Rumors that Muslims had deliberately torched the train rapidly spread. In the days that followed, Hindus retaliated by killing over 2,000 people, most of them



Muslims, and by looting and burning businesses, homes, and mosques. Human Rights Watch reports that “scores of Muslim girls and women were brutally raped... before being mutilated and burnt to death” (Human). Moreover, it identifies the VHP, RSS, Bajrang Dal (militant youth corps), and the Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP], a political party, as perpetrators of this violence (Human).<sup>12</sup>

The Sangh Parivar mounted an ideological assault later that year through the ruling BJP-lead coalition, which reorganized the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) responsible for educational policy. The coalition appointed new officers to NCERT and outlined an agenda in keeping with the major tenets of the Hindutva movement. A crucial aspect of this sectarian makeover was the removal of textbook passages authored by eminent historians and the production of new books that reflected the Sangh Parivar’s peculiar understanding of Indian history (Sen 63; Delhi). Some books, for example, omitted the fact that Mahatma Gandhi had been assassinated by an RSS acolyte. In the 2004 elections, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) ousted the coalition from office, pledging to “take immediate steps” to reverse the sectarian trend of education under its predecessors (US Department). The UPA is currently in the process of revising the older texts and producing more historically-accurate ones, which are available online.<sup>13</sup>

While the approbation for Hitler and Mussolini expressed by RSS founders, along with the RSS’s, VHP’s, Bajrang Dal’s and BJP’s appalling human rights records, are common knowledge in India, they are less well publicized in the United States. W. James Booth has remarked on the necessity of invoking memory in discussions of group identity to ask how “the sameness, the selfhood, of the group or political community across time and change” (and, I might add, space) is constituted (3). Rather than draw on the global memory of human rights atrocities against religious minorities on the subcontinent or acknowledge the regard that militant Hindu organizations have for earlier forms of fascism, diasporic Hindu culture in the US tends to localize memory by articulating it with religious practices specific to its US context and by projecting these practices as universal and perennial among its faithful. Even as the Hindu diaspora has a fundamental diachronic dimension, operating very much in the present tense and positioning itself for future collective action, concern over recent violence seems surprisingly muted.<sup>14</sup> These immigrants privilege ancient India as the basis of their construction of the past, imaginatively creating it as a golden age of ideal social relations characterized by harmonious gender dynamics, benign caste interactions, and an absence of religious conflict.

## THE HINDUIZING MISSION

As the chart below demonstrates, the Indian based RSS has spread its tentacles worldwide by affiliating with the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS),

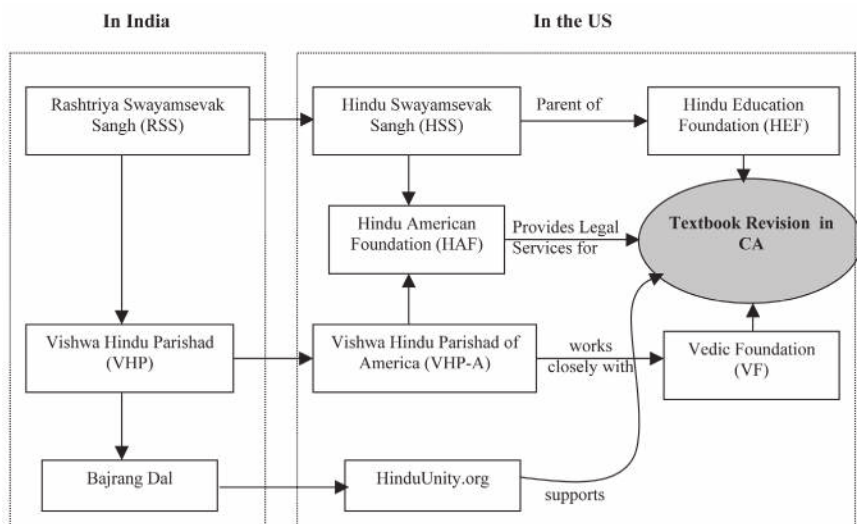


Figure 1. The RSS's global reach.

