



Members of the Hindu American Foundation, a political force behind the Hinduism textbooks debate, meet with senator Debbie Stabenow. Photo from the office of the senator. Flickr Creative Commons: <http://bit.ly/2wBZn1N>

Note on this Case Study:

Religions are embedded in culture, and are deeply impacted by questions of power. While reading this case study about Hinduism and life as a member of a minority religion in America, think about who is in power and who lacks power. Is someone being oppressed? Is someone acting as an oppressor? How might religious people respond differently when they are in a position of authority or in a position of oppression?

As always, when thinking about religion and power, focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

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Hindus in American Textbooks

There are around 2.5 million Hindus in the US, most of whom are relatively recent immigrants.¹ Few Hindus lived in the US until national quotas on immigrants were removed in 1965, beginning successive waves of Hindu immigration, largely from India.² Partially because Hindus are only recently common in the US, their beliefs are often misunderstood by other Americans. American Hindus have often been deeply concerned by the disrespect that businesses and the entertainment industry have shown to their faith; Hinduism has often been commercialized or misused in public discourse. Many have also been concerned about a lack of recognition as part of the American fabric in the political sphere.³ However, while religious and cultural discrimination against the American Hindu community is real, Indian immigrants—most of whom are Hindu—are the wealthiest immigrant group in the US and are generally highly educated.⁴

In the early 2000s, some American Hindus organized to stop perceived discrimination against them in American public school books. Protests against these textbooks were lodged in Virginia, California, and Texas. The situation in California became particularly contentious, as different Hindus—while generally agreeing that the textbooks must change—disagreed on how to represent their diverse tradition. In addition,

due to California's large population, textbooks approved by the state are often used in many other states, meaning that changes to California's textbooks effect a much larger population.⁵

There was little disagreement that California's textbooks contained serious errors, falsehoods, and a lack of respect for Hinduism. For example, a textbook incorrectly claimed that the Hindi language is written in Arabic script—it is written in Sanskrit Devnagari script. A photo caption misidentified an Indian Muslim as a Brahman priest. A section on Hindu vegetarian beliefs was

¹ Jennifer Medina, "Debate Erupts in California over Curriculum on India's History," *New York Times*, May 4, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/us/debate-erupts-over-californias-india-history-curriculum.html>

² Purnima Bose, "Hindutva Abroad: The California Textbook Controversy," *The Global South* 2, no. 1 (2008): 13-14.

³ Prema Kurien, "Hinduism in the United States," in *Hinduism in the Modern World*, ed. Brian Hatcher (New York: Routledge, 2016), 151-3.

⁴ Purnima Bose, "Hindutva Abroad," 14.

⁵ Prema Kurien, "Hinduism in the United States, 153; Daniel Golden, "Defending the Faith: New Battleground in Textbook Wars," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 25, 2006. <http://on.wsj.com/2uxVX6n>

disrespectfully titled, “Where’s the Beef?” and other sections made light of important figures in Hindu scriptures.⁶ Addressing these problems was uncontroversial. However, the Vedic Foundation (VF) and Hindu Education Foundation (HEF)—the Hindu groups who proposed these changes—also asked the California Board of Education (CBE) to remove or rewrite other significant sections. These changes included rewriting widely accepted scholarship about Indian history and eliminating references to polytheism, Hindu patriarchy, Hindu connections to the caste system, and Dalits—also known as “Untouchables.”⁷ Members of these organizations claimed the textbooks were focusing only on negative aspects of Hinduism while not doing the same for other religions. Believing in the expertise of these Hindu groups, after hearing these recommendations the CBE approved all of the VF and HEF requests.⁸

Soon however, many American Hindus and academics complained that this was unacceptable. Some Hindus pointed out that the VF and HEF were promoting a representation of Hinduism specific to upper caste North Indians which they did not share.⁹ For example, many Hindu Dalits claimed the edits would erase their own history; some testified to the CBE that Dalits still suffer due to their low caste today. Similarly, critics accused the VF and HEF of attempting to erase real patriarchal history in Hinduism. Opponents also pointed out VF and HEF ties to *Hindutva*—conservative Hindu nationalist organizations in India which have tried and failed to make similar textbook changes there. *Hindutva*, they argued, have a biased political agenda to represent Hinduism in a way that undermines established scholarship and presents the religion in a solely positive light. They were concerned that *Hindutva* groups wanted to silence minority voices and present an idealized, false representation of Hinduism.¹⁰

