

[Confronting Misconceptions](#)

Category : [July/August/September 2006](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jul. 02, 2006

IN MY OPINION

Confronting Misconceptions

Hinduism should be properly taught in schools

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Hinduism has been misrepresented and insulted in California history textbooks. Even before the state Board of Education met in March to vote on adopting suggested changes (See page 36), Hindu parents were outraged and the local Hindu community was at war over this issue, all at a time when President Bush was saying that India and America were "global leaders and good friends."

I feel a moral obligation to stand with indignant Hindu parents in demanding that changes be made in textbooks for California middle-school students. Such perpetuation of an unnecessary ignorance about Hinduism and Indian culture has not only hurt the feelings of immigrant children, it has also hindered a delicate alliance that has just begun to flower between India and the USA. When President Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh signed their historic nuclear agreement earlier this year, it seemed that the two countries were serious about working together on issues ranging from security and trade to education and culture. However, the future of this relationship depends on rejecting old frameworks and mistaken assumptions. These misrepresentations of Hinduism in textbooks form a part of that negative past that has no place in a positive future.

I disagree with those academics who view these demands for changes in the textbooks as being part of a "Hindu extremist conspiracy." I am no supporter of religious extremism, but extremism is not an issue here. All we seek to accomplish is to correct three fundamental misconceptions.

First, there is a problem with the California textbooks defining Hinduism as a religion of caste and gender discrimination. This perception has been challenged by the Hindu community for a number of reasons, including fairness (other religions are not defined largely by their faults) and, of course, accuracy. I do not suggest that these problems do not exist. I simply feel that there is a better time and place to address them than in the first lessons schoolchildren receive on Hinduism.

Second, it is true that--as the textbooks state--the term "Hinduism " refers to a complex diversity of traditions that are difficult to unify or summarize in terms of founders, dates and origins. But this is Hinduism's virtue, not its vice. The presentation of Hinduism in California's textbooks is out of sync with the way that Hinduism is lived by its followers. For example, many textbooks, even in India, refer to Hinduism being the religion of "Aryan invaders." The issue of an Aryan invasion in India is complex. What is relevant here is that Hindus simply don't dwell on this matter during their daily worship.

Third, the disrespect of Hindu "myths " in these textbooks is plainly insulting. If Hindus think about an Elephant God writing an epic and a Monkey God leaping over an ocean, they are neither ignorant nor are they merely celebrating "stories." For devout Hindus, these are not characters from fairy tales; they are Gods.

There has been a history of stereotyping and misrepresenting Hinduism in this country. Katherine Mayo's vicious 1927 book, *Mother India*, was referred to by Mohandas Gandhi as a "drain-inspector's report, " because of its graphic description of the stench of India's open drains. The 1984 "Indiana Jones " movie, *Temple of Doom*, deeply upset Hindus with its bizarre fantasies about Indian dining customs. Perpetuating these stereotypes is not in the best interests of India or the United States.

Religion is like a mother. It has made us who we are. To use the name of a great religion as a synonym for vileness, as a few scholars have done recently, is not only unscholarly, it is hurtful. I am tempted to say to these people, "You are savaging the mother of a civilization."