which in turn has propagated chapters in the US, England, Trinidad, Hong Kong, and the Netherlands [See Figure 1]. While the HSS (US) is registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit cultural organization and public charity, its website not only features a link to the RSS, but also describes its mission as “ideologically inspired by the RSS vision of a progressive and dynamic Hindu society that can deal with its internal and external challenges, and contribute to the welfare of the whole world” (Hindu “FAQ”). On its website, we find the HEF is “an educational project of Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh” that “strives to replace... various misconceptions with a correct representation of India and Hinduism” (Hindu “Bhoudik”).<sup>15</sup> Alluding to the California textbook controversy, a US-based activist underscored the connections between the three groups at a December 2005 conference of RSS and HSS cohorts in India. “Through the Hindu Education Foundation run by the RSS in California,” he boasted, “we have succeeded in correcting the misleading information in text books for primary and secondary classes” (qtd. in Times).

Although the HEF’s resources page includes a link to the VF, describing it as a “similar project,” the VF’s Sangh Parivar affiliations are not legible on its own website (Hindu “Resources”). Formed in 2003, its connections to Hindutva groups consist of the fact that it is housed in the Barsana Dham, a temple in Austin, Texas, which hosts VHP conferences and dignitaries such as Ashok Singhal (the Working President of VHP India) and B.K. Modi (the Working President-External Affairs of VHP India) (Anthropology). Oddly, for an organization lobbying to alter the content of educational materials, the VF’s website is replete with imaginative word forms (“despisations” and “con-

solence”) and malapropisms (“descension” for “descendant”). Much of the rhetoric on this site also echoes that of the HSS, particularly its emphasis on the necessity of promoting “authentic” Hinduism to counter “the anti-God elements” pervasive in our times (VF “What”). Members of these organizations seem especially concerned about transmitting an authentic form of Hinduism to their children, who risk exposure to American morals and values deemed inferior to Indian ones.

Were the parent organizations of the HEF and VF not downright frightening, their understanding of history and Hinduism might be comical. The first entry under “resources” on the HEF’s website, for instance, leads to a page called, “A Tribute to Hinduism.” Quoting everyone from Carl Sagan to Frijtof Capra to Robert Oppenheimer, the site asserts that ancient India had everything from supersonic airplanes to electric trains to nuclear weapons. This site also brags that ancient India has the distinction of being the only destination in the world for UFOs, while the Aryans made it to the moon. Scientific-minded readers can be assured that

Vedic technology does not resemble our world of nuts and bolts, or even microchips. Mystic power, especially manifest as sonic vibration plays a major role. The right sound—vibrated as a mantra, can launch terrible weapons, directly kill, summon beings from other realms, or even create exotic aircraft. (Vimanas)<sup>16</sup>

Such quotations illustrate Vinay Lal’s contention that the “postindustrial civilization of North American Hindus” is paradoxically also “a Vedic civilization,” in which the conception of India “is largely derived from the texts and practices of remote antiquity, which supposedly furnish us with a vision of Hinduism in its pristine state” (106). Thus, for these Indian American Hindus many scientific and technological discoveries are already anticipated and described in the Vedas or other ancient Hindu texts. Similar to Christian and Islamic fundamentalism, Vedic Hinduism employs an interpretive strategy of literalism, taking descriptions of divine visions, magical weapons, and flying vehicles from the Hindu epics the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, for instance, at face value as accurate representations of historical reality.

As strange as the HEF’s account of Vedic technology is the VF’s chronology of Indian history and Hinduism. According to the VF, the “Hindu religion was first revealed 111.52 trillion years ago” (before the Big Bang apparently) (Vedic “Do”). Hinduism appears prior to Indian history which, the website claims, is dated as “1972 million years ago,” making it roughly 1.7 billion years older than the dinosaurs (Vedic “Do”). Like the HEF’s resources, the VF insists on India’s singular status, perhaps explaining what made it so attractive for UFO landings:

India... is such a place on the earth planet which is not much affected by the natural calamities and disasters like the ice age and the prolonged spine chilling, icy cold storms and blizzards that happen in America and the European countries at the beginning and at the recessing period of these ice ages. Thus, the history of the uninterrupted survival of the civilization of India... goes back to an unbelievable period of time which could easily be said to be the beginning of the human civilization on the earth planet, whereas the history of the other countries of the world is the history of only 6,000 to 8,000 years. (Vedic “Unbroken”)<sup>17</sup>

The VF’s site is invested in asserting the primacy and superiority of India’s civilizational origins. Significantly, while Indian history is claimed to have begun prior to other civilizations, India itself is not identified as the source of a global humanity, nor does it appear part of such a configuration. Lal notes that “diasporic Hindus can routinely invoke Indian civilization with a self-assurance that, [to] an Indian in India, would at once provoke mockery and consternation” (111). In promoting the superiority of Indian civilization and India’s climate history, the site seems oblivious to the irony of its status as a diasporic cultural artifact, ignoring the contradiction of trumpeting India as a singularly-exalted place in the face of migration elsewhere.

