Reflections on Hinduphobia: A Perspective from a Scholar-Practitioner

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What Is Hinduphobia?

Hinduphobia: The term was coined by independent scholar, Rajiv Malhotra, although the London-based group, Hindu Human Rights, also has a claim in this regard.[1] Perhaps each arrived at the term independently. In any case, what is of interest to us here is not who can be credited with coining the term first, but the phenomenon to which it points.

Like any phobia, Hinduphobia is an intense and deeply rooted aversion—a fear and hatred—in this case, of Hindus and Hinduism. As such, Hinduphobia is a non-rational phenomenon. That is, it is not the result of a process of reasoning or thoughtful reflection based on experience. It is a feeling that occurs at a visceral level rather than at the refined level of the intellect, though it can manifest as a set of intellectual claims that portray Hindus and Hinduism in a negative light. This set of claims—let us call it *Hinduphobic discourse*—is a narrative which typically portrays Hinduism exclusively as an oppressive and regressive tradition, inextricably bound up with social institutions like caste and patriarchy. In this discourse, positive and progressive aspects of Hindu traditions—such as those which question or oppose caste prejudice or male chauvinism—are either ignored or attributed to outside, non-Hindu influences. Hindu teachings, for example, of nonviolence and vegetarianism become solely the result of Jain or Buddhist influence. The use of beautiful *murti*s, idols, in worship is attributed solely to the coming of the Greeks to India. And Hindu work for uplifting the poor and downtrodden of India is portrayed as an imitation of the Christian missionaries. This is not to say that such outside influences have been wholly absent from the history of Hinduism; for indeed, openness to new ideas and practices has been part of the genius of the Hindu tradition for centuries. But the Hinduphobic discourse is characterised by a persistent refusal to see Hindus as positive, active agents in the development of Hindu traditions—or, for that matter, in determining their own destinies. In the words of the University of Chicago-based historian, Ronald Inden, it is a discourse which treats Hindus as 'patients' rather than 'agents'.[2]

Regarding Inden, it should be noted that, though he never utilises the term 'Hinduphobia'—his work predates its coinage by a number of years—he anticipates many contemporary critiques of Hinduphobic discourse in his presentation of how India as a whole has been depicted over the course of two centuries of Indological scholarship. A great deal of the substance of contemporary critiques of Hinduphobia is, in fact, anticipated by Inden. In my opinion, his work deserves a much wider readership than it currently enjoys.

Differentiating Hinduphobic Discourse from Objective and Constructive Critique

Acknowledging the reality of the Hinduphobic discourse is not to say that specific aspects of

Hindu thought or practice, or the actions of particular Hindus, can never be examined critically, or to deny that there are or have been oppressive and regressive elements in Hindu society at varied points in history. Indeed, Swami Vivekananda himself faced stiff opposition from such elements in the early years of the Ramakrishna Mission and the Ramakrishna Order. Swamis of the Order were derided by some as 'scavenger monks' for working to alleviate the suffering of the poor, and Swami Vivekananda himself was castigated for initiating non-Brahmins and Westerners into his Order, and for not being himself a brahmin by birth. But there is a world of difference between constructive criticism, aimed at emphasising and drawing out the best in the Hindu tradition, and seeking to define the entire tradition only by the worst actions of those who claim to inhabit it. In fact, this is the dividing line between genuine, objective, or constructive critique and Hinduphobia. One seeks to make the highest Hindu ideals a reality. The other seeks Hinduism's eradication.

Like similar phobias, such as racism, the root causes of Hinduphobia are a combination of individual psychological and broader cultural factors: biases imprinted on the mind from an early age by one's family and society, including the media and educational system. To the extent that it is a result of such cultural imprinting, it is possible for Hinduphobia to be a largely unconscious phenomenon, manifesting only when one actually encounters and engages with Hindus and Hindu traditions. It is possible that, just as one might be a racist and not know it until meeting people from a different ethnic group, one might also be a Hinduphobe and not be aware of it until meeting Hindus or encountering Hindu thought and practice through books or other media.

One might also *not* be Hinduphobic, in the sense of holding a deep and visceral aversion to Hindus or Hinduism, but nevertheless inadvertently participate in and replicate the Hinduphobic discourse because one has been educated to believe that this discourse is an accurate depiction of reality. While latent Hinduphobia might only manifest when one meets actual Hindus, one who has been educated in the Hinduphobic discourse while not harbouring Hinduphobic feelings is likely to be pleasantly surprised upon meeting Hindus. In this regard, I recall a conversation I once had with a friend who is a sadhu in a Hindu *sampradaya*. He narrated an encounter in which he met a group of American students who seemed shocked to find him a warm, kind, open-hearted human being. One of them even told him: 'We were afraid of you until we met you.' These students had been presented only with stories and images of fierce sadhus attacking persons of other traditions and asserting Hindu superiority. The reality they encountered in my friend was far different from this!

Precisely because it is, like racism, often unconscious, rather than treating Hinduphobia in a way that will arouse defensiveness—that is, as a kind of moral failing—it may be more productive to approach Hinduphobia as a discourse or ideology that has become embedded in people's thought processes: a set of views which share the quality of persistently casting Hindus and Hinduism in a negative light, despite all evidence to the contrary. The phrase 'despite all evidence to the contrary' is important; for it is here that the irrationality of Hinduphobia lies: in adherence to negative views about Hinduism, not as the conclusion of a thoughtful process of rational reflection on experience, but as axiomatic to one's worldview, much as one would adhere to the claims of a religious faith. Hinduphobic discourse can be refuted. Visceral Hinduphobia, like racism, is a harder nut to crack.

The important distinction between

Hinduphobia and what I call sincere, thoughtful critique of Hindus and Hinduism is the closed and irrational character of the Hinduphobic discourse. The Hinduphobe, in other words, has already decided, before the conversation has even begun, that Hinduism is in some way inherently flawed and problematic. Hinduphobic discourse thus follows a circular logic, in which the conclusion has already been built into the premises: that, *whatever the problem or issue in question*, *Hindus and Hinduism are at fault*.

Sincere and thoughtful critiques of Hindus and Hinduism, on the other hand, are evidence-based. They are open to the good and the bad which one finds in any human community, and any tradition entrusted to the care of flawed, limited human beings. A test of whether Hinduphobia is at play in a critique of Hindus or Hinduism is to ask, 'Is there any scenario, short of their complete renunciation of Hinduism, in which Hindus might address this critique in a way the critic would find acceptable?' In other words, is it the critique of something specific which Hindus might address while adhering to Hindu principles—or even better, that Hindus might address *by means of* Hindu principles? Or are Hindus being criticised, essentially, for being Hindus? If the former is the case, then the critique is genuine, even if Hindus ultimately choose to reject it—for criticisms themselves need to be analysed critically. If the latter is the case, we are dealing with Hinduphobia. A similar test could be applied to criticisms of other worldviews and traditions.

There is a distinction, important to many Hindu practitioners, between what might be called the essence or eternal truth at the heart of the Hindu traditions—the Sanatana dharma or perennial philosophy of Vedanta—and the opinions and the practices of specific Hindus at specific times and places in history. Not all sincere and thoughtful critics of Hinduism will observe this distinction; but certainly, those who identify with the tradition—Hindu critics of Hinduism or self-critics—will typically differentiate between the eternal truths of the Sanatana dharma—which are axiomatic to a Hindu way of life—and the particular interpretations, and manipulations, to which these truths have been subject at various points in time. There is a difference between the essence of dharma—affirming which, one can say, is part of what it means to be a Hindu—and its many manifestations, which can vary across time and space, and whose authenticity may fairly be disputed. Indeed, this kind of argumentation within and among Hindu traditions has been going on for millennia.

