

Commentary

Corporate Hinduism in America The Usurpation of Hindu Language and Culture

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Introduction

America has been exporting its culture to the rest of the world via movies, TV shows, pop music, and other forms of entertainment for a long time but especially since the communications revolution in the 1980s when improved technologies spawned the concept of globalization. This same globalization, in turn, has allowed Americans to freely import artwork, music, and other forms of culture from the rest of the world. There is a curious and pervasive trend in the United States with regard to this borrowing from other cultural traditions: the frequent usurpation of the languages, artwork, and imagery of Asia for commercial purposes. In other words, we appropriate from the cultures of Asia to sell products in the US! American companies like Kohler, for example, commonly employ Chinese or Thai imagery to induce us to purchase their sinks, shower units, and bathtubs. This practice is more prevalent in the United States than we think and one of the more observable examples of it is the marketing of merchandise such as perfume, record albums, and handbags with a Sanskrit word or Hindu imagery attached to it.

The Use of Hindu Language and Culture in American Advertising

Historically, America's interest in Hinduism started with the Transcendentalists – especially Emerson (1803-1882) and Thoreau (1817-1862) – and continued through the late twentieth-century when many non-Indian college students listened intently to the teachings of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1917-2008), Swami Satchitananda (1914-2002), A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Pradupada (1896-1977), and other Hindu gurus who visited the United States in the Sixties.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, familiarity of Hinduism among non-Indians drew attention of Wall Street who saw in it the religion's commercial value. What happened next was predictable: American companies seized the language and imagery of Hinduism, put them on products, and sold them for profit.

How often do students see the word *avatar* in popular culture? Do they know the origins or meaning of the word? Do they know it's a Sanskrit word with its origins in Hinduism or do they think it's an English word dreamed up by an advertising agency?

I've been teaching courses on Hinduism for over thirty years now and I'm aware of what students know – and more importantly, don't know - about Hinduism before my classes commence because I'm in the habit of administering entrance surveys at the beginning of each semester. Two years ago, I added new questions that included the following one:

The word *avatar* refers to (choose only one)

- A. a cologne for men (02.8%)
- B. the last Airbender (11.2.2%)
- C. a 2009 movie title (23.2%)

- D. an incarnation of Vishnu (57.2%)
- E. a country in Asia (02.0%)
- F. a recreation vehicle (03.6%)

The results of the survey were not surprising. 42.8 % of the students answered incorrectly in the sense that they have identified the concept with contemporary cultural artifacts instead of its religious significance and origin. Although students see the word *avatar* all around them – and perhaps have used it themselves – they are generally unaware of its connection to Hinduism.¹

The Sanskrit word *avatar* literally means “descent” or “incarnation.” More precisely, the word refers to one of Vishnu’s incarnations. The traditional view is that Vishnu descends or incarnates on Earth when the world is filled with spiritual decadence. Reading from Chapter 4 in the *Bhagavad-Gita*,

Whenever there is a decay of righteousness and a
rising up of unrighteousness, O Bharata, I send forth
Myself. For the preservation of good, for the
destruction of evil, for the establishment of
righteousness, I come into being in age after age. (4.7-
8)

In this section of the *Gita*, Krishna is revealing himself to Arjuna as Vishnu. In other words, Krishna is revealing himself as an *avatar* of Vishnu in human form. There are ten incarnations of Vishnu – not all of them humans - and these incarnations are a popular theme in Indian art and dance. The three *avatars* (i.e., the three incarnations of Vishnu) we’re most familiar with in the West are Rama of the *Ramayana*, Krishna of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and the Buddha, the ninth avatar. Vishnu is also the second member of the Hindu Trimurti (i.e., Hindu Trinity) and represents the preservative aspect of God whom the Hindus call Brahman.