## **SCHOLARS AND PROGRESSIVES STRIKE BACK**

Given these views on history, it is little wonder that the HEF’s and VF’s foray into the California educational system has alarmed academics specializing in South Asian studies, progressive Hindus, and secular South Asian community groups. In early November 2005, 47 internationally-renowned scholars of ancient India, including Romila Thapar, 2003 Kluge Chair in Countries and Cultures of the South at the Library of Congress, and Michael Witzel, Wales Professor of Sanskrit at Harvard University, expressed their objections to the HEF’s and VF’s interventions in a letter to the SBE. Characterizing the textbook changes as “unscholarly” and “politically and religiously motivated,” the letter alerted California officials that similar campaigns to alter textbooks in India had been rejected by government authorities and that the adoption of the proposed edits in the US would “lead without fail to an international educational scandal” (Witzel). Another letter followed in early December, signed by over 140 US-based scholars of South Asia, many of South Asian descent, protesting the changes proposed by the HEF and VF. This letter urged the SBE to recognize the “complex and pluralistic” nature of Hinduism, along with the necessity of speaking frankly about “the historical relationship of Hinduism to the ongoing and debilitating inequality of the caste system” and discrimination against women (South).

At this juncture, South Asian community groups such as Friends of South Asia (FOSA), the Ambedkar Center for Justice and Peace, the Federation of Tamil Sangams of North America, and the Coalition Against Communalism began weighing into the debate. In a series of public hearings held by the SBE between January and March 2006, parents, university students, working professionals, and first-generation immigrants eloquently testified to the importance of presenting children with accurate, scholarly information on all aspects of ancient Indian history, including unpleasant ones such as the caste system and the oppression of women. Some of the most moving statements came from individuals who had personally experienced caste oppression. "The caste system is the single most important repressive social phenomenon that has been unique to Hinduism for over 3,000 years and should therefore find a place in the textbooks," declared Rama Krishna Bhupathi, a Dalit (qtd. in FOSA Victory). Concerned parent Thillai Kumaran, who identified his lower-caste origins during his testimony, strenuously objected to the textbooks' suggestion that the caste system is no longer relevant in modern India. "Hinduism continues to affect the social status of people in India, and has condemned millions of Dalits as social outcasts," he said (qtd. in Friends "Victory").

Kumaran was alluding to the fact that although articles 15, 16, and 17 of the Indian constitution abolish "untouchability" and ban caste discrimination, in actuality caste status continues to be the grounds on which individuals and groups are excluded from education; have restricted access to hospitals, water sources, and places of worship; are subject to land evictions, channeled into physical labor or demeaning occupations, and sometimes denied basic civil liberties and human rights (United). In its March 2007 report, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination concluded that India's compliance with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in relation to the protection of Dalits was woefully inadequate. Even more alarming, the report documents routine violations of Dalits' right to life and security of person through state-sponsored or -sanctioned acts of violence, including torture. Dalit women, it notes, face multiple forms of discrimination and are frequent targets of sexual abuse. State and private perpetrators are rarely prosecuted for these crimes (United; Human "India").

In spite of the diverse opposition to the HEF's and VF's edits, which included many South Asians, the two Hindu organizations initially drew on the binary terms of colonial discourse, constructing the debate as a simplistic opposition between white, secular, elite intellectuals and brown, ordinary believers, who could lay claim to possessing an authentic knowledge of Hinduism. They also assumed the representational privilege to speak for the "Indian American community." Elsewhere I have written about the ways in which the term "community" gets invoked by specific segments of the South Asian diaspora to advance their interests, noting that it can be defined along the lines of Benedict

Anderson's concept of the nation as "an imagined political" entity conceived as both "inherently limited and sovereign" (Bose 152). Unlike Anderson's definition, however, the value of the term "community" resides in its refusal to name its limits and boundaries, even as it retains the "sovereign" inflections of Anderson's definition of the "nation" in the piety of its rhetoric. The effectiveness of invocations of the "community" for the purposes of mobilizing segments of the South Asian diaspora requires that the term remain elastic, stretching to accommodate members of the group who at other times would be denied inclusion.