One may very well object that the distinction between the essence of Hindu dharma and its many manifestations simply mirrors the circular character of the Hinduphobic discourse: that, whatever the problem or issue in question, the *essential core* of Hinduism is *never* at fault. This is a fair objection. The response to it is that this is what it means, or at least part of what it means, to be a committed Hindu.

In other words, if one concludes that the essential core of Hindu dharma is fundamentally flawed—as opposed to finding fault with some specific form or expression of it—then one will, in all likelihood, cease to identify oneself as Hindu, except perhaps in an ethnic or cultural sense, as opposed to an expression of one's philosophy of life.

One may, of course, question whether there is an essential core of Hinduism, and of what it might consist. But that, again, is the kind of question Hindus have debated for centuries. It may even be said that participating in this debate—this internal critique—is also an important part of what it means to be Hindu, at least for those who are intellectually inclined.

Sincere and thoughtful critique of Hindu thought and practice is not only possible, but also desirable, because it is an essential portion of the spiritual path, at least as conceived in the Vedanta tradition. *Mananam*, or reflection on the teachings that one has learned, or 'heard', *shravanam*, is a process that necessarily involves questioning, leaving no stone unturned, no topic off limits, as one seeks to understand the truth. Hinduism is not, at its authentic core, a tradition of censorship, of squelching intellectual inquiry and debate. On the contrary, such debate flourished in classical India, as adherents of various worldviews, *darshana*s, engaged critically with one another's claims.

The critique of Hinduphobia offered here is therefore not an attempt to censor or to cut off intellectual debate, or sincere and thoughtful criticism. It is, rather, an attempt to define a deeply pernicious form of discourse that is ultimately anti-intellectual, inasmuch as it is rooted in the deep bias that Hindus and Hinduism can do no right, despite evidence to the contrary. It is an intellectual manifestation of what is, at core, an irrational aversion—a phobia, or a fear of and hatred for Hindus and Hinduism—and it is even capable, as we have already discussed, of 'colonising' the minds of those who do not hold such an aversion, but are, rather, educated into the Hinduphobic discourse. In short, Hinduphobia, as understood here, is a form of intellectual imperialism which functions to strip validity and agency from Hinduism and any who identify with a Hindu philosophy of life. It is not simply a critique of Hinduism, in a straightforward sense—which is welcome if pursued in a truly objective and constructive spirit—but a deeply embedded and very often unexamined set of assumptions pervading some, though not all, academic writing on Hinduism.

Varieties of Hinduphobic Discourse

My focus in this essay is not Hinduphobia in all its varied forms—both in popular culture and in scholarly writing—but rather, Hinduphobic *discourse* as it manifests in academic writing in particular. As a practitioner in a Hindu tradition who is also an academic scholar of Hinduism, I do not claim to have a unique or perfect vantage point for understanding and explaining this issue. I do, though, have a perspective that I hope will be helpful to Hindus in conceptualising the issue of what has come to be known as 'academic Hinduphobia.'[3] My aim will not be to critique or 'out' particular scholars by name, but to point to the trends in academic writing which might be placed under the category of the Hinduphobic discourse. My focus, in short, will be defining and describing Hinduphobic discourse, not accusing any specific person of harbouring Hinduphobia. As a deep and visceral feeling, it would require a psychoanalyst deeply informed in Hindu traditions to diagnose Hinduphobia in the case of any particular person, unless that person's Hinduphobia was truly conscious and blatant. I certainly claim no privileged window into the psyches of my fellow scholars, most of whom I know as sincere and decent people. Hinduphobic discourse, though, *is* something one can identify, evaluate, and critique, independently of any motives that one might impute to those who participate in and perpetuate it. Again, it is possible to have been educated in this discourse and simply take what one has taught to be an accurate reflection of truth. The critique of Hinduphobic discourse, though, invites one to take a more critical attitude, not only toward the scholarship of others, but even toward one's own, in order to discern whether one might, even inadvertently, be replicating it. What follows, then, are simply my own observations about the varieties of Hinduphobic

discourse I have encountered in my career thus far, as well as about forms of discourse which might be taken as Hinduphobic, but which are in fact distinct from it.