After thousands of often contradictory testimonies from different Hindus and academics of Hinduism, the CBE made their decision in 2006. While many of the VF and HEF edits were accepted, most requests to rewrite sections and delete references to patriarchy, caste, and polytheism were rejected. However, the debate raged on, as the Hindu American Foundation (HAF), another group with *Hindutva* ties, promptly sued the state to force the changes.¹¹ The HAF lost, but debates on the portrayal of Hinduism in textbooks continue. In 2016, the VF, HEF, and HAF renewed their fight, arguing Hinduism was still being unfairly treated in textbooks. This time, the HAF worked to stop wording changes which involved changing “ancient India” to “ancient South Asia” which some argued should be done to reflect the fact that ancient India includes the modern nations of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. The HAF successfully enlisted Tulsi Gabbard, the first Hindu member of Congress to support this point. They also continued to try to remove caste from the books, sparking the same fight with Dalit groups. The results of 2016 debates were similarly mixed. While caste remained, so did references to “ancient India.” And like 2006, shortly after the decision, Hindu groups sued the state in 2017 to continue the debate.¹² There is thus no end in sight as Hindus, school officials, and religious studies scholars debate how to respectfully and accurately represent a diverse, complex tradition in US schools.

⁶ Purnima Bose, “Hindutva Abroad,” 15; Subhasree Chakravarty, “Learning Authenticity: Pedagogies of Hindu Nationalism in North America,” in *Representations: Doing Asian American Rhetoric*, e. LuMing Mao and Morris Young (Loga: Utah State University Press, 2008), 113; Scott Baldauf, “India History spat hits US,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 24, 2006. <http://bit.ly/2wQRbgR>

⁷ Daniel Golden, “Defending the Faith.”

⁸ Bhaavya Sinha, “India, South Asia, and Hindutva: What’s Going on with California’s Textbooks?” *Berkeley Political Review*, May 17, 2016.

⁹ Scott Baldauf, “India History spat hits US.”

¹⁰ Kamala Visweswaran, Michael Witzel, et. al., “The *Hindutva* View of History: Rewriting Textbooks in India and the United States,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 10, no. 1 (2009): 101-112; Daniel Golden, “Defending the Faith.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Bhaavya Sinha, “India, South Asia, and Hindutva.”; Audrey Cleo Yap, “Lawsuit Alleges California’s School Curriculum is Biased against Hinduism,” *NBC News*, Feb. 28, 2017. <http://nbcnews.to/2mbpMEv>

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- Editorial from Hindu American Foundation’s Murali Balaji on teaching Hinduism in public schools (2015): <http://bit.ly/2vuMV78>
- Editorial from Hinduism professors Romila Thapar and Michael Witzel on teaching Hinduism in public schools (2006): <http://bit.ly/2hSJ7K0>
- Editorial from professor Rohit Chopra on complexity of Hinduism in textbook debates (2016): <http://bbc.in/2uAoggi>

Secondary Sources:

- PRI podcast “The World in Words” on Indian and Hindu disagreements over their own history and religion (2017): <http://bit.ly/2eFQsLM>
- NPR story on the original controversy (2006): <http://n.pr/2uz3XzE>

Discussion Questions

- How do different perspectives on the representation of Hindus in American textbooks illustrate the internal diversity of Hinduism?
- How does the immigrant context of American Hindus play a role in these debates?
- How do the disagreements around the influence of caste in Hinduism show how Hinduism is internally diverse? Or how Hinduism changes over time?
- Among other issues, those who oppose *Hindutva* changes to textbooks often charge that they are trying to teach a solely positive, devotional representation of Hinduism. What is the difference between devotional representations and an academic, religious studies approach? How can you tell which approach is which?
- Read the editorials in the primary sources. While written years apart, these editorials illustrate American Hindu views that are still common today. How might you explain these strikingly different views of Hinduism to someone? How do the authors use Hinduism to prove their points?
- Textbooks that discuss Hinduism are controversial across the entire country, but Hindu organizations have focused on changing textbooks in Virginia, Texas, and especially California. Why do you think this is the case? What about the context of these states makes them points of conflict?
- Listen to the PRI podcast on these issues. Why does the reporter find common ground with all of the Hindu positions she encounters? What does this tell you about the controversy and about Hinduism?



Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, the first Hindu member of the US Congress, who has weighed in on California’s textbook debates. Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2wQvItN>