## ANTI-COLONIAL NATIONALISM VERSUS CULTURAL NATIONALISM

Given the resonances of the term "nation" as a means of understanding diasporic cultural politics, it might be useful to briefly outline some distinctions between nationalism and cultural nationalism. As Eqbal Ahmad has observed, nationalism is based on an epistemology of difference in which the subject posits the self in opposition to the colonial state (2). Identity is constructed here in difference to an institutional structure with the primary goals of wresting state power from colonial authorities and their territorial eviction from the emergent, independent state. Nationalist discourse often draws on a religious idiom, and is generally patriarchal in its orientation, relying on familial tropes to express social relations and the imaginary construct of the nation (as in the phrase "Bharat Mata," Mother India, for instance). Nationalist movements also emphasize the importance of physical fitness and gyms as recruiting grounds for new members. In addition, we know from Frantz Fanon that nationalist ideologies and practices signify a complex matrix of desire and repulsion in which the native subject seeks to emulate that which he is attempting to expel. (I use the male pronoun deliberately here).

In the United States, the term "cultural nationalism" has gained currency to describe social movements such as the Black Power and the Chicano/a movements that arose during the 1960s. We can understand cultural nationalism as a "mimetic" form of nationalism, insofar as its immediate objectives depart from anti-colonial nationalism's focus on seizing state power and establishing territorial integrity.<sup>18</sup> Cultural nationalism involves demands for the benefits of full citizenship figured in terms of civil rights and economic advancement. These demands for political and economic representation are accompanied by a concern with aesthetic representation, which in the early phases of cultural nationalist movements cohere over the issue of positive and negative images (Hall). As the more progressive of these movements mature, the representational field expands and acknowledges difference through the inclusion of marginal subjects such as women, gays, and lesbians, and other subalterns whose artistic production is incorporated into the cultural imaginary. The backward, nostalgic gaze of anti-colonial nationalism can be tempered in cultural nation-

alism through the recontextualization of traditional images in the idiom of everyday practices through the creation of a dialectic between the sacred and the mundane, as well as an indigenization of images.<sup>19</sup>

Territory is also at play in cultural nationalism in three major ways: the demand for access to institutional spaces such as city halls or museums, the reclamation of the street from the repressive state apparatus of the police, and the transformation of the physical landscape through commerce and architecture that bespeaks cultural identity. Cultural nationalism, in other words, seeks to overlay physical territory with imaginative geographies. For Yankee Hindutva, architecture has been an important means to inscribe cultural identity on the American landscape, namely through the construction of some 200 temples in such locations as San Diego; St. Louis; Birmingham, Alabama; and Anchorage, Alaska, with estimates that 1,000 additional temples are in the planning or building stage in the US (Anand 12). According to Priya Anand, a fear that the second generation of Indian Americans does not “know their homeland” has made temple construction even more urgent as a means to maintain Hindu traditions and faith (Anand 12).

## LOCAL MEMORY AND THE INVENTION OF TRADITION

Yankee Hindutva has been inflected with these characteristics in being influenced by the cultural nationalism of progressive social movements in the United States that have agitated for civil rights. Such influences are visible in the HEF’s and VF’s rhetoric of positive and negative images in California textbooks, and in their charges that the State Board of Education has discriminated against Hindu groups by not treating their concerns with the same gravity that they have accorded other religious groups. Religious pride is an important leitmotif in the rhetoric of Yankee Hindutva. Janeshwari Devi, the director of programs for the VF, declares that “Our motto is to re-establish the greatness of Hinduism, and part of that is to correct the textbooks. Those are a source of misunderstanding, prejudice and derogatory information” (qtd. in Golden). Supporters of the HEF and VF argue that the textbooks present Hinduism stereotypically and could damage the self-esteem of their children. Jihane Ayed of Ruder Finn, a public relations firm representing both organizations, explains, “What is at stake here is the embarrassment and humiliation that these Hindu children continue to face because of the way textbooks portray their faith and culture” (qtd. in Burress).