It is important to note that simply because some Hindus or some groups of Hindus do not like a particular piece of academic writing, this alone does not place that writing in the category of Hinduphobic discourse. The criterion, again, is this: 'Is there any scenario, short of their complete renunciation of Hinduism, in which Hindus might address this critique in a way the critic would find acceptable?' If the answer to this question is 'no', then we are dealing with Hinduphobia.

I would divide the academic writing that might easily be regarded as Hinduphobic into two categories, which I call *Apparent Hinduphobia* and *Real Hinduphobia*. Each of these categories is further divided into two further subcategories. In the category of *Apparent Hinduphobia*, I place what I call '*Tone Deafness*' and *Genuine Disagreement*. *Real Hinduphobia*, on the other hand, consists of *Open Hinduphobia* and *Deep Hinduphobia*. Deep Hinduphobia is further divided into Freudian and Marxist sub-varieties.

This schema can be illustrated in the following way:

Hinduphobic Discourse:

1) Apparent Hinduphobia
    a) 'Tone Deafness'
    b) Genuine Disagreement
2) Real Hinduphobia
    a) Open Hinduphobia:
    Anti-Hindu Apologetics
    b) Deep Hinduphobia:
    The Hermeneutics of Suspicion
        i) Freudian
        ii) Marxist

Again, the point of this analysis is to establish the conceptual contours of the Hinduphobic discourse. The claim is not that any scholar who utilises Freudian or Marxist methodologies is a Hinduphobe in a pathological sense. On the contrary, there are dimensions of both Freudianism and Marxism that can be extremely useful to Hindu discourse. The claim, rather, is that there are certain ways of deploying these methodologies that are clearly hostile to Hinduism, and that these need to be understood in order to be addressed.

Apparent Hinduphobia is just that: apparent. There is writing about Hinduism that is, for a variety of reasons, off-putting, and perhaps even deeply offensive, to many Hindus. It may fail, though, to meet the criterion of belonging to Hinduphobic discourse: 'Is there any scenario, short of their complete renunciation of Hinduism, in which Hindus might address this critique in a way the critic would find acceptable?'

Apparent Hinduphobia falling under the category of 'Tone Deafness' may not even contain a critique of Hinduism. There is a certain way of writing about Hindu thought and practice which comes across as cold and clinical. This is often a function of the effort of the author to maintain a stance of objectivity. Particularly if one is accustomed to writing on Hindu thought and practice that is reverential, or even devotional, in tone, some academic writing on Hinduism may read as if the author is describing some newly discovered species of bacteria. Religious people will naturally find such writing disrespectful and inappropriate for sacred topics. Authors of this kind of writing, though, are not trying to express reverence or devotion—but neither are they seeking to demean or attack the topics they are discussing. They see themselves as social scientists, trying to describe human behaviour and thought using the agreed upon categories of their discipline. They may even be

practising Hindus themselves. When they are writing in this mode, though, they are wearing their 'anthropologist hat', or 'sociologist hat', or 'religious scholar hat', and so on.

The second type of apparently Hinduphobic writing, which I call Genuine Disagreement, does include criticisms of specific Hindu teachings or practices; but it is not aimed at undermining the tradition as a whole. If one applies our criterion in these cases—'Is there any scenario, short of their complete renunciation of Hinduism, in which Hindus might address this critique in a way the critic would find acceptable?'—the answer to the question will be, 'Yes'. Indeed, the full answer will be that this is precisely what the author is aiming to achieve: some reform or revision in the way the Hindu community is practising or thinking about some topic. Such critiques may be of an internal variety—by Hindus seeking to advance an agenda of social or political reform—or may come from outsiders—non-Hindus—who nevertheless see themselves as friends of the tradition. Of course, whether such critiques are received in this spirit or as forms of Hinduphobic discourse is in the eye of the beholder. It will depend upon the stance the reader takes on the particular topic on which the author is writing. If the author sees a particular practice by Hindus as reprehensible and in need of reform, and if the reader sees that practice as essential to Hinduism, then the reader will answer our criterion question with a 'no' and judge the writing to be Hinduphobic. The Hindu American Foundation's critical report on caste may be a good example of writing in this category.[4]

We come, then, to Real Hinduphobia. We are speaking now of Hinduphobic writing aimed specifically at undermining Hindu traditions, seeing these traditions as inherently oppressive and destructive to human life and flourishing.

