



# Teaching About Hindus in America

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## Introduction

Hindus had reached America as early as 1635. Swami Vivekananda was the first major spiritual leader who introduced Hinduism to America at the World's Parliament of Religions (1893) and founded the Vedanta Society. Other early major leaders included Paramahansa Yogananda, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and Srila Prabhupada. Institutionally racist laws, like the Asian Exclusion Act (1924 Immigration Act), tightly restricted immigration until 1965. The American civil rights movement ushered in other reforms, however, including passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 (INA). The INA lifted the bar on Asian immigration and the previous quota system, and replaced it with a preference system based on labor skills needed by the United States and those who had a pre-existing family tie in the country. These major changes to American laws paved the way for Indians to immigrate to the US from which the Hindu American community grew, now surpassing 3.3 million. Hindus have, overall, successfully integrated into broader American society, despite facing ongoing hate crimes and discrimination in education.

### Early American Writings on Hindus

The first American writings on Hindus (“Hindoos”) and “Hinduism” were overtly disparaging and prejudiced. Cotton Mather (1663-1728) saw “Hindoos” as heathens on the fringes of Christian European civilization. Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) compared “Hindoo religion” with Biblical religion in order to prove the superiority of Christianity. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, founded in 1810, represented “Hindoo religion” in its missionary reports as noisy, chaotic, obscene, bloody, ritualistic heathenism, and explicitly claimed the superiority of Protestant Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

American public school textbooks constructed an anthropology through which they understood human differences, and ranked human differences across categories of race, civilization, and religion. They overtly taught American children that they were part of a superior enlightened, white, Protestant identity, in order to produce the model American citizens that the government desired. They described India as “a distinct and peculiar nation,” emphasizing its deep differences from the West. Many of these stereotypes persist in American education today.

Similarly, magazines such as Harper’s New Monthly Magazine used “Hindoo religion” as a foil for the “superior” white American Protestantism. American popular culture thus constructed their identity by casting “Hindoos” as Other.<sup>2</sup>

The first major manifestation of more positive understandings of Hindu philosophy was in the literary movement called Transcendentalism, led by famous authors Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. This is where Hindu influence in America catapulted. By the 1830s, Emerson was studying translations of the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad Gītā. They were the source of his understanding of the underlying oneness of spirit linking the human soul and the Transcendent reality, and thus the intellectual movement he started became called the Transcendentalists. He disseminated Hindu scriptures in these circles, calling them “the ethical scriptures.”<sup>3</sup> “In the morning, I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat-Geeta... in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial.” - Henry David Thoreau.

Around the same time, many members of the Unitarian movement were drawn to Hindu (especially Vedānta) ideas on the fundamental oneness of the Divine, the deep connection between the soul and the Divine, and the transcendent unity of many different ways and paths. The Unitarians of Boston had connections with some of the reformist Hindu renaissance movements in Bengal from an early period.

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<sup>1</sup> Altman, Michael J., 'Transcendentalism, Brahmanism, and Universal Religion', *Heathens, Hindoo, Hindu: American Representations of India, 1721-1893* (New York, 2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 24 Aug. 2017), chapters 1 and 2

<sup>2</sup> Altman, Michael J., 'Transcendentalism, Brahmanism, and Universal Religion', *Heathens, Hindoo, Hindu: American Representations of India, 1721-1893* (New York, 2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 24 Aug. 2017), chapter 3

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, chapters 2 and 4, and <https://pluralism.org/trade-and-transcendentalism>

### The First Hindus Arrive in America

A record from 1635 mentions an “East Indian” living in Jamestown, Virginia. Some people from India, including Hindus, were held as slaves in Maryland and Delaware in the 1700s. Upon the abolition of slavery, they blended into the freed African American population; their descendants were considered mulattos.

Free Hindu sailors came on trading ships from India entering the ports of Salem and Boston in the early to mid-1800s. By the mid-1800s, Hindus were reportedly participating in Salem’s Fourth of July parade.<sup>4</sup>

After slavery was ended in the area, beginning in 1838 plantations in the Caribbean were re-staffed with over half a million indentured laborers, mainly from India (also some from China), most of them press-ganged into indentured servitude by force and/or deceit and shipped across the world without their informed consent, never to be able to go home.<sup>5</sup> While initially no women were allowed, this was later revoked and an estimated quarter million women from India alone sailed to the West Indies to work sugar plantations.<sup>6</sup> While not technically slaves, these workers lived under inherited structures of slavery, including identical living conditions and restrictions of their movement and freedom. The ships that transported them were the same slave ships, the workers were housed in the same housing recently vacated by slaves, and the slave masters were retained as the new indenture overseers.<sup>7</sup> This continued until 1917, when the indentureship system was also ended. The indentured and formerly indentured laborers formed new communities in the Caribbean area, including many large Hindu communities. These communities were heavily targeted by Christian missionaries, including the deliberate use of abuses and religiously discriminatory employment restrictions to coerce them into conversion. Today many Caribbean Hindus have made the United States their home and built temples that carry on many of the traditions they preserved and adapted for generations outside of India.

### Systemic Discrimination Against Hindus

The Naturalization Act of 1870 allowed black Americans to obtain US citizenship, but not Asians. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and Geary Act of 1892 restricted citizenship and access to many services for Asians.

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<sup>4</sup> Meyers, Debra & Perreault, Melanie, *Colonial Chesapeake: New Perspectives* (Lexington Books, 2006), <https://pluralism.org/trade-and-transcendentalism>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/02690055.2022.2031035>

<sup>6</sup> Lai, Walton Look. “Life and Labor on the Plantations: The Indians.” *From Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838- 1918*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> [https://flexpub.com/epubs/97808078769611558197699/OEBPS/bano\\_9780807876961\\_oeb\\_c01\\_r1.html](https://flexpub.com/epubs/97808078769611558197699/OEBPS/bano_9780807876961_oeb_c01_r1.html)

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In 1905, the Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL) was founded to advocate for the prevention of Asian people from immigrating to America. The AEL argued that “Hindoos” were dangerous cheap laborers and unassimilable foreigners. The AEL also mischaracterized the freedom struggles and independence movement in India as Indian nationalism and perpetuated smears that they were a threat to US national security. Discrimination and racial violence ensued.<sup>8</sup> Indians were harassed, prohibited from owning or leasing land (which other Asian immigrants could do), and were entirely driven out of cities including Marysville, CA and Bellingham, WA by violent mobs. The 1911 U.S. Immigration Commission identified Indians as the “least desirable race of immigrants thus far admitted to the United States.” The 1917 Immigration Act legally banned all Indians from entering the United States, except those of a very short list of specific professions (including religious teachers), and in most cases they could not even bring their wives.<sup>9</sup> Restrictions were tightened even further with the institution of race-based exclusionary quotas in 1924 with the Oriental Exclusion Act (which incidentally was a direct inspiration to Adolf Hitler’s Exclusion of Foreign Blood Act of 1928 in Nazi Germany). This ban stood until 1946, when the Luce-Celler Act allowed Indians to enter the country, but with an extremely limited quota of only 100 Indian immigrants allowed per year. This miniscule quota remained in place until 1965, and naturalization was not allowed until 1952.<sup>10</sup>

The Ghadar Movement (1913-1948) was a movement and party founded by Indians living in America to help in the struggle for India’s independence from the British Empire. The founder and first leader, Har Dayal, was a Hindu as were many others. Many were Sikhs and some were Muslims. Har Dayal was forced to flee the United States in 1914. Based out of San Francisco, the movement’s headquarters were referred to as an Ashram. They published a highly popular and influential weekly paper titled “Ghadar” to promote the cause of Indian independence. In 1914 the Ghadar Party called for overseas Indians to go to India to fight for its freedom. In response to this call, 8,000 Indians living in America went to India. Many were jailed by the British, and some killed. Those killed are memorialized and celebrated as martyrs to this day. A later president of the Ghadar Party, Ram Chandra, was charged with sedition and assassinated during his trial.<sup>11</sup>

A Sikh member of the Ghadar Movement named Bhagat Singh Thind joined the US Army and served in World War I. After the war he sought naturalized citizenship, which at the time was legally restricted to those of Caucasian and/or African descent. By the racial science of the time, Indians were considered Caucasian. Thind received his certificate of US citizenship in 1918 at Camp Lewis, Washington, wearing military uniform. However the Bureau of Naturalization revoked his citizenship four days later on the grounds that Thind was not a “white man.” The case reached the Supreme Court, which unanimously denied citizenship to Indians.<sup>12</sup> This affected not only Thind, but stripped the citizenship (and by extension, the land) of more than seventy Indians who had already received it

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.aalde.org/news/the-juggernaut-the-dotbusters-were-not-a-joke/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.saada.org/tides/article/legacies-of-the-1965-immigration-act>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.saada.org/tides/article/celebrating-south-asian-american-womens-stories>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.cgisf.gov.in/page/gadar-memorial-hall/>,

<https://pluralism.org/the-ghadar-party-freedom-for-india>, <http://www.panjab.org.uk/english/histGPty.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/thind-v-united-states%E2%80%8B/>,

<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/261/204/#214>,

<https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/us-supreme-court/261/204.html>

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and were living in the US as naturalized citizens prior to this ruling.<sup>13</sup> These people had been required to renounce their prior citizenship to become Americans, so this ruling rendered them legally persona non grata or stateless. The ban on Indians being eligible for naturalization stood until 1946.<sup>14</sup>

Just one example of the impact this had on Indians in the US is Vaishno Das Bagai, a model Hindu American. A husband and father of three, he had asked his brother to sell some of their land so that he could use his portion of the inheritance to settle his family in America. He was a fully integrated and proud American citizen, wearing American suits, speaking fluent English and fully conversant with Western etiquette. He owned a home and a thriving business in San Francisco, despite having faced racism from neighbors. When stripped of his citizenship, he became subject to California's alien land laws; he was forced to liquidate his property, including his business. When he sought a passport to return to India, he was denied this too. He committed suicide, leaving this letter:

"I came to America thinking, dreaming and hoping to make this land my home. Sold my properties and brought more than twenty-five thousand dollars (gold) to this country, established myself and tried my very best to give my children the best American education. In year 1921 the Federal court at San Francisco accepted me as a naturalized citizen of the United States and issued to my name the final certificate, giving therein the name and description of my wife and three sons. In last 12 or 13 years we all made ourselves as much Americanized as possible. But they now come to me and say, I am no longer an American citizen. They will not permit me to buy my home and, lo, they even shall not issue me a passport to go back to India. Now what am I? What have I made of myself and my children? We cannot exercise our rights, we cannot leave this country. Humility and insults, who is responsible for all this? Myself and American government. I do not choose to live the life of an interned person; yes, I am in a free country and can move about where and when I wish inside the country. Is life worth living in a gilded cage? Obstacles this way, blockades that way, and the bridges burnt behind."<sup>15</sup>

In 1927, the *Lum v. Rice* Supreme Court case allowed Asians to be designated non-white for the purpose of segregation in schools, which stood until 1954 when it was revoked by *Brown v. Board of Education*.

## Major Hindu Spiritual Leaders' Influence in America

In 1893, Swami Vivekananda became the first major Hindu spiritual teacher to visit America. He introduced Hinduism at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, a major historic moment. He called for a universal religion "which would have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, and would recognize a divinity in every man or woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force

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<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/law-and-history-review/article/making-of-modern-us-citizenship-and-alienage-the-history-of-asian-immigration-racial-capital-and-us-law/6563E350D8B5855520FEEFD4C76A0B0E>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.indiaspora.org/100-years-later-embracing-our-legacy-of-dr-bhagat-singh-thind/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/876-bridges-burnt-behind-the-story-of-vaishno-das-bagai/>

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would be centered in aiding humanity to realize its Divine nature.” He was received with great enthusiasm.<sup>16</sup> Swami Vivekananda then toured the US for two years, speaking and lecturing on spirituality and women’s suffrage at Harvard, in major churches and other venues across the country, and teaching daily lessons on Vedānta.<sup>17</sup> In 1894 Swami Vivekananda founded the American Vedanta Society in New York, which taught Vedānta and Yoga (especially rāja yoga) to many Americans. He initiated the first American saṁnyāsin svāmins (monastics). Most of these early Vedanta Society members were white Americans with no Hindu ancestry. In 1899 Swami Vivekananda founded the second Vedanta Society in San Francisco. The Vedanta Society groups were the first organized Hindu communities in America, and still exist to this day.<sup>18</sup> They built the first Hindu temple in the US in 1906 in San Francisco.<sup>19</sup> Joseph Campbell later studied under Swami Nikhilananda at the Vedanta Society, and introduced a lot of Hindu influence into the fields of comparative mythology, comparative religion, and also into pop culture through blockbuster hits like Star Wars, as explicitly credited by George Lucas.<sup>20</sup> Other influential students of the Vedanta Society included Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, Huston Smith, and J.D. Salinger.

In 1920, Paramahansa Yogananda, a Hindu spiritual teacher, came to America to attend the International Congress of Religious Liberals in Boston. Afterward he stayed in the US to teach spirituality. He lived in the US for the rest of his life, until 1952. In 1925 he founded the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF), which became the most prominent Hindu organization in America, based in Los Angeles and with dozens of local centers across the country. Yogananda was by far the foremost Hindu community leader in America in his time. Most early members of the SRF were white Americans from Christian backgrounds. In 1946, his book *Autobiography of a Yogi* was published and became one of the most widely read and influential books by a Hindu author in America for decades to come. Even today, many cite Yogananda’s book as having inspired their personal journey to Hindu Dharma, both among hereditary Hindus and non-hereditary. Yogananda demonstrated that Hindu spirituality is fundamentally pro-science.<sup>21</sup>

In 1948, Indra Devi, a pupil of Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, opened the first “yoga studio” in Hollywood, teaching asanas to celebrities and popularizing yoga in a form that would be commonly recognizable to most Americans today. From there yoga’s popularity spread steadily, with many teachers coming from India. Today yoga is among the most recognizable contributions of Hindus to American culture, with about 10% of the US population practicing yoga.<sup>22</sup>

Hindu thought also had a major influence on America through Martin Luther King, Jr. King studied Gandhi’s works and teachings (themselves drawn from a combination of Jain teachings and Hindu

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<sup>16</sup> <https://pluralism.org/vivekananda-at-the-parliament>

<sup>17</sup> Altman, Michael J., 'Transcendentalism, Brahmanism, and Universal Religion', *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu: American Representations of India, 1721-1893* (New York, 2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 24 Aug. 2017), chapter 6

<sup>18</sup> <https://pluralism.org/the-vedanta-society>

<sup>19</sup>

<https://historicalsouvenirs.rkmm.org/s/hs/m/the-first-universal-hindu-temple-in-the-west-a-landmark-of-san-francisco/a/building-the-hindu-temple>

<sup>20</sup> <https://billmoyers.com/content/mythology-of-star-wars-george-lucas/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://pluralism.org/yogananda-and-american-yoga>

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.indiaspora.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Indiaspora-Impact-Report\\_Full.pdf](https://www.indiaspora.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Indiaspora-Impact-Report_Full.pdf)

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sources like the Bhagavad Gītā) from at least 1950 on, and heavily based his own approach on them. King argued that Gandhi's philosophy was "the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom," and that it was Gandhi's approach which would "bring about a solution to the race problem in America."<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. first employed Gandhi's strategies of nonviolent direct action in the 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott which famously led to desegregation. In his own words: "While the Montgomery boycott was going on, India's Gandhi was the guiding light of our technique of nonviolent social change."<sup>24</sup> In 1959, King went so far as to visit India to meet with the Gandhi family and some of Gandhi's surviving associates.<sup>25</sup>

From 1959, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, another teacher from a Hindu tradition, began repeatedly touring America teaching Transcendental Meditation and other spiritual techniques. He gained many famous celebrity followers including the Beatles, the Beach Boys, the Rolling Stones, Clint Eastwood, David Lynch, Jim Carrey, Jerry Seinfeld, and Deepak Chopra. He taught meditation to many millions of students in America and all over the world. The Transcendental Meditation movement became one of the primary organizations driving and funding high-quality scientific research into the benefits of meditation. American practitioners of Transcendental Meditation and other teachings of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi include many Indian and Nepali-origin practitioners as well as many from non-Hindu backgrounds, most of whom do not identify as Hindus.<sup>26</sup> Their popularization of Hindu forms of meditation, which were based on understanding the mind and managing reactions to triggers, even drew the attention of the Vatican, which accordingly criticized and demonized Hindu meditation in the 1989 Letter to Eastern Bishops.

In 1965, Abhaya Charanaravinda Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada came to America and began attracting followers of his devotional veneration of Kṛṣṇa (the Supreme Being in many Hindu traditions). Prabhupada taught a very different Hindu tradition from those that preceded him to America - a fervently theistic devotional tradition rather than emphasizing meditation and abstract philosophy, which appealed to a different demographic of Americans, tapping into the youth counterculture movement of the '60s. He and his followers founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement, which remains a popular Hindu community in America to this day. ISKCON was the first major temple-building tradition of Hindus in America, and a large majority of early Hindu temples in the US were ISKCON temples. Initially these communities consisted overwhelmingly of non-Indian ISKCON-specific followers, but over decades they attracted more and more Indian-origin Hindus and became more integrated into the broader Hindu American community.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/his-influence-speaks-world-conscience>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.biography.com/activists/martin-luther-king-jr-gandhi-nonviolence-inspiration>

<sup>25</sup> [https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/gandhi-mohandas-k#:~:text=A%20testament%20to%20the%20revolutionary,\(Papers%204%3A478\)](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/gandhi-mohandas-k#:~:text=A%20testament%20to%20the%20revolutionary,(Papers%204%3A478))

<sup>26</sup> <https://pluralism.org/the-rush-of-gurus>,  
%20<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-late-maharishis-impact-on-music-118973/>,  
%20<https://www.thearda.com/us-religion/history/timelines/entry?etype=5&eid=144>

<sup>27</sup> <https://pluralism.org/the-rush-of-gurus>

### New Wave of Immigration

In 1965, the US government passed an Immigration and Nationality Act<sup>28</sup> which eliminated the limits on the numbers of individuals from any given nation who could immigrate to the United States. The new immigration standards were focused on family reunification, refugee status, and most of all, professional skills, encouraging the immigration of much larger numbers of highly qualified professionals and students from India. In response, many Indians did immigrate, forming much larger, and more ethnically Indian, Hindu communities than had ever before existed in the United States. Importantly, before this time women were mostly only able to immigrate as wives of working men. Hereon, more women began coming as professionals and students in their own right, balancing the gender dynamics of Hindu American society. It is also important to note that many of the Indians who were able to immigrate were educated in Christian-run English language schools in India, which has led to many such Hindus' understanding of Hindu traditions to be shaped through an Abrahamic lens of thinking about religion.

At first, many of the immigrants gathered primarily with others of the same Indian region, language, or culture. Collaborations between different regional communities came later, over time. Today some of them remain highly regionally specific given their unique ancestral traditions, while others have become more pan-Hindu. Most of these immigrants performed their main spiritual practices at home. For communal gatherings, they initially often visited ISKCON temples and Vedanta Society centers as the only available options, though these were from different Hindu traditions than most of these new immigrants and many of them saw them as sacred venues but retained their own Hindu traditions. By the mid-1970s, many of these Hindu immigrants now had children to whom they wanted to impart their Hindu heritage. This created a rising demand for new and more diverse temples and other Hindu cultural centers, and much grander communal celebrations of Hindu festivals like Dīpāvali/Diwali, Gaṇeśa Caturthī, Navarātrī, etc. in major cities across America, initially in rented halls and former churches.<sup>29</sup>

Many Hindu immigrants in America desired full-scale temples like those in India, but most of the Hindu communities and regional associations individually lacked the resources to build and operate them. To this end, they began to collaborate with each other to construct shared temples in their cities, often (though not always) representing a plurality of multiple regional styles and traditions to serve multiple Hindu communities. The first non-ISKCON, non-Vedanta Society Hindu temple to be built in the US was actually the Palaniswami Sivan Temple in San Francisco as early as 1957<sup>30</sup>, but more began to follow from 1977 on. There are now hundreds of Hindu temples in the US. Hindu temples are integral for many Hindu communities in America, often even more so than in India, as they provide centers of Hindu culture and tradition in a broader societal context where Hindus are a micro-minority.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Aka the Hart–Celler Act.

<sup>29</sup> <https://pluralism.org/the-new-hindu-immigrants>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.temple.org/about-us/intro.html>

<sup>31</sup> <https://pluralism.org/the-temple-builders>

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The anti-Hindu sentiment that underwrote the discriminatory practices prior to the Immigration Act of 1965 did not disappear. Instead, it proliferated past California to other areas where Indians settled and sometimes manifested in violence. From 1975 into the early 1990s, a violent anti-Hindu hate group was active in Jersey City, New Jersey. Calling themselves the Dotbusters, they placed threat ads in the local newspaper, “We will go to any extreme to get Indians to move out of Jersey City. If I’m walking down the street and I see a Hindu and the setting is right, I will hit him or her.” In 1987 they murdered an Indian man, Navroze Mody, by brutally beating him to death on the street. The murderers were never apprehended despite there being a direct witness. Many dozens of other anti-Hindu and anti-Indian hate crimes were committed, including another assault which left Dr. Kaushal Saran in a coma and inflicted lasting brain damage. The Dotbusters searched phone books to find the home addresses of Indian families, and broke their windows and crashed parties, seeking to harass them until they moved away. The Dotbusters went free and were never brought to justice.<sup>32</sup>

From 1980 to 2013, the population of Indian immigrants in the US roughly doubled each decade, going from 206,000 to well over 2 million.<sup>33</sup> The 1990 Immigration Act raised the number of permanent work visas. According to Pew Research Center’s 2012 survey based on a 35,000 sample size, an estimated 1% of the US population is Hindu, equating to ~3.3 million American Hindus. ~2.5 million US Hindus are of Indian origin, but 800,000 are from other countries.<sup>34</sup> Hindu communities are spreading throughout the US. While they have long existed in California, New York, and New Jersey, more recently large Hindu communities have formed in Texas, Minnesota, Georgia, and North Carolina, among other places. The CEOs of Microsoft<sup>35</sup>, Adobe<sup>36</sup>, Starbucks<sup>37</sup>, and FedEx<sup>38</sup> are all Hindu Americans. Hindus make up only 1% of the US population, but contribute closer to 4% of federal tax revenue, plus spending several hundred billion dollars per year, a major contribution of Hindus to the prosperity of America. Since 2022, young Hindu Americans have secured Forbes 30 Under 30 awards at almost ten times the average rate for their population size, most of all in healthcare, consumer technology, education, and energy. Their massively outsized rate of contribution is similar in new patents and publishing in scientific journals. Hindu Americans own more than a third of all hotels in the US, and an only slightly smaller share of all convenience stores. The first female CEO of a major US biotech company is a Hindu.<sup>39</sup>

Some Hindu communities in America came as refugees due to expulsion, violence, or anti-Hindu policies, primarily from Bhutan, Afghanistan, and the Sindh and Balochistan provinces of Pakistan.

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/unmaking-asian-exceptionalism-bahadur/>,  
<sup>20</sup> <https://www.aaldef.org/news/the-juggernaut-the-dotbusters-were-not-a-joke/>,  
<https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/new-jersey/2022/01/26/indians-jersey-city-nj-attacks-1980-s/6397092001/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.saada.org/tides/article/legacies-of-the-1965-immigration-act>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/religious-tradition/hindu/>

<sup>35</sup> Bhanver, Jagmohan S., Nadella: The Changing Face of Microsoft (Hachette India, 2014)

<sup>36</sup> <https://businessabc.net/wiki/shantanu-narayan>

<sup>37</sup>

<https://www.thetimes.com/article/reckitt-boss-laxman-narasimhan-growing-up-in-india-you-learn-resilience-3lbckn77h>

<sup>38</sup>

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/who-is-raj-subramaniam-the-indian-origin-boss-appointed-as-the-new-ceo-of-fedex/articleshow/90513809.cms>

<sup>39</sup> [https://www.indiaspora.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Indiaspora-Impact-Report\\_Full.pdf](https://www.indiaspora.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Indiaspora-Impact-Report_Full.pdf)

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Other Hindu communities in America are second- and third-level diasporas, their ancestors having spent two or three generations in places like Fiji, the Caribbean, Mauritius, Uganda, Kenya, or Tanzania. Their particular histories have often produced unique modulations or reframings of the Hindu traditions that passed through those places. Although 91% of Hindus in the US are of Asian descent, 4% are white, 2% are black, 1% are Latino, and 2% are mixed or from other backgrounds.<sup>40</sup> Similar demographics are reflected at most major temples, while smaller temples may be more community-specific. There have been black Hindu communities in the US since at least the 1970s. For example, at that time Alice Coltrane, a black jazz musician, was sharing Vedanta teachings, writing her own jazz-style Bhajans, and popularizing Hindu traditions in her predominantly black spiritual community in California. She founded and directed a Vedanta center. There are also Afro-Caribbean Hindu communities descended from intermixtures of African and Indian indentured laborers on plantations.

With Hindu Americans having come from a wide variety of different countries, and a substantial portion of Hindus in the US having grown up here in this country, Hindu traditions have now become maturely established as America; not inherently closely tied to India or any other particular country. Major, widely influential Hindu organizations like ISKCON<sup>41</sup>, the Vedanta Society<sup>42</sup>, and Kauai Aadheenam<sup>43</sup> were originally founded in the United States, and are as much or more American than Indian.

## Issues Facing Hindu Americans Today

Pressing issues facing Hindu Americans include:

- One in three Hindu students in America report being bullied for their religious beliefs, and a full half report being socially isolated because of their religious identity.<sup>44</sup> Hindu students report that faith-based bullying is tightly correlated with inaccurate and negative content on Hinduism being taught in their classes, especially equating Hinduism to a caste system. In addition to contributing to bullying, such inaccurate content disrupts healthy identity development of Hindu American children.
- In recent years, the prevalence of bias-motivated incidents and hate crimes against Hindu Americans and Hindu institutions across the country has increased sharply. For example, according to a 2024 survey by the California Civil Rights Department, 23% of all religiously motivated hate incidents in California were directed at Hindus, second only to the Jewish community at 37%.<sup>45</sup> Unlike prior decades, many recent hate crimes

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/hindu/>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.iskconvrindavan.com/home/the-history>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.vedantany.org/history>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.himalayanacademy.com/>

<sup>44</sup>

[https://www.hinduamerican.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/HAFN\\_16\\_008-BullyingReport\\_final\\_RGB\\_r2.pdf](https://www.hinduamerican.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/HAFN_16_008-BullyingReport_final_RGB_r2.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> <https://calcivilrights.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/32/2024/05/2024.05-CA-vs-Hate-Factsheet.pdf>

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against Hindu temples in California and New York have been committed by extremist members of other South Asian diaspora groups, at times engaging in violence, harassment, and intimidation. Accordingly, complex inter-South Asian religious and political community dynamics have often played out in America, tied to religio-political issues from the Indian subcontinent, very often leading to demonization and hate against Hindu Americans. The Network Research Contagion Group at Rutgers University has released reports documenting social media hate and disinformation by these same extremist groups against Hindu Americans.<sup>46</sup> Importantly, these extremist groups represent only small minorities of their broader religious communities, both in America and abroad.

- Hindu Americans' opposition to discriminatory caste policies, which unnecessarily add caste as a protected category in contexts where discrimination based on ancestry or ethnicity is already protected and thus serve only to demonize Hindus, has been mischaracterized as themselves seeking to protect the "right to discriminate." Hindu Americans themselves abhor the caste system which was instituted by the British colonizers and are working to undo its harmful and discriminatory effects.
- A common misconception is that all Indians are Hindu, or else non-Muslim Indians may be assumed to be Muslim. Indians in America, Hindu and otherwise, often encounter assumptions about their religious identity which may be incorrect, as Indians in America are religiously diverse.<sup>47</sup>

## Common misconceptions about “the caste system” include:

- **There is one “Hindu caste system” across all Hindu traditions, of four castes: Brāhmaṇas (priests), Kṣatriyas (warriors), Vaiśyas (merchants), and Śūdras (laborers).** No, there is no Hindu caste system. Some Hindu traditions did have social teachings, particularly about *varṇa* and *jāti*. The *varṇa* model is not a caste system. *Varṇas* are archetypes in Hindu sources of knowledge that lay out a framework for a balanced and well-functioning society. Groups labelled as privileged priests by the British are actually some of the poorest and are negatively stigmatized in India, while some communities labeled as low-caste by the British are wealthy and many were historically rulers. There are hundreds of different versions and configurations of *jāti* or tribes with shared distinguishing features, such as origin story, history, worldview, teachings, customs, religions, traditional trade or guild affiliation, vocation, profession, or trade,

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<https://networkcontagion.us/reports/4-11-23-inauthentic-cyber-activity-from-khalistani-extremist-accounts-precipitates-and-amplifies-attacks-on-hindu-temples-and-indian-government-buildings/>

<sup>47</sup>

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/india/#:~:text=Religious%20Demography.-The%20U.S.%20government&text=The%20World%20Religion%20Database%20estimates,%3B%20and%20agnostics%2C%201.2%20percent,https://www.pewresearch.org/2024/08/06/indian-americans-a-survey-data-snapshot/>

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and/or language and dialect, etc. in different local regions of South Asia. Today most Hindu traditions emphatically reject treating or mistreating others on the basis of their community identity. Many have done so for hundreds or even thousands of years.<sup>48</sup>

- **Hindu social identities are singular and rigid.** No. Hindu identities are layered and complex, and significant fluidity in group identity is actually fairly common.
- **Hindu society is a clearly organized hierarchy.** No, it is not. Hindu socio-political and religious status is highly localized and often is largely subjective and without religious codification, especially pre-colonization.
- **Your “caste” determines your job, where you live, and who you can associate with.** For most Hindus today this is not true, and less and less so. Especially outside of the jurisdiction of Indian Law, Hindus can return to their traditional understandings of the world wherein this is not a consideration. Again, caste is an administrative category under Indian law, and does not encapsulate the diverse complexities of Indian social identity. Especially in America, Hindus’ jobs, neighborhoods, and social freedom are not at all restricted by tribal or ancestral identity.
- **Hereditary caste is mandated in the authoritative scriptures of Hinduism.** No, most Hindu sources of knowledge do not mention nor mandate hereditary “caste.” Some sources of one particular Hindu Dharma tradition (Mīmāṃsā/Smārta) do mention privileges and restrictions based on social class or tribe, but there is little evidence such systems were ever enforced over multiple kingdoms historically until the British enshrined a caste system in British Indian law and governed according to it across their territories. Certainly, Hindus today are not bound to follow them.
- **Untouchables are the lowest in Hindu society and are required to do unclean work.** There is no word meaning “untouchables” in any ancient Hindu source of knowledge, nor a category of people called “untouchable” in any ancient Hindu source. It is true that some people who worked with contagions or effluvia were quarantined, perhaps for hygienic purposes initially, but over time they were definitely ostracized and marginalized by other communities. Discriminatory attitudes of some traditions of Hindus that lent credence to such discriminatory attitudes were opposed by many other popular ancient Hindu traditions. The British chose to use discriminatory sources as they appeared to mirror 1800s class society in Britain, itself rife with discrimination, to craft a Hindu identity that the British could articulate in their legal and academic circles, and thus they categorized any supposedly “unclean” community group as “Untouchables.” This led to erroneous views of Hindus becoming entrenched throughout the world as the British spread their Empire, while others consumed British and other European scholarship. In reality, these communities are not mandated by all Hindu traditions to stick to the occupation that their ancestors may have done at a point in time. In India,

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<sup>48</sup> A variety of Śākta, Śaiva, and Vaiṣṇava Hindu Dharma traditions have very influential, ancient teachings on the importance of equality and non-discrimination. They became vocal about these issues as certain kingdoms adopted insular attitudes. Incidentally, the tribes that survive to this day with very unique language and practices have done so by being very strict about excluding members of foreign tribes from their communities. The blanket, reductive views of the vast majority of authors on this subject choose to ignore the complexity of the issue of the governing of multicultural societies, while also failing to see contemporary issues around multicultural societies and nations as a manifestation of what is evidently a human phenomenon not restricted to Hindus as they would claim.

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these communities are not required to do unclean work and some are in high government and corporate positions. A large majority in India report that there is not a lot of discrimination against them.<sup>49</sup> Here in America, Hindus are free of colonial-era impositions and the majority of Hindus are embracing Hindu traditions without colonial era attitudes and adulterations.

- **Caste is a specifically Hindu phenomenon.** No, social identities, including *jāti*, *kula*, etc. are a natural human phenomenon found in societies all over the world. People of all religions, including Abrahamic religions, throughout South Asia have tribal identities and organization in their societies as much as Hindus do; this is widely documented by social scientists.
- **Only Brāhmaṇas can reach mokṣa; other people should first aspire to rebirth as a Brāhmaṇa.** Not at all; major Hindu sources of knowledge like the *Bhagavad Gītā* and many others explicitly proclaim that anyone can reach *mokṣa*, and there are many revered examples of this. Many important Hindu sages were not Brāhmaṇas in the sense of ancestral tribe or sector.
- **Buddhism and Sikhism arose as rejections of “the Hindu caste system” and the overemphasis on rituals “imposed by” the Hindu priestly sector or Brāhmaṇas.** This is a modern stereotype not found in the actual histories of Buddhism and Sikhism. A similar misconception is the claim that Islam and Christianity historically won converts in India by providing an escape from “the Hindu caste system.” The reality is that the Buddha and historical Buddhists made no such rejection, but fully acknowledged and explicitly affirmed ancient Indian social institutions; they did not challenge or object to these institutions or propose social reform.<sup>50</sup> Sikhism in its opposition to social divisions in its environs was very much in tune with the broader Hindu Bhakti traditions. Furthermore, there never was one “Hindu caste system” in Indian history. Rather, different Hindu communities, as well as Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, Christian, and Muslim communities across India had many different social models and ways of self identifying. The idea that the whole of Hindu society was organized as a four-fold “caste system” plus a class of “untouchable” outcastes outside the main four, that was created and enforced by a small and oppressive Hindu priestly class, was a fabricated presumption based on European perspectives and religious history.<sup>51</sup> This idea was especially pushed by Christian missionaries and has a very deeply Protestant bent to it.<sup>52, 53, 54</sup> Notably, perceptions of difference, and even prejudices and discrimination at times, both between and amongst different *jātis* exist and historically existed among Buddhists, Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians in Indian society as well as amongst Hindus; it is not a distinct

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<sup>49</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/attitudes-about-caste/>

<sup>50</sup> Fárek, Martin, 2017. *Western Foundations of the Caste System*. Palgrave Macmillan, p. 131-133, 139.

<sup>51</sup> Keppens, Marianne and De Roover, Jakob, 2020. *The Brahmin, the Aryan, and the Powers of the Priestly Class: Puzzles in the Study of Indian Religion*. Religions 2020, 11, 181, p. 9-13.

<sup>52</sup> Gelders, Raf & Derde, Willem, 2003. *Mantras of Anti-Brahmanism: Colonial Experience of Indian Intellectuals*. Economic and Political Weekly, p. 4611.

<sup>53</sup> Keppens, Marianne and De Roover, Jakob, 2020. *The Brahmin, the Aryan, and the Powers of the Priestly Class: Puzzles in the Study of Indian Religion*. Religions 2020, 11, 181, p. 8.

<sup>54</sup> De Roover, Jakob and Claerhout, Sarah, 2015. *The Caste Connection. On the Sacred Foundations of Social Hierarchy*. Theatrum Historiae, (17), 9–36., p. 18, 21, 25-29, 32.

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feature of Hindu traditions or societies. These phenomena do not embody the form and pattern attributed to them by the dominant conception of 'the caste hierarchy' as a Hindu institution. "The Hindu caste system" never existed as an actual social structure or system in the social world of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>55</sup>

- **If caste isn't Hindu, then why is it only Hindus who have to say that they're not casteist?** Because Hindus are forced to defend themselves from misinformation that was developed as targeted anti-Hindu propaganda in colonial times, even though many of those repeating it today are unaware of this. Anachronistically reading caste into history is not only a failure of scholarship, but is a technique that was used to flatten the diversity and complexity of Indian society and weaponized by imperialist colonial officers and missionaries to subjugate Indians and vilify Hindus.<sup>56</sup> This false and harmful presumption is still by far the most common description of "Hinduism" given to this day in introductory works, encyclopedia entries, school textbooks, and other sources.<sup>57</sup>

## Hindu American Identities

Hindu Americans may identify in various ways. 'Cultural Hindus' or 'heritage Hindus' are from the ancient Indosphere or their diasporas, were raised in a household that describes themselves as Hindu, observe certain aspects of their ancestral familial/clan/tribal/regional culture i.e. art, music, dance, poetry, cuisine, festivals, special occasions, etc., and are more likely to identify with the geography and culture of their heritage rather than with a spiritual tradition. They may not be deeply familiar with the spiritual aspects of that heritage, specifically around philosophies, teachings and spiritual practices, but may participate in family ceremonies.

'Spiritual Hindus' or 'practicing Hindus' are those who actively engage in spiritual philosophies, teachings and practices with varying levels of consistency, or observe various aspects of the culture and spirituality derived from a Hindu Dharma tradition. They may or may not have a Hindu heritage. If they do, they may largely embrace their ancestral culture and spiritual tradition(s) and/or that of another Hindu Dharma tradition. They may identify as Hindu (cultural) and by their Hindu Dharma tradition, region/linguistic group and/or clan/tribe, e.g. Hindu Śākta or Tamil Hindu Śākta, or Hindu Vaiṣṇava or Hindu Gujarati<sup>58</sup> Puṣṭimārg<sup>59</sup> Vaiṣṇava<sup>60</sup> Modh<sup>61</sup>. If they do not have a Hindu heritage, they may adopt a specific Hindu Dharma tradition, and largely embrace the culture (knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, customs, norms, ethics, values, music, dance, art, poetry, cuisine, festivals, special occasions, etc.) and spiritual traditions of the Hindu Dharma tradition they adopted, and may

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<sup>55</sup> De Roover, Jakob and Claerhout, Sarah, 2015. "The Caste Connection. On the Sacred Foundations of Social Hierarchy". *Theatrum Historiae*, (17), 9–36., p. 19.

<sup>56</sup> Balagangadhara, S.N., 'Chapter 4 Colonialism and Colonial Consciousness', *Reconceptualizing India Studies* (Delhi, 2012; online edn, Oxford Academic, 20 Sept. 2012)

<sup>57</sup> Keppens, Marianne and De Roover, Jakob, 2020. *The Brahmin, the Aryan, and the Powers of the Priestly Class: Puzzles in the Study of Indian Religion*. *Religions* 2020, 11, 181, p. 2, p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> Region of origin

<sup>59</sup> Denomination

<sup>60</sup> Hindu Dharma tradition

<sup>61</sup> Clan

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prefer the name of the tradition over ‘Hindu,’ e.g. Śaiva, Vedānta, Yoga, etc. Some may adopt the regional culture of the founder of the tradition, for example Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas in the West who adopt Bengali cultural norms of its founder, Caitanya.

There are also those who do not identify as Hindu, but may espouse or partake in Hindu philosophies, teachings and practices because of personal preference, custom or marriage, and identify with other Dharma traditions. The Dharma traditions have historically been and continue to be syncretic, especially in regions of India where marriage between Hindus and Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs and Zoroastrians is common. They may identify as “spiritual” or with the religion of their family even though they espouse or partake in Hindu philosophies, teachings and practices because the Hindu Dharma traditions do not demand ‘conversion’ or denouncing one’s former religion or culture and the other religion requires exclusive allegiance or commitment. For example, there are Christians who also practice Vedāntic methods, and Indian Muslim women who engage in Devī vrata (spiritual observance).

The Hindu Dharma traditions include:

- **Śākta Dharma traditions** are the main monotheist traditions that see the Supreme Being as feminine, though all of the Hindu traditions mentioned here do revere the divine feminine. Śāktas venerate Śākti in various embodiments, such as Kālī, Rājarājeśvarī, Durgā, Lakṣmī, and Sarasvatī. Most, but not all, Śākta traditions follow a non-dualist philosophy. Śākta Dharma generally doesn’t advocate a renunciate life which is common in the other traditions. Śākta Dharma generally does not recommend vegetarianism.
- **Vaiṣṇava Dharma traditions** are ancient monotheistic Hindu traditions. They emphasize a variety of devotional practices to the Supreme Being; in some Vaiṣṇava traditions the Supreme Being is personified as Kṛṣṇa and in others as Nārāyaṇa/Viṣṇu. Vaiṣṇava traditions are nevertheless based on philosophical systems, and they run the full gamut of philosophical views from *dvaita* (dualism) to *advaita* (non-dualism), with the most ancient being *dvaitādvaita* (simultaneous dualism and non-dualism). Vaiṣṇava Dharmas emphasize *ahimsā* or non-violence more than other traditions, which is embodied in their dietary ethics also. Vaiṣṇava traditions with large followings in America include the ancient Śrī Vaiṣṇava, and Puṣṭimārga amongst others, and the modern-era Swaminarayan and ISKCON traditions.
- **Śaiva Dharma traditions** are also ancient monotheist Hindu traditions that see the Supreme Being as Śiva. Śaiva Dharma highly emphasizes the practice of Yoga, tending towards *jñāna* and *aṣṭāṅga yogas*, which are less prominent in many other traditions. Śaiva Dharmas often (though not always) takes a more impersonal view of the Supreme Being, and includes a wide range of philosophical perspectives. Śaiva Dharma recommends vegetarianism but generally sees it as optional. Major Śaiva organizations in America include Saiva Siddhanta Church, Sadhguru’s Isha Foundation, and Siddha Yoga headed by Gurumayi Chidvilasananda.
- **Kaumāra Dharma** or simply Kaumāram is a monotheist tradition that primarily venerates the Supreme Being as Kumāra/Murugan/Kārtikeya. The vast majority of Kaumāras are Tamil peoples, especially from Sri Lanka, though most Tamil Hindus are not uniquely

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Kaumāram; it is a much smaller tradition than those listed above. The Malaysian diaspora do feature a larger proportion, however.

- **Smārta tradition**, which evolved from the Vedic-era and subsequent Mīmāṃsaka tradition, is based on Śaṅkara's (c. 8th century) reformulation and articulation of *advaita vedānta* (non-dualism) as their central philosophy. This system gives primacy to meditation on the formless Supreme Being but provides for practitioners who are not at the level to be able to do so by allowing them to venerate the Supreme Being through the forms venerated in any of the monotheist traditions above plus the Gāṇapatya and Saura Dharma traditions (whose lineages were extinguished during colonization but whose practices survive). Swami Vivekananda, Paramahansa Yogananda, and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi all came from the Smārta tradition. Mata Amritanandamayi is another popular Smārta guru with a large following in America.
- **Regional-ancestral traditions**, often with tribal connections are numerous and are practiced by people of a given region (from a former tribal confederation) or of a specific tribe/tribal confederation. Examples of this are Kirāt Mundhum, Sarnā Dharma, Sanamahism, etc.
- **New Movements**: There are also various Hindu movements and organizations founded in the 1800s and since that may be considered new traditions, though they all collectively include less than 3% of Hindus. There is a very long list of such modern Hindu organizations. Many of them do not claim to be new traditions, but align themselves with general Smārta-style Hindu Dharma or one of the other traditions. Many of them are fusion movements from multiple traditional roots, and/or may be counted among "New Age" movements.

## Are Hindu Dharmas monotheistic or polytheistic?

Western/Abrahamic theological categories like "monotheistic" and "polytheistic" do not cleanly fit Hindu Dharmas. Monotheist Hindu Dharmas, with the largest followings today, revere one Supreme Being. In most traditions, the Supreme Being takes on many different forms and aspects (quite like Trinitarian Christianity — but just a lot more, as the Supreme Being cannot be limited according to the Hindu Dharma traditions). Though *theos* refers to the creator in Abrahamic religions, Hindu teachings do not give credence to the creator of a material universe as distinct from it. So, *theos* is not an equivalent of the Hindu traditions versions of the Supreme Being. However, given academic categories' Protestant foundations, they would be best housed under the monotheist category by way of reasoned approximation.

Distinct from the singular Supreme Being, most Hindu Dharmas also recognize vast numbers of *devas* or illumined beings who, though worthy of deep respect, are not Supreme. In addition to the above points, most Hindu Dharmas are panentheistic, meaning that the multiverse itself is part of the unitary Supreme Being, but the Supreme Being is also infinitely more than merely this multiverse. Many Hindu Dharmas are monistic, teaching that all of the multiplicity of reality is a unitary whole. A small minority of Hindus, mostly from regional/ancestral traditions, identify as polytheistic. Some Hindu Dharmas are non-theist, teaching that liberation can be achieved without the need for venerating a Supreme Being at all - preferring to focus only on self-cultivation.