The testimonies of Hindu children at the SBE hearings and in the print media have emphasized the inverse relationship between negative images of Hinduism and cultural pride as well; yet they also suggest that the diaporic understanding of Hinduism is far more restrictive than that practiced on the subcontinent. While it is informed by the abstract concepts of dharma (right



conduct), karma (ethical causation), and samsara (cycle of reincarnation), homeland Hinduism lacks the regulative framework prescribing individual behavior at the quotidian level associated with religions such as Christianity and Islam. The religion, as practiced in India, has multiple sources of doctrinal authority, numerous sacred spaces, including shrines in the homes of believers, and a large number of pilgrimage destinations. Individual Hindus can determine the location, manner, and frequency (if at all) of their observances, and are free to choose the deities and texts that they worship and hold in authority. The transmission of culture generally relies on the reproduction of individual and collective memory; however, diasporic Hinduism is based on a type of theological amnesia that consigns the polycentric, polytheistic, and doctrinally de-centered characteristics of homeland Hinduism to oblivion. Rather than draw on the global memory of a polymorphous Hinduism—including its unsavory manifestation in recent pogroms against non Hindus—Indian immigrants invoke local memory in their construction of Hinduism, which is an invented tradition increasingly patterned on observances associated with Christianity, the dominant religious tradition in the United States. Chief among these novelties are the assertion of Hinduism as monotheistic, the increasing importance of the temple as a site for worship during prescribed times and days in the week (on Sunday mornings, for example), and scriptural classes for young people modeled on Bible school.

For those second generation Indian Americans with little first-hand experience or knowledge of the diversity of Hindu practices on the subcontinent, this hybridized form of Hinduism is understood as the authentic version. They universalize their limited and localized practices of Hinduism as characteristic of its global practices. For instance, a suburban high-school student in Houston bemoans her shame in acknowledging her Hindu identity on account of exposure in schools to textbooks that touch on caste ostracism and sati. She complains, “The textbooks bring up all these obscure practices, like bride burning, and like that happens every day... The biggest mistake is that Hinduism is portrayed as polytheistic... [T]he caste system has nothing to do with Hinduism. But no one believes you, because it’s in the textbook” (qtd. in Golden). Joan Scott has written about the limitations of invoking personal experience as evidence on which to base historical claims insofar as such utterances “reproduce rather than contest given ideological systems” and impede their critical examination (778). In this case, the individual second-generation immigrant subject’s account of her religious practices in the diaspora obscures the ways in which the categories of Hindu and non-Hindu, caste Hindu and non-caste Hindu, and polytheism and monotheism have been constructed through language and history on the subcontinent. The young woman’s monotheistic religious observances and lack of personal knowledge of bride burning in suburban Houston become the grounds for asserting her knowledge of Hinduism, which

she posits as authentic. In actuality, her claims are absurd when examined in relation to the polytheistic religious practices of many Hindus and against the high-incidence of dowry deaths, which over the last several decades have been documented by feminist organizations and the Indian government.<sup>20</sup>

## BELEAGUERED MINORITIES

Along with emphasizing the deleterious effect of negative representations of Hinduism on young people, another common refrain in the textbook hearings and media interviews of HEF and VF members was the sentiment that Indian Americans are a beleaguered minority that uniformly experiences racism.<sup>21</sup> As Shalini Gera and Girish Agrawal observe,

Where Hindutva in India menacingly brandishes its muscle to elicit fearful compliance from ... minorities, in the US it uses the subdued vocabulary of plurality, multiculturalism and “hurt feelings” to plead for incorporation into the mainstream... Hindutva groups are converting history books into cheery propaganda tracts as reassurance that Hindus are the same as white Christians and Jews and fully deserving of the most-favoured minority group status. (Gera)

The demands that textbooks be revised along the sectarian lines advocated by the HEF and VF are cloaked in the appealing language of rights and equality. Of course, the discourse of rights and equality is energized by racism against people of color in mainstream American culture. Racism is a fact of life for working-class Indian Americans. Since 9/11, Sikhs have been specifically targeted for attacks by patriotic zealots and detention by the government.<sup>22</sup> But the many Indian Americans who comprise the professional-managerial class do not face the level of hostility routinely confronted by African Americans, Latino/as, and Native Americans on a regular basis. These professionals are part of the HEF’s and VF’s membership, and have contributed to making Indian Americans the wealthiest ethnic group in the US (Setoodeh 39).