The first sub-variety of Real Hinduphobia—Open Hinduphobia—consists of writing that is plainly opposed to Hinduism as such. It typically consists of apologetic writing. Here 'apologetic' does not mean what it does in regular, daily discourse—to speak in a way that is remorseful, or that shows that one feels sorry for something. The older meaning of *apologetics* in Christian theology is a discourse that is intended to advance and defend one's tradition. This can either take the form of defending one's own views from the arguments of others, or arguing actively against the views of others. Writing of this kind, directed against Hinduism, is ancient. It includes the early colonial-era writing of Christian missionaries, seeking to refute Hinduism and win converts, or even earlier, of Islamic apologists arguing against Hinduism in the name of advancing Islam. Writing of this kind continues today, such as among evangelical Christians seeking, just like their predecessors, to convert people from Hinduism to Christianity.

Such apologetics are rare in the contemporary academy, though, and occur more often in the popular media. Such writing has fallen out of fashion in the academy for a variety of reasons. One is the dominant worldview of the academy, which is more drawn to a scientific materialism than to openly religious views, which are seen by many as irrational. We shall return to this point shortly. Another is the rise of multiculturalism among many scholars: a stance which sees open criticism of religious belief systems, particularly of communities that form minorities in the West, as a form of intellectual violence and oppression. Hinduphobic writing by Christian polemicists who are also professional scholars of Hindu thought and practice was quite common among earlier generations of scholars, as has been documented most recently in the work of Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee.[5] According

to Adluri and Bagchee, such writing and the dispositions behind it have left a legacy in the world of Indological scholarship, even among those secular scholars who do not, themselves, identify as Christians, and so would not necessarily be expected to have taken on the theological assumptions of their forebears in a new form.

This legacy is, of course, the Hinduphobic discourse I have been describing. Again, it is possible, even for one who does not feel any visceral hatred for Hindus or Hinduism, to absorb the deeply embedded assumptions behind one's education, even while holding a very different view on a conscious level.

One part of the legacy of the older anti-Hindu apologetics—or Open Hinduphobia—has been the emergence of Deep Hinduphobia. Deep Hinduphobia consists of the application of what has come to be called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' to Hindu thought and practice, on the assumption that Hindu thought and practice are fundamentally oppressive, misguided, and superstitious. It is quite different from Open Hinduphobia, in that Open Hinduphobia actively engages with Hindu ideas in order to refute them—much in the same way that adherents of the ancient Indic systems of philosophy engaged with one another. Deep Hinduphobia does not bother to do this. Instead, it begins with the assumption that of course Hinduism, and religion generally, is a delusion, a result of false consciousness. On this basis, it seeks to deconstruct the beliefs and practices of Hindus by revealing them to, in fact, consist of attempts to control society or repress certain behaviours.

While many of the critiques of Hinduphobia tend to lump all Hinduphobic discourse into one category—conflating Christian missionaries with secular Freudian and Marxist skeptics—the perspective from which Deep Hinduphobia operates is, in reality, just as hostile to Christianity and other religions as it is to Hinduism. The view of reality it takes to be true is essentially materialistic and sees human beings as being driven wholly by material urges—either sexual, as in the case of Freudian approaches, or in the form of money or power, as in Marxist approaches.

If one were to analyse the Hinduphobic discourse in terms of the four *purusharthas*, or the aims of human life, found in the Hindu traditions, then Open Hinduphobia could be seen to operate on the level of dharma. The anti-Hindu polemicist seeks to advance a religious view other than Hinduism in order to undermine and replace it, but does so openly and honestly. Marxist Deep Hinduphobia operates on the level of *artha*—of wealth and power—seeing this as the fundamental human urge. And, of course, Freudian Deep Hinduphobia operates on the level of *kama*—sensual pleasure—seeing *this* as the fundamental human urge.

