



Identity & Challenges Faced

Ethnic Studies | Grades 9-12 | Brooke Pillifant, M.A., M.Ed.

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Hindu American Identity & Challenges Faced

Lesson Overview

This lesson helps students explore the complexity and diversity of identity, using Hindu American experiences as a case study. Students will reflect on their own identities, learn about the varied ways Hindu Americans define and express their identities, and consider how misunderstandings or stereotypes can impact individuals and communities. The lesson encourages empathy, critical thinking, and respect for diverse perspectives.

By examining identity through both personal reflection and the lens of a specific cultural and religious community, students will begin to understand that identity is not a single label or fixed category—it is made up of many layers, including culture, spirituality, family background, personal beliefs, and lived experiences. The lesson highlights that even within a single tradition like Hinduism, people may identify in different ways: some may connect primarily through heritage and culture, while others engage deeply with spiritual practices, and still others may blend traditions or participate without adopting a specific religious label.

Through collaborative discussions, real-life scenarios, and comparative reflection, students will also grapple with how bias and misinformation can distort our understanding of others. Ultimately, this lesson empowers students to better understand both themselves and those around them.

Key Terms and Concepts

Identity:	The way a person sees themselves and how they are seen by others, shaped by things like culture, religion, family, traditions, and personal experiences.
Heritage:	The cultural traditions, values, and history passed down from previous generations.
Śakti:	Power or energy, which is seen as a feminine trait in Hindu Dharmas.
Diaspora:	A group of people who have moved from their original homeland to other places around the world but still maintain cultural connections.
Cultural Hindu/ Heritage Hindu:	Someone who identifies with a Hindu Dharma mainly through cultural traditions like festivals, food, music, and art, rather than spiritual or religious practice.
Spiritual/ Practicing Hindu:	A person who actively follows Hindu teachings, philosophies, or ceremonies, whether or not they have Hindu ancestry.
Hindu Dharma Traditions:	The many different Hindu spiritual paths, including Śākta (focused on the Divine Feminine, Śakti), Vaiṣṇava (focused on Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa/Rāma), Śaiva (focused on Śiva), and others.
Bias:	An unfair judgment or assumption about a person or group, often based on stereotypes.

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Stereotype:	An oversimplified and often incorrect idea or belief about a group of people.
Empathy:	The ability to understand and share the feelings of another person.
Misrepresentation:	When information about a group or idea is presented in an inaccurate or unfair way.

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify and explain the different ways Hindu Americans might describe their identity.
- Describe and analyze common misconceptions and challenges faced by Hindu Americans today.
- Reflect on and connect the diversity within Hindu Dharma traditions to their own personal identity and experiences.
- Demonstrate empathy and awareness of the impact that bias and stereotypes can have on individuals and communities, specifically Hindu Americans.

Opening

Begin by pairing students with a shoulder partner to answer or having students participate as a whole class.

Teacher: "Can you think of different ways that people in your own family, friend group, or community might identify themselves? How do these identities differ, even though you're from the same group?" Allow for students to respond.

Teacher: "How does your own identity reflect multiple influences, like family, friends, religion, culture, or even where you live?" Allow for students to respond.

Teacher: "Can someone be part of a group culturally without sharing all its religious or spiritual beliefs? Can you think of an example?" Allow for students to respond.

Teacher: "Why is it important to understand the different ways people identify themselves, especially in a diverse country like the United States?" Allow for students to respond.

Did you know that not all Hindu Americans practice the same ceremonies or share the exact same beliefs? For some, being Hindu is about connecting to their heritage—through things like festivals, food, music, or even dance. For others, it's deeply spiritual, guiding their daily practices and beliefs. Some people blend Hindu traditions with other spiritual paths, creating unique identities influenced by different cultures and religions.

Similar to our own lives, Hindu identity isn't just one single thing—it's a vibrant, complex mix of cultural heritage and spiritual practices, shaped by personal experiences, family traditions, and community connections.

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Information

When presenting information to students, the information can be read aloud by the teacher or a student, read silently, or read in groups. If a copy is provided to students, have students underline or circle areas that resonate with them. If a copy is not provided, have students jot down parts of the reading that resonate with them on a separate sheet of paper.

Just like in many communities, identity among Hindu Americans can vary widely—some focus more on culture, some emphasize spirituality, and others might not use the label "Hindu" but still practice elements of Hindu traditions.