Ironically, the appropriation of civil rights discourse belies the level of solidarity that these Indian Americans have historically expressed with other communities in the US marginalized on the basis of race and ethnic identity, particularly African Americans. Toni Morrison has written about the ways in which assimilation into North American culture for immigrants has meant the internalization of racist attitudes towards African Americans: “this most enduring and efficient rite of passage into American culture” demands of immigrants “negative appraisals of the native-born black population” (qtd. in Prasad 163). The dominant association of African Americans in mainstream culture with tropes of criminality and laziness has found a receptive audience among Indians, who have their own indigenous forms of color prejudice shaped by a

complex history of caste and colonialism.<sup>23</sup> While alternative traditions of solidarity between Indians and other people of color exist, as Vijay Prasad demonstrates in his masterful study *The Karma of Brown Folk*, North American Orientalism, in articulating Indian subjectivity with an exotic spirituality, “allows the desis to be positioned in such a way that they are seen as superior to blacks, a social location not unattractive to a migrant in search of some accommodation in a racist polity” (xi). “The tragedy of this social compact,” he notes, “is that it perpetuates and reproduces antiblack racism” (xi).<sup>24</sup>

Not all of the Indian Americans present at the SBE hearings subscribed to the HEF’s and VF’s characterization of the textbooks, or believed that it was in the best interests of young people to encounter only positive images of Hinduism and ancient Indian history. Based on her experiences as a middle-school student, Veena Dubal disputed the idea that learning unpleasant aspects of history was harmful:

Like many of my European-American classmates whose ancestral histories could be traced to a time before women and people of color were given independent legal identities and allowed political participation... I was painfully embarrassed to read about the injustices committed in my parents’ homeland. Yet it was precisely these lessons that taught me about the necessity for universal civil liberties and human rights. (qtd. in Friends “Victory”)

For Indian Americans like Dubal, history, however unpleasant, provides valuable pedagogical lessons and inspiration in the struggle to universalize rights. She acknowledges the discomfort of covering such materials in the classroom but finds them a crucial aspect of civic instruction.

Apparently, the SBE agreed with Dubal’s sentiments. On March 8, 2006, it voted to reject the HEF’s and VF’s edits and endorse an alternate set of recommendations proposed by an SBE subcommittee, which included scholars. The Hindu American Foundation, the legal arm of the HEF, subsequently filed a lawsuit against the SBE in the California Superior Court charging procedural violations of the textbook adoption process, which the court rejected. But the matter does not end there; the California Parents for the Equalization of Educational Materials filed another lawsuit against the SBE in federal court, which is still pending as of July 2007. California’s decision regarding the content of its textbooks has repercussions elsewhere; other states follow its lead in textbook adoption. If the HEF and VF are successful, they will be emboldened to aggressively pursue similar campaigns in other states. If not, they will redouble their efforts for the next big recertification process at the end of the decade in Texas.

## CONCLUSION

While I have primarily focused on the ways in which Yankee Hindutva borrows and redeploys a rhetoric of rights and equality from 1960s social movements, I want to close with the question of the other tendential line of force that shapes diasporic Indian American identity: the pervasive religiosity of American culture. I suggest, perversely perhaps, that Hindu immigrants are performing their assimilation into American society by asserting their distinct religious identity. Religion provides a major interpretive framework for most North Americans. According to a 2001 study conducted by researchers at CUNY, 81% of the adult US population identified with a religious community and 77% declared themselves Christian (Kosmin). Some Christians have been active in promoting the inclusion of creationism by another name, "Intelligent Design," in science textbooks. Their efforts have even inspired one scientist to found the "Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster." Writing to the Kansas State Board of Education, church founder and physicist Bobby Henderson asked that education officials recognize the plurality of belief in creationism by including materials on his pasta cosmology in the science curriculum. Henderson explained a key belief of the Church to be that the Flying Spaghetti Monster changes the results of scientific tests such as carbon dating with "His Noodly Appendage" and stressed the importance "that students are taught this alternate theory" (Henderson). Henderson's parody of the Christian religious right and his calls for parity in the state's treatment of creationists in the name of pluralism underscore the fact that religious extremism is part of the American national imaginary.