From these perspectives, the highest human goal—*moksha*—is held to be a delusion. People really want either wealth and power or sensual pleasure, and their religious beliefs and aspirations are a cover for these pursuits. Again, this is never argued directly. It is simply assumed.

Because it does not engage directly and openly with Hindu ideas—treating these, rather, as symptomatic of false consciousness—the hermeneutics of suspicion utilised in Deep Hinduphobic discourse is akin to the following scenario:

> Let us say that a scholar presents a logical argument at a conference for the reality of reincarnation, looking at the evidence of children who seem to have memories of past lives that cannot be accounted for through more conventional means, and also comparing the doctrines of karma and rebirth with other available options for belief about what happens after we die, such as the materialist belief in no afterlife, or teachings of an eternal heaven or hell.

> During the question and answer session that follows, rather than directly addressing the evidence the scholar has presented, an opponent of these ideas instead says something like: 'Surely you don't believe that!' Or, perhaps more pointedly, 'You know, Hitler also believed in rebirth.'

To be sure, most discourse of this kind is not so unsophisticated. But the essential structure of the argument is the same: the ideas being rejected are not even worthy of serious consideration, and so another story needs to be told about why they are held—a causal story, involving something more plausible than the idea that karma, rebirth, Brahman, or Atman are concepts that have a persuasive appeal. This story involves something that the opponent *does* find persuasive: like wealth, power, and sex. The opponent prefers to find these motivations lurking behind such beliefs, rather than giving serious consideration to a worldview—like Vedanta—that, when it is taken seriously, shakes materialism to its very foundations.

Conclusion

To assert that a Hinduphobic discourse exists, and to critique that discourse, is not to say that Hindus and Hinduism can never be on the receiving end of legitimate criticism. As Pravrajika Vrajaprana writes:

> What is generally considered 'religion' is a mixture of essentials and nonessentials; as Sri Ramakrishna said, all scriptures contain a mixture of sand and sugar. We need to take out the sugar and leave the sand behind: we should extract the essence of religion—whether we call it union with God or Self-realization—and leave the rest behind. Whatever helps us to manifest our divinity we embrace; whatever pulls us away from that ideal, we avoid.[6]

At the same time, any discourse that is built upon or that serves to cultivate fear and hatred is likewise an impediment to God-realisation, whether it is Hinduphobia or phobia of some other religion or ideology. Even the critique of Hinduphobia ought to be pursued not out of fear or hatred of any individual. This is one of the reasons I have not focused on specific scholars in this outline of the Hinduphobic discourse. We should not operate out of Hinduphobia, but nor should we operate out of Hinduphobia-phobia. The aim of the critique of Hinduphobia, rather, is to advance truth, and to reveal—particularly in the case of Deep Hinduphobia—the conceptual underpinnings of the Hinduphobic discourse so they can be addressed directly, through logical argumentation, pursued with open-mindedness and compassion. In the words of Swami Vivekananda: 'Fear comes from the selfish idea of cutting one's self off from the universe. The smaller and the more selfish I make myself, the more is my fear. If a man thinks he is a little nothing, fear will surely come upon him. And the less you think of yourself as an insignificant person, the less fear there will be for you.'[7]

Notes and References

1. Personal communication.
2. See Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University, 2001).
3. See Rajiv Malhotra, *Academic Hinduphobia* (New Delhi: Voices of India, 2016).
4. See Hindu American Foundation, *Hinduism: Not Cast in Caste: Seeking an End to Caste-based Discrimination* <https://www.hafsite.org/media/pr/hinduism-not-cast-caste-full-report> accessed 07 October 2017.
5. See Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2014)
6. Pravrajika Vrajaprana, *Vedanta: A Simple Introduction* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2011), 40.
7. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3.89.