In My Opinion: Hinduism in College Courses
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In My Opinion

Hinduism in College Courses

Misrepresentation and misguided emphasis plague the academic presentation of Hinduism

By Kirthi Narasimhan

As a growing number of courses on Hinduism are showing up in universities across the US, professors should be mindful of their audience, making sure they are communicating the appropriate message to their students. And students, especially Hindus, should not be afraid to apply critical thinking, to analyze and respectfully question the knowledge being presented. One class I took in college was called "Visions of the Divine Feminine." It focused on the Mahavidyas, the ten aspects of Devi, and gave a foundation in understanding Shaktism, the Hindu denomination that focuses on worship of the Divine Mother as the Supreme Being. Until I read the syllabus, I had not realized the importance that the female principle plays in Hinduism, and I looked forward to learning more. The reason the course did not meet my expectations was not that the content was incorrect, but rather how the material was covered. My professor's teaching style and tone allowed for, even encouraged, misconceptions to arise. For example, on the first day, the topic of why some of the Goddess's forms are depicted as scantily clad, if not partially nude, was brought into question. Some students asked why the Goddesses are represented by voluptuous figurines and had such large breasts. Until that point, I had not even noticed these features; since childhood I had simply accepted that this is how they look. This question even piqued my curiosity. But the professor did not provide sufficient responses to the questions. He started by implying that these are representations of absolute femininity, but finished by comparing the iconography of the Goddesses to a picture of a skimpily dressed American adult film actress. I found this highly inappropriate. A better explanation would have been that the icons are models of the essence of life: Large breasts symbolize ample milk to feed a child, and wide hips imply fertility. And in India's climate, prior to the influence of Islamic and Western culture, wearing less clothing and not covering women's breasts was more practical. The class also covered the topic of the Sivalingam. My professor did not adequately address the mystical significance and instead alluded to a more bawdy meaning. A more satisfactory presentation would have stated that the Lingam represents the union of the male and female energies of this world from which all life begins, the beginning from which all existence emanates. Explained in this way, the Sivalingam actually reinforces my belief and faith in Sanatana

Dharma. However, when erotic connotations without justification or clarification are left to the imagination of students, who simply do not know any better, misinterpretations of our Divinities, beliefs and way of life become more likely. There was also a discussion on the four aims for existence as Hindus: dharma (righteousness), artha (prosperity), kama (pleasure) and moksha (liberation). Which aspect do you think the professor focused on? Although kama is an essential part of our lives, this topic has not been well elucidated in our upbringing. The course did not shed much light in this area either; the professor's discourse clouded my perception of sexuality, an essential part of our being, and licentious behavior, which is associated with other vices such as greed and pride. With better definition and demarcation, one can understand kama from the right perspective. I applaud the growing number of universities that are making an effort to provide courses on Hinduism in their religious studies curriculum, but the sheer expanse of our faith requires careful instruction so that people do not go away from classes with wrong ideas.

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