Cultural or Heritage Hindus

Some Hindu Americans call themselves "cultural" or "heritage" Hindus. These are people who have family roots from an area historically known as Ancient India, or from its sphere of cultural influence known as the Indosphere—or from communities originally from those areas, called diasporas. Cultural Hindus might have grown up in homes identifying as Hindu and celebrate their heritage through art, music, dance, poetry, food, and festivals. They often feel connected to their ancestral land and cultural traditions more than just spiritual practices. While they might participate in family ceremonies, they may not deeply understand or follow Hindu spiritual philosophies or teachings.

Spiritual or Practicing Hindus

Other Hindu Americans describe themselves as "spiritual" or "practicing" Hindus. They actively engage in Hindu spiritual teachings, philosophies, and practices at varying levels. Practicing Hindus might come from Hindu families or might have chosen a Hindu Dharma tradition later in life. Spiritual Hindus might have Hindu heritage or they might not. If they have Hindu heritage, they might follow the traditions passed down by their families, or they might adopt practices from different Hindu spiritual paths that are more personally meaningful to them. They may identify using their specific spiritual tradition, like Śākta, Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, or a combination including their regional or linguistic group (for example, Tamil Hindu Śākta or Hindu Gujarati Vaiṣṇava). If they don't have Hindu heritage, they may choose to adopt a specific Hindu tradition, embracing its culture and spirituality, and often prefer calling themselves by their tradition's specific name (for instance, Yoga or Vedānta) instead of broadly using the term "Hindu." They might even adopt the regional customs of the founder of their spiritual tradition, like Western Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas who follow Bengali traditions introduced by their founder, Caitanya.

People Who Engage in Hindu Practices Without Calling Themselves Hindu

There are also those who don't identify as Hindu, but who follow some Hindu teachings or practices. This could be due to personal interest, custom, or through intermarriage with Hindus. The Hindu Dharma traditions don't require someone to convert or give up their original religion like other religions often do, making it easy for people from other faiths or spiritual backgrounds to engage in Hindu practices. For example, some Christians practice meditation methods taught in Hindu traditions like Vedānta, or some Indian Muslim women perform Hindu spiritual practices like *Devī vrata*. This flexibility has historically encouraged mixing of traditions, especially in places where marriage between Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians has been common.

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Challenges that Hindu Americans Face Today

Hindu Americans today face several significant challenges related to their identity and beliefs. Understanding these challenges helps us recognize the importance of respect and accurate representation of all cultures and religions.

Bullying and Isolation

Many Hindu students in the United States experience bullying because of their religious identity. Studies show that one out of three Hindu students reports being bullied at school due to their religious beliefs, and about half say they feel socially isolated or left out because of their Hindu identity. Often, this bullying happens because schools sometimes teach incorrect or negative information about Hindu Dharmas—especially when Hinduism is wrongly equated with the caste system, or being misogynist (in fact, Hindus have an entire tradition dedicated to the Supreme Being as feminine, and have hundreds of female spiritual leaders all throughout their history and today). Such inaccurate lessons can lead to misunderstandings and affect Hindu students' sense of self-worth and belonging.

Increase in Hate Incidents

Recently, there has been a sharp rise in hate crimes and bias-driven incidents against Hindu Americans and their communities. For example, a 2024 survey by California's Civil Rights Department found that 23% of religious hate incidents in the state targeted Hindus—the second-highest after Jewish communities. Unlike previous decades, recent attacks on Hindu temples in states like California and New York have sometimes come from extremist individuals within other South Asian diaspora groups. These attacks often involve violence, harassment, or threats.

These conflicts partly reflect complicated religious and political tensions from South Asia that have traveled with immigrant communities to America. Unfortunately, extremist groups sometimes spread negative stereotypes, hatred, or misinformation against Hindu Americans online, though these extremists represent only a small minority of their own religious communities.

Misunderstanding Religious Identity

Many Americans mistakenly assume that all Indians are Hindu, or sometimes they incorrectly assume that non-Muslim Indians must be Muslim. The reality is that Indian Americans come from very diverse religious backgrounds, including Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, and others. This misunderstanding can lead to awkward or uncomfortable situations, further complicating how Hindu and other Indian Americans express and navigate their identities in the United States.

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Activity 1

Materials: sticky notes; printed short scenarios

Have students take a few minutes to write short responses to the following questions on sticky notes. Each question should have a different sticky note.

- What are three aspects of your identity that matter a lot to you (e.g., culture, religion, hobbies, traditions)?
- Have you ever been misunderstood or unfairly judged because of these aspects of your identity?
- How did that misunderstanding make you feel?

Encourage a few volunteers to briefly share their thoughts.

Divide the class into small groups of 4–5 students. Have them bring their sticky notes with them. Give each group a different scenario describing bias or a challenge faced by a Hindu American teenager.

- Scenario A: Priya, a Hindu student, feels isolated when classmates repeatedly tease and ask her where she falls in the caste system. While she knows a lot about her family's Hindu Dharma tradition and culture, her family has never talked about a caste system or anything like it and she has never heard about it in her community. She doesn't really know anything about it. How might Priya feel? What could classmates or teachers do differently?
- Scenario B: Arjun sees a social media post falsely linking his local Hindu temple to negative political events happening in another country. He worries this misinformation could lead to threats or vandalism. How would you feel in Arjun's place? How might social media spread misunderstandings?
- Scenario C: During a class lesson, Sunita hears Hinduism described inaccurately, focusing only on negative stereotypes like idol worship and arranged marriages, making her feel embarrassed and misunderstood. What could a student like Sunita do to correct misogynist misunderstandings respectfully in class? What role does the teacher have?

Have each group write answers to the following questions:

1. How might the Hindu American teenager in your scenario feel in this situation?
2. What assumptions or biases are causing this misunderstanding?
3. What steps could classmates, teachers, or communities take to support this student?

Have each group briefly present their scenario and solutions. Facilitate a respectful discussion, emphasizing themes like empathy, respect, and accurate information amongst students using the following prompts. Students can answer out loud or write their answers on additional sticky notes.

- What similarities do you notice between how you felt in your warm-up reflection and how the students in these scenarios might feel?
- Why is it harmful when identities are misunderstood or stereotyped?

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Major Hindu Dharma Traditions

Information

Śākta Dharma

Śāktas see the Supreme Being as a feminine energy called Śākti. They honor forms of the divine feminine such as Kālī, Durgā, Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī, and Rājarājeśvarī. Most Śākta traditions believe in non-dualism, seeing everything as one unified divine reality. Unlike many other Hindu paths, Śākta tradition generally doesn't encourage renouncing worldly life or vegetarianism.

Vaiṣṇava Dharma

Vaiṣṇavas are part of ancient monotheistic Hindu traditions, venerating the Supreme Being as Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu. They emphasize devotion and non-violence (*ahimsā*), which strongly influences their dietary choices, often promoting vegetarianism. Philosophically, Vaiṣṇava traditions vary from dualism (*dvaita*) to non-dualism (*advaita*). Some popular Vaiṣṇava groups in the U.S. include ISKCON (the Hare Kṛṣṇas), Sri Vaiṣṇavas, Puṣṭi Mārga, and Swaminarayan communities.

Śaiva Dharma

Śaivas venerate the Supreme Being as Śiva. Their practices strongly emphasize yoga and meditation—especially *jñāna yoga* (path of knowledge) and *aṣṭāṅga yoga* (eight-limbed yoga). Śaiva traditions can have a range of philosophical viewpoints, often seeing the Supreme Being as less personal or more abstract. Vegetarianism is recommended but usually not strictly required. Popular Śaiva organizations in America include the Saiva Siddhanta Church, Sadhguru's Isha Foundation, and Siddha Yoga led by Gurumayi Chidvilasananda.

Kaumāra Dharma (Kaumāram)

This monotheistic tradition venerates Kumāra (also known as Murugan or Kārtikeya) as the Supreme Being. It's a smaller tradition mainly practiced by Tamil communities from South India, Sri Lanka, and parts of Malaysia. But while Kaumāram is largely concentrated among Tamils, most Tamil Hindus do not identify solely as Kaumāras.

Smārta Dharma

Smārta tradition comes from ancient Vedic practices and the teachings of the philosopher Śaṅkara, focusing heavily on *advaita* Vedānta (non-dualism)—the understanding that everything is one unified reality. Smārtas prioritize meditation on the underlying unified reality as a formless principle

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(non-theist) but also allow followers to use a symbol to help them focus. They do so through venerating the principle as the personified Supreme Being through any of the traditional Hindu forms mentioned above, along with other forms like Gaṇeśa and Sūrya. Famous Smārta teachers in the US include Swami Vivekananda, Paramahansa Yogananda, and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Mata Amritanandamayi, known popularly as Amma, is another influential Smārta teacher in America.

Regional and Ancestral Traditions

Some Hindu Americans follow traditions that were local, regional, or even specific to their own tribes as handed down from their ancestors. They may be very ancient and deeply tied to specific geographic areas and cultures within their ancestral homelands.

New Hindu Movements

Since the 1800s, new Hindu movements and organizations have emerged. While they involve less than 3% of Hindus globally, this still represents around 34 million people—more than the global population of all Jews, Jains, Zoroastrians, and Shintoists combined. Many of these movements blend traditional teachings or align themselves with broader Hindu Dharma philosophies, and some are even seen as part of broader 'New Age' trends that combine multiple spiritual traditions

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Activity 2

Have students work independently.

Choose two of the Hindu Dharma traditions. For each tradition:

- Briefly summarize what you find most interesting or meaningful about this tradition (core beliefs, practices, values, or teachings).
- Reflect on how aspects of this tradition connect to your own layers of identity—such as family culture, religion or spirituality, personal values, dietary choices, practices of meditation or reflection, views about the world, or cultural traditions you observe.

Using their answers, have students participate in a stand up, hand up, pair up activity. Students should stand and walk about the classroom, raise one hand, and then find a partner by high-fiving someone with their hand up. Once they have found a partner, have them choose one of their traditions to discuss with the partner. Once each partner has shared, they should separate, raise their hands again, and find a new partner.

Set an allotted amount of time for this activity or a number of people students must pair up with.

As a whole group, ask students to share their reflections:

- Do you see similarities between your beliefs or cultural traditions and those found in the Hindu Dharma traditions you've chosen?
- How does learning about these Hindu traditions help you better understand or appreciate something about your own identity or family background?
- Even if your identity or beliefs differ, what can you learn from these Hindu traditions that could enrich your own views or practices?

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Wrap Up

Throughout this lesson, we explored the rich and diverse ways Hindu Americans identify themselves—through culture, spirituality, or personal experience. We've also talked about how harmful misconceptions can affect Hindu Americans' lives, influencing how they're treated and how they feel about themselves. Through your reflections, you've connected your own identity and experiences with those of others, helping you see both the unique and shared aspects of human identity.

The diversity within Hindu Dharma traditions can teach us a powerful lesson: identity is never one-dimensional. It's layered, personal, and constantly shaped by our experiences, families, cultures, beliefs, and even how others see us. Recognizing and respecting these layers helps us build a community where everyone feels seen and understood.

As you leave today, remember that exploring and understanding identities different from your own not only enriches your perspective—it helps create a more inclusive, empathetic, and connected world.

Assessment

Have students write their answer on an index card. Share the cards at the beginning of the next class or use them to create an awareness bulletin board.

How does bias affect someone's ability to express their identity openly?

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Homework Assignment

Research a recent hate crime or anti-Hindu incident (from the past 3 years) either in your home town or somewhere else in the United States.

Use credible news sources to research your chosen event to answer the questions below:

1. What happened? Summarize the event clearly and respectfully.
2. Who was affected? Individual, group, or community – include age, background, identity if relevant.
3. Why did it happen? Was there evidence of hate, bias, or prejudice? What type?
4. What was the response? Did the community, police, or activists take any action?
5. What do you think needs to happen to prevent this in the future?

Choose one format for your project:

- Instagram (3-5 slides)
- TikTok script or short video idea
- Twitter/X thread (3–5 tweets)
- Infographic (Canva, Google Slides, or paper)

Your post must include:

- Brief, clear summary of the incident (with sensitivity and accuracy)
- Message of solidarity or a call to action
- Tips or ways to overcome bias and spread inclusion
- Hashtags/slogans (e.g. #StopHate, #UnityInDiversity)

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Grading Rubric:

Category	4 - Excellent	3 - Good	2 - Satisfactory	1 - Needs Improvement
Research & Accuracy	Clear, accurate summary; shows deep understanding of the incident and context	Mostly accurate and well-researched; minor gaps	Some key facts missing or unclear	Lacks key details or contains misinformation
Cultural Sensitivity & Empathy	Demonstrates strong empathy; uses respectful and inclusive language throughout	Mostly respectful; minor lapses in tone or understanding	Some signs of empathy, but tone may be vague or unsure	Lacks awareness or includes insensitive or biased language
Message & Call to Action	Clear and powerful message; strong call to action or solution offered	Good message; includes a relevant solution or call to action	Message is vague or lacks a clear call to action	Confusing, off-topic, or missing key message
Creativity & Communication Style	Highly engaging format; visuals or text are compelling and memorable	Creative and clear presentation; some originality	Some effort in design or writing; could be stronger	Little effort or creativity; hard to follow or bland