While the Christian right's assault on the teaching of evolution has been framed as a debate between competing epistemologies, pitting scientific knowledge against religious mythology, Yankee Hindutva advances its educational agenda on the basis of claims about historical knowledge itself to provide a normative account of India. For these Indian Americans, historical knowledge must be produced against the signs of authenticity whereby diasporic religious practices become the standard of accuracy for representations of Hinduism across the ages. Yankee Hindutva is thus structured on a central paradox: The movement mobilizes a discourse of pluralism to erase the very pluralism of homeland Hinduism. The turn to pluralism, as I have argued, draws from the rhetoric of cultural nationalism associated with the Civil Rights movement. Untangling issues of racism and immigrant identity in curricular matters is vital for multicultural societies such as the US. Making this point, Angana Chatterji remarks:

Fiction as history does not benefit Indian-American and other California school-goers, for whom [an] engagement with the past must facilitate a deep questioning of how things come to be, of what constitutes knowl-

edge, of how knowledge is contested, so that the study of history [can] inform the work of citizenship. (Chatterji)

The California controversy demonstrates what happens when ethnic pride cast as revisionist history collides with scholarship that understands history as complex human interactions. The complexity of this particular historical moment requires that we attend to the ways in which ethnic and religious formations interact and influence one another at both the national and international levels, in order to set agendas that might be at odds with larger democratic values even as they cloak themselves with the culturally-sanctioned signs of authenticity, pluralism, and multiculturalism.

### Notes

1. This article had its origins as an invited lecture co-sponsored by the Center for South Asia and English Department at the University of Hawai'i. Subsequently, I presented versions of it at the annual South Asia Conference in Madison, Wisconsin, and at Indiana University, and am grateful to audiences at all three locations for their questions and comments. Ellen Brantlinger, Patrick Brantlinger, Angana Chatterji, Eva Cherniavsky, Margo Crawford, Laura E. Lyons, and Richard Miller provided valuable suggestions on drafts of this article. A section of the article appeared in "Textbook Tempest in California: Who Speaks for Hinduism?" *Against the Current* May/June 2006: 14-16. Friends of South Asia and *The Silicioneer* graciously gave me permission to reproduce the graphic "Textbook Revision in California." Mia Houtermans, Simmy Makhijani, Pei Wu, and Annie Paradise offered their research assistance, and I thank them. All errors, of course, are mine.
2. For a thoughtful account of the Indian diaspora in the United States in the context of North American Orientalism, see Prasad. Prasad notes that Yankee Hindutva has found a felicitous environment on the internet, a point explored in more detail in Lal.
3. Though comparatively recent, a number of academic studies outline the history of Indian immigration, including Takaki, Cao, Asian, and Leonard. For a thoughtful analysis of the emergence and status of such scholarship in relation to Asian American studies more generally, see Grewal. For more information on the "Man from Madras," see Bhola.
4. According to the 2000 US Census, the median family income of "Asian Indian" families in 1999 was \$70,708 in comparison to \$50,046 of the total population (2000 Demographic).
5. For an excellent account of organizing among some of these groups, see Gupta. The 2000 US Census estimates that 11.2% of the Indian immigrant community is employed in farming, fishing and forestry; construction, extraction, and maintenance; and production, transportation, and material moving. This figure contrasts with the 59.9% of the community which is employed in management or professional occupations. See US "We."
6. For a thoughtful account of the relationship between the California textbook controversy and the Sangh Parivar, see Anthropology.
7. Sample edits of the HEF and VF are posted on the Friends of South Asia website.
8. For a detailed analysis of the ideology of the Sangh Parivar and its penetration into contemporary Indian culture, see Bhatt. See also Ahmad.
9. See also Anand Patwardhan's 1994 documentaries, *Father, Son, and Holy War*, for an investigation of the relationship between gender and Hindu identity. Part I, *Trial By Fire*, concentrates on

constructions of womanhood, while Part II, *Hero Pharmacy*, presents a powerful analysis of the ways in which Hindu communalism is based on conservative notions of masculinity and virility.

10. As documented by the Indian People's Tribunal on Environment and Human Rights, the Sangh Parivar has intensified its organizational efforts in Orissa. The extent of its organizational and political reach as described in their September 2006 report, *Communalism in Orissa*, is alarming. See Indian.

11. The Banerjee Commission, constituted by the Railway Board, has suggested that the fire originated inside the compartments, instantly engulfing them in flames ("Uncovering"). For a scientific analysis of the physical evidence, see Hazards. See also Desai.

12. For a detailed account of gender-specific violence, see International.

13. The new NCERT textbooks are available online at <http://www.ncert.nic.in/textbooks/testing/Index.htm>. The BJP's rout in the 2004 Lok Sabha (parliamentary) elections has been viewed by some as evidence that Hindutva's power is waning. In support of this view, commentators stress recent shifts in the BJP's support-base; the electorate's growing concern over economic issues such as inflation and unemployment rather than communal identification; and internal squabbles among the Sangh Parivar, some of whose dissidents have defected to the ranks of the Congress Party (Bidwai). The recent electoral victory of the BJP and the re-election of its contentious leader Narendra Modi as chief minister of Gujarat by a wide margin in the December 2007 race, however, indicate that such sentiments might be too optimistic. Indeed, Modi's incendiary references to the police murder of Sohrabuddin Sheik and his wife Kauserbi as getting "what [they] deserved" stoked communal sentiments against Muslims; moreover, he successfully presented himself as an avatar of economic development, suggesting that the BJP is appropriating a rhetoric of economic populism. See Kumara.

14. See, for instance, Vinay Lal's description of the responses of diasporic Indians in California to the riots following the destruction of the Babri Masjid in December of 1992, when over 2,000 people died, most of them Muslims. See Lal.

15. The passage is buried in a magazine on p. 15 of this site.

16. This link has been subsequently removed from the HEF's website.

17. This link has been subsequently removed from the VF website. For a detailed description of how Hindutva groups falsify history, see Maira.

18. Activists in the Black Power movement often drew on tropes of colonialism to describe the status of African Americans in the US. In his powerful account of the movement, *New Day in Babylon*, William L. Van Deburg distinguishes between different strands of Black Power: pluralism, territorial nationalism, revolutionary nationalism, and cultural nationalism. Pluralists sought community control by making institutions such as hospitals, schools and government more responsive to their needs; black empowerment at the local level, they felt, would translate to participation at the state and national levels. Territorial nationalists advocated a desire for spatial separatism and the creation of a black state either in Africa or the US. Revolutionary nationalists, such as the Black Panther Party, yoked a desire for self-determination to the necessity of a socialist transformation of society. For their part cultural nationalists, such as US Organization, believed that culture was the proper arena for struggle. Van Deburg cautions that these strands often overlapped. Of these, pluralism and cultural nationalism seem most relevant to diasporic Indians in their attempts to make educational institutions more sensitive and to assert their identity in cultural terms. See Van Deburg.

19. I'm thinking, for example, of Yolanda Lopez's painting "Margaret Stewart: Our Lady of Guadalupe," which collapses the sacred and the mundane by resituating the visual icon of the Virgin of Guadalupe within the context of women's sweatshop labor. For an analysis of this painting, see Chabram-Dernersesian.

20. An estimated 6,000 to 7,000 women are killed annually in disputes over dowries. See Lloyd.

21. See Gera, Ravishankar.

22. There were a number of attacks against Indians during the 1980s, concentrated in the northeastern United States. For further details on these attacks, see Mazumdar. For an analysis of the gender and racial dynamics of consumer nationalism to emerge after the 9/11 attacks, see Grewal. Grewal analyzes the ways in which the production of new ethnic “others” (Arab, Muslim, and South Asian males) as “terrorists” enables the incorporation of other ethnic subjects, who were previously pathologized by the state, into the national imaginary.

23. For an elaboration of indigenous forms of racism tied to both colonial scholarship and the history of caste in South Asia, see Mazumdar.

24. See Prasad xi. The Indian American comic, Rahul Siddharth, combines a critique of both indigenous forms of colorism and diasporic forms of racism against African Americans in his routines. For example, he notes, “Indians don’t have a lot of black friends. I ask, ‘Mom, how come we don’t have a lot of black friends?’ She says, ‘We have some friends from Tamil Nadu. That’s close enough.’” See “Comedy.”

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