How is the word *avatar* employed in the United States? Let's look at a few examples. There is a cologne spray for men called Avatar marketed by Coty, Inc. – one of the world's largest fragrance companies and headquartered in New York City. Coty advertisements for this cologne state, "Today the beginning, tomorrow the world: Avatar, the Fragrance of Possibilities". When men put this fragrance on, do they become an *avatar* as the advertisement suggests? After all, it is the fragrance of possibilities. The handsome male in this advertisement is not an *avatar*. There is a Jayco recreation vehicle with the model name Avatar. Is an *avatar* a thing? The Jayco Avatar recreation vehicle is not an *avatar* either. The movie, *Avatar*, came out in 2009. The title is a misnomer. The movie has nothing to do either with an *avatar* or with Hinduism. The word *avatar* is attached to a New Age journal as well. The journal has been in publication since 1986. This is what the journal says on its website: *The Avatar Journal is a quarterly published magazine devoted to Avatar and the creation of an Enlightened Planetary Civilization*. What does that mean? They say, . . . "devoted to Avatar". Which *avatar*? Notice they say "avatar", not "an avatar." Their use of the term deviates from the traditional Hindu definition. In a July 6, 2005 newspaper article by Peter Applebome, the word *avatar* was applied to a person instead of a product. The article, published in the *International Herald Tribune* (i.e., The Global Edition of The *New York Times*), was entitled, "An Avatar of Rock N' Roll History". The article was about Al Kooper, a keyboardist who's played on numerous recordings. Is Al Kooper an *avatar*? He was born in 1944. Nickelodeon produced a TV series for kids that ran from 2005-2008 called "Avatar, The Last Airbender". It was also made into a movie in 2010. There's something rather curious about the advertisements for both the movie and TV series. The imagery and story lines utilized throughout the movie version and the TV series are certainly Chinese and the advertisements employ Chinese calligraphy. Why is the Sanskrit word *avatar* included in the advertisements?

What happened to the word *avatar* in the transition from traditional Hinduism to corporate Hinduism? Obviously, the word has been emptied of its original intent and indiscriminately attached to a product or person. In commodifying the word *avatar*, its true meaning has been taken away. We are left with a form that has no content. In American popular culture, the word has value, but what exactly does the word *avatar* mean? Is it a person, an RV, a cologne, a movie, etc. all of the above, none of the above? More precisely, in corporate Hinduism the word *avatar* has **no** collective meaning; its meaning has become confused and relative to the perceiver. Let's review some other words connected to Hinduism and see if those words experience a similar fate in American advertising.

In traditional Hinduism, *samsara* refers to the seemingly endless cycle of birth-death-rebirth. It literally means, "journeying" but most of us understand the word as reincarnation or rebirth. Corporate Hinduism, too, has assimilated it. In 1989, Guerlain – a perfume house founded in Paris in the early 19th-century – introduced the world to a fragrance for women called Samsara. Its advertisements stated, "Samsara: A Sense of Serenity". When women put this on, are they supposed to feel a sense of serenity? Are they supposed to feel they've incarnated into another body? Are they reborn? Maybe that's what the perfume company is implying. There can be no other purpose for using Hindu terms on products sold here in the US than to make those products sound exotic and, therefore, more desirable. My students don't know the meaning of the word *samsara* until they take my Hinduism class. Why don't they label this perfume "Renaissance" which also means rebirth? Perhaps the French have lost their status as being considered 'exotic' to Americans.

People use the word *karma* here in the U.S. in the same way they use the word "economy"; it's either bad or good. In Hinduism, the word is used in four ways. It literally means a mental or physical

“action” but it can also refer to the consequence of a mental or physical action, the sum of all consequences of actions (mental and physical), and the cause-and-effect relationship operative in human behavior. In America, we use the word to sell car insurance, hybrid cars, and beer! Billboards advertising Allstate Insurance in downtown Chicago a few years ago read, “Good Karma For Your Car: Allstate Accident Forgiveness”. Does the word *karma* imply forgiveness? The advertisement seems to be doing just that. It’s another example of how Hindu words are misused by corporate Hinduism. In 2008, a new hybrid car called Karma debuted at the Detroit Auto Show. This luxury hybrid sedan from Fisker Automotive in California was ready for mass production in 2011. It gets 100 miles per gallon and goes 125 miles per hour – all for \$96K. The Avery Brewing Company in Boulder, Colorado markets Karma Ale for our drinking pleasure!

Now, consider this: car insurance, hybrid sedans, and beer. We can drink a six-pack of Karma ales, get behind the wheel of our Karma hybrid, and if we crash into a tree or mailbox, we need not worry. We have good karma for our car with Allstate!

