

Critique of Hindu American Foundation's Report on 'Caste'

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Summary

The critique below is in response to a report on "caste" recently issued by the Hindu American Foundation (HAF), "*Hinduism: Not Cast in Caste*" (available at http://www.hafsite.org/sites/default/files/HAFN_Caste_Report_Dec10.pdf.) The purpose of my critique is two-fold: (1) to highlight substantive defects in the content of the report and (2) to demonstrate the severe damage that has already been inflicted or will likely result as a consequence of the distribution of the report. The report threatens to undo significant progress achieved by the Hindu community in correcting derogatory misrepresentations of Hinduism in the US educational system, provides valuable ammunition to anti-Hindu groups that will seriously undermine Hindu interests worldwide, and has serious geopolitical ramifications that threaten the interference of Western bodies into internal Indian/Hindu matters. Meanwhile, it does not achieve anything constructive to improve conditions on the ground in India in any sense.

This is a grave and urgent crisis for the Hindu community and cannot be dismissed or glossed over as a philosophical or ideological disagreement. The issuance of this report has become a serious political vulnerability for the Hindu cause. This critique is written in the hopes that HAF will respond to the concerns documented herein in a constructive manner through collaboration with concerned members of the community.

How the Controversy Started

In early December, 2010, India-based Dr. Kalyanaraman, a well-published scholar on ancient Indian history, brought to my attention a widely hyped report on caste published by the Hindu American Foundation (HAF). HAF claimed that this report and its contents

had received the support of many major spiritual and other leaders of Hindu Dharma, mostly based in India. The report's purpose is to serve as a formal briefing document to the US Congress and other international legal bodies, positioning HAF as the apex body representing Hinduism and its "human rights violations." It stated: "The key goals in this report are to ... Highlight the fact that caste-based discrimination represents a failure of Hindu society..." (p.5)

This immediately raised several alarming questions: Shouldn't any such briefings be completely vetted by a wider constituency before being submitted? Who gave HAF the authority to speak for India? and Hinduism itself? Is this an effort by Hinduphobics in Washington to get an outfit like HAF to "plead guilty" and surreptitiously incriminate all Hindus who are not even aware that they are being represented as such?

HAF made tall and indeed false claims for itself, stating: "It is the first major study to be done by a Hindu organization to try to understand the problems of caste prejudice from within and attempt to take concrete steps to help ameliorate them." (p. i) This ignores the fact that countless Hindu bodies in India have written on caste over the years. The reason HAF gives for writing the report is that "there has not been a similar report from a credible Hindu institution in India." (p.12) But who decides the credibility of Hindu institutions and is this not a completely disingenuous attempt at self-promotion? Another reason given by it is that "because Hinduism has no single central religious authority, individual *sampradayas* and Hindu organizations do not, and have never, spoken for Hindu society as a whole..." (p.12). HAF now claims the authority to speak for Hindu society as a whole!

Dr. Kalyanaraman launched a massive email campaign against the report calling it rash, and "a rehash of the evangelical points of view." He wrote that HAF is placating Washington based groups by "falling into the trap set by evangelical groups who are present also in US Congress." This, wrote Kalyanaraman, opens the door further for the USA's "interfering in the internal affairs of India ... Caste is a stick to beat India with." He completely questions and challenges HAF's authority and competence to deal with this issue, and remarks that HAF has "overreached themselves." In addition, he also criticizes their failure to differentiate between jati and caste. His critique of the report is available at: <https://sites.google.com/site/hindunew/jaati>. He has called for a complete withdrawal of the report, and HAF's top executives have categorically dismissed that possibility.

This episode triggered dozens of emails and conference calls within the US based Indian/Hindu community. While many privately complained about the report, they seemed unwilling to publicly question it because HAF claimed that it had been blessed by Swami Dayananda Saraswati. Given Swamiji's stature, and out of respect for him, they felt compelled to keep their concerns private.

So I investigated whether Swamiji had actually endorsed this report or not. I found from two separate sources, who are in regular contact with him, that **he had never read the report or endorsed it**. I pointed out to HAF that using Swamiji's name without his permission was tantamount to a serious misrepresentation. After several attempts at intimidation and even hurling insults, one of the HAF top executives tried to back track and downplay this misrepresentation. **He sent an email retracting the earlier HAF claim of support from Swamiji: "My humble apologies as well in implying that Swamiji reviewed our report."**

This retraction opened the door for many more persons in the community to read the report and to draw their own conclusions. With the credibility of Swamiji no longer associated with the report, criticisms poured in from various places. HAF responded with a series of massive personal attacks against the critics, insulting them with name calling and making all kinds of irrelevant and false charges. An HAF supporter even resorted to the use of an anonymous id to send slanderous emails to their support base. Their tactics were a way to divert away from the issues of substance that were being raised, by attacking the personal credibility of the critics. It backfired miