

[Hinduism as Global Corporation](#)

Category : [August 1990](#)

Published by Anonymous on Aug. 02, 1990

Hinduism as Global Corporation

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A front page article in The Wall Street Journal this June made me sit up and take notice. There, among the leveraged buy-outs and junk bond analyses, was a major piece about Goddess worship in America, a phenomenon apparently big enough to merit full discussion in the world's premier financial daily.

According to the story, the cosmos began not with God, but with the Goddess, who reigned over a relatively peaceful humanity for hundreds of estrogen-influenced generations. It was not until about 3,000 BCE that males decided to install their deities - among them the sun god Marduk. Deriving His just powers from the testosterone tribe, Marduk did the natural things - he destroyed Tiamet, the mother of all gods, by pumping air down Her throat until She exploded. That seemed to set the pace for the following 6,000 or so years of human history.

Many women (and men) are eager to return to the nurturing Goddess and to let the warrior male Gods have a much-needed break. They are ready to declare the death of patriarchy and figure that maleness is already so puffed up with its own ego that just a few gentle breaths from them should blow it to smithereens. They are tired of being patronized and devalued.

These women, many of them wealthy and well-positioned career-wise, are founding tax-exempt churches and conducting fertility rites in their back yards. One ex-nun, calling herself Changing Woman, dances with her earth sisters around a Maypole in joyous communion with nature (who, she says, is a mother).

Is it another fad? Many think not. Observers note that there is a global return to the right-brained side of human nature, a call for less violence and intellectualization and more nurturing and intuition. They say the aggressive side of ourselves has gone too far, harmed too many, unbalanced individuals and entire societies. We have too much head, not enough heart. Since much of our actions derive from our conceptualization of the Divine and what we think the Divine wants of us, they postulate, maybe a vengeful, powerful male God needs to be rethought. Women are doing just that. They want feminism to reach to the core of their being, to be at the center of their spiritual life.

This is old news in Hinduism, where millions worship God as Goddess and Creatrix, and where any individual may elect to do so with the full support of the culture. But in the good 'ol USA, thinking of God as a woman comes close to heresy and provokes much soul-searching.

Changing the subject to money, it dawned on me while reading the Goddess article that from the point of view of The Wall Street Journal religion is just another market, subject to the same forces that drive manufacturers of soap. And they are right. That is one of the fields of reality upon which people of all religions play - not the most crucial one, to be sure, but neither is it trivial. The indigenous peoples of many nations know well the effectiveness of US-financed missionaries and the frustration of striving for noble objectives with little or no monetary muscle.

So imagine, for just a moment, that you are a hotshot WSJ reporter, assigned to examine Hinduism as a purely business entity called Hindu Corporation, HC for short. What would you see? Your analysis to investors might go something like this:

Size: This is a Big Company. Nearly a billion employees. Exxon only has 100,000 or so, and the world's largest staff is found at the Indian Railways - 1.6 million (that's six times the entire population of Brunei). It remains well-diversified, with outlets in virtually all nations. Moreover, it has a strategic policy of no single central managerial authority, giving each branch complete autonomy. This radically lessens the sluggishness which more hierarchical competitors of similar size feel.

Established: HC is the oldest firm in its field, founded 6-10,000 years ago. This

company is a survivor. It enjoys the longest record of uninterrupted service in the spiritual field. That's a plus, showing staying power and the ability to cope with the vicissitude of a volatile industry. But age can also be a minus if innovation and creative impulses dry up. Older corporations tend to be a little stodgy, with leaders entrenched at the top who squelch innovation in an eager young-blooded staff.

Competition: Hostile takeovers are a dangerous but potentially profitable way to eliminate the competition. Investors should be aware of the long history of efforts to take over HC, but it has proved resilient and managed to hold the fort against raiders.

What about normal competition? It's the name of the corporate game, and any business worth its salt must be judged on the basis of its products and services to the consumer. Here we have the real strength of the Hindu Corporation. It is genuinely concerned for clients and generally willing to provide service and support far in excess of financial remuneration (Yo, Mr. Analyst, you can say that again!). This "kinder, gentler business attitude" makes for a loyal clientele. Add to that HC's track record in the global community, where it has blown away the competition with its tolerance, all-embracing attitudes. It will take a monolithic sales effort for competitors to overcome product satisfaction and carve out a significant niche. And since HC is providing goods and services at bargain prices, their position is well-entrenched to all but the most savvy and altruistic of businessmen. HC's service downside is seen in poorer sales territories where failure to meet customer demand has led to runaway loss of low-caste clients. The key for HC's future: "You have to find new revenue streams and win more net new business than you lose each year."

Product Assessment: Studies show there is an increasingly stronger user mandate in the religion business for openness, user-friendly tools and contemporary products. HC has been sitting on its Glory Days, failing to upgrade, ignoring the market's shift and hoping customers will keep buying the old, reliable products. This could cause serious sales shortfalls if clients perceive that the company has not responded to their current needs, but is content to crank out the same goods that made grandma happy. Grandma is not doing the shopping today. HC execs have to recognize this and put more effort into R&D, new packaging and sales efforts. HC's products are too sophisticated for most users. More basic tools would reach the broader, low-end market.

To its credit, the basic goods are solid. Like cornflakes and light bulbs, products for which HC is best known don't change much, and don't have to. But that doesn't mean the client won't shop elsewhere if he thinks his needs are being ignored.

Balance Sheet: HC's net worth remains an industry secret, but insiders say \$500 billion (a mere \$500 per employee). Though assets are relatively low, so are liabilities. HC owes virtually no long-term debt and owns plant assets outright. However, physical facilities are in poor condition and will soon need major capitalization. Cash flow is tight. Annual sales are on an upswing, getting a boost from markets in the New Europe and North America. During the '70s and '80s HC placed stress on its yoga products overseas, and small franchises in Japan and South America, though modest now, show potential growth.

Board Room strategies: There are other problems with the company which need to be addressed if optimal performance and profit are to be achieved. One is inadequate planning. Studies show that HC is flying by the seat of its pants, plan-wise. There is little discussion about overall corporate goals, and less planning in the treasurer's office. HC executives seem reluctant to talk about money, to think about money, to ask about money. No business can take that attitude, not as long as coin is the coin of think tanks funded, planners hired, managers corralled and tough discussions begun. Not tomorrow. Not at the end of the fiscal year. Now. Today. If no corporate global vision is forthcoming, existing weaknesses will be amplified. In a company this size even a minor down-turn can gain dangerous momentum.

Bottom Line: Despite its cash flow and plant disrepair problems, we rate HC a solid long-term investment. Customers see it as a company with heart, and say they like the HC staff and enlightened service. As long as people are willing to put up with the shabby offices, business should thrive.

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