Everyone seems to use the word here in the United States. My suspicion is not many of those who use the term know of its origins in Sanskrit and meaning in Hinduism. My students don’t. On that same survey, I asked them this question:

The origin of the word *karma* is

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| A. | Persian (13.6%) | D. | Italian (01.2%) |
| B. | Sanskrit (38.8%) | E. | English (02.4%) |
| C. | Arabic (22.8%) | F. | Japanese (21.2%) |

I wasn’t surprised by the above results either. Over 61% of the students failed to answer the question correctly. It’s interesting to note that 44% of the surveyed students thought the word was either Arabic or Japanese!

Should we seek out the wisdom of a Brahmin priest or purchase a Brahmin bag? In America, it's all about the bag. In Hinduism, however, a Brahmin refers to a member of one of the four *varna* (classes) in traditional Indian social organization. More specifically, it refers to a male priest. While the Brahmins historically occupied the highest echelon of Indian society, this class in India did not necessarily imply wealth. Brahmins were not necessarily wealthy. The Kshatriya class has historically been the wealthiest. Yet, in the US, the target audience of these Brahmin bags seems to be the wealthy. The bags in their advertisements sell for around \$395.00 each. Why don't advertisers call this bag Kshatriya instead of Brahmin? Again, their advertisements are another example of the misuse and misinterpretation of a Sanskrit word in corporate Hinduism. (Notice also that most advertisers aim their exotic sounding products at women).

[14] The Sanskrit term *moksha* is introduced to Hinduism in the *Upanishads* and is literally translated as "liberation." More, specifically, it means liberation from the seemingly endless cycle of birth-death-rebirth (i.e., *samsara*). It is the Hindu version of salvation. When we have realized our divinity within, when we have awakened from *maya*, the cosmic dream, we have reached *moksha*. *Moksha* is best described as a state of consciousness. Here's how Hindu saints have described *moksha*:

Self-Realization

Self-realization is the knowing - in body, mind, and spirit - that we are one with the omnipresence of God; that we do not have to pray that it come to us, that we are not merely near it at all times, but that God's omnipresence is our omnipresence; that we just as much a part of Him now as we ever will be.

Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952)

Bliss

When you find that the very mention of God's name brings tears to your eyes and makes your hair stand on end, then you will know that you have freed yourself from attachment and attained God (i.e., moksha).

Ramakrishna (1836-1886)

Equanimity

When a person responds to the joys and sorrows of others as if they were his own, he has attained the highest state of spiritual union (i.e., moksha).

Bhagavad-Gita 6:22

In the U.S. most students know *moksha* as a DIY (do-it-yourself) band from Las Vegas. Their first studio album called *Mammal or Machine* debuted in 2010.

We not only borrow the language of Hinduism to sell products, we borrow its imagery as well. There is an album cover design for a 1968 recording by The Jimi Hendrix Experience called *Axis: Bold As Love*. In creating the design, artists Roger Law (b.1941) and David King (b.1943) depicted the three members of The Jimi Hendrix Experience with Vishnu, Hanuman, Ganesha, and other heroes and forms of God described in classical Hindu literature like the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The above instances are just the tip of the iceberg. The use of Hindu terms such as dharma, mantra, and guru are also prevalent in American popular culture. For example, there is the Dharma and Greg TV series that ran from 1997-2002, Mantra Perfume by the Eclectic Collections Company, and The *Golf Guru* book by John Barton. We can order clothing from Deva Lifeware catalog and purchase our Brahma Boots from Walmart. The use of Hindu words and imagery in our examples does not represent a malicious intent on the part of the advertisers but it's clear from the examples we have that Hinduism's potential to transform us spiritually is being ignored and the world's oldest living religion is viewed as a marketplace for words and images that could be put on products and sold in the U.S. for a profit. The same goes for Buddhism, but that's another story.

Concluding Remarks

Employing the languages and cultures of Asia for commercial purposes has some longevity in the United States. The process of globalization, however, has intensified the practice. What are the consequences of usurping words and images from one culture and using them in radically different ways in another culture? What can we conclude from our examples and what are the implications for education? Perhaps the larger question is why **should** students have to know the cultural origins of words and images they see and use in American popular culture in the first place.

A principal goal I have for almost all of my courses is to improve the students' abilities to see the world in its interrelatedness and to discover how their own civilization has been shaped by the influences of other civilizations. One thing I can confidently say is that my students are generally not able to see the linkages between American culture and other cultures around the world before taking a humanities class that incorporates a global perspective. They see and use words like *avatar* and *karma* but they can't connect these images and words to their original sources. They are failing in cultural literacy even at the most superficial level.

There's another dimension to the practice of appropriating words and images from other cultures and commodifying them in our own culture: the matter of cultural sensitivity. There are approximately 1.4 million Hindus in the United States. In fact, there are more Hindus than Jehovah Witnesses in our country. We're using Hindu words and images to sell products. Think of some words that are associated with Christianity: resurrection, baptism, Eucharist, and savior, for example. Now imagine an Indian company arbitrarily attaching one of those words to a product and selling it in South Asia. We might get Resurrection cologne for men or Baptism perfume for women (the fragrance of purity) or Eucharist

motorcycles. I have little doubt that more than a few Christians would consider this culturally insensitive. Why should we consider the use of Hindu words in the same way as less distasteful? Similarly, it's difficult to imagine American advertisers appropriating Arabic words from Islam to sell products. Would we ever see a recreation vehicle in the U.S. with the brand name Hijrah, for example? It's unlikely. Why is it acceptable in the U.S. to utilize the Hindu word, *avatar*, as a brand name for a recreation vehicle?

There is a darker side to all of this. The cultural insensitivity can be taken to an extreme. Hitler and his Nazi Party looted images and words from Hinduism. Everyone in the West has seen a swastika and knows what it implies in our culture. The swastika is, however, a Hindu image stolen by Hitler who transformed it into an icon for evil. The word "swastika" itself is derived from the Sanskrit word *svasti* which means "auspicious" or "good fortune". Hitler also employed the word *Aryan* in his perverted ideology. The word has nothing to do with an ethnic group. It's a Sanskrit word for "noble."

Undeniably, that words come to be employed by a culture that speaks differently from the culture the words originated in is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it's quite common in world history and the practice is most often benign. A few observations about this process are noteworthy and relevant to our specific examples from Hinduism. Although the Sanskrit words utilized above have their origins in Hinduism it's also the case that in South Asia, other South Asian religions and languages have borrowed these words. For example, the Pali word *kamma* is a Buddhist rendering of *karma* but given a more psychological interpretation by the Buddha. Likewise, the meaning of *karma* in the Jain tradition carries with it a more materialistic interpretation. In these instances, however, the different interpretations are not divorced entirely from the Hindu understanding since both the Buddhists and Jains view the concept of *karma* as a cause-and-effect relationship inherent in all human actions. The more interesting issue arises when these Sanskrit words are used in a non-religious sense and in a culture other than a South

Asian one. The original meanings are often deposed as illustrated by our examples. The words attain new meanings or are emptied of meaning depending on how they are used in the host culture (i.e., America). Is this an entirely undesirable process? For this author, the practice of using Sanskrit terms that have their origins in Hinduism for commercial purposes in the United States is deemed culturally inconsiderate. For others, it is nothing more than a consequence of cultural contact resulting from globalization. Either way, it provides all of us with an opportunity to explore the origins and cultural context of these words so that we may better value them and ensure their continuity.

¹ The survey was conducted entirely at Lansing Community College. The results are not meant to be scientific. The survey was informally done in the classrooms. Two hundred fifty students from various humanities and performing arts classes participated in the survey. These classes included the following:

Religions of South and Southeast Asia (REG 211); Religions of East Asia (RELG 250); World Civilizations from 1600 (HUMS 214); Japan: Past and Present (HUMS 125); Philosophy: Modern and Contemporary (PHIL 212); Masterpieces of Art and Music (HUMS 120); Musical Cultures to 1750 (MUSC 240); Writing About Literature and Ideas (ENGL 122); World Drama (ENGL 202); Art History from the Renaissance (HUMS 212). The results may be slightly skewed in favor of the correct responses because the students who took the survey were in humanities and performing arts classes. My suspicion is this: if the survey was given to students in non-humanities/performing arts classes, fewer students would have answered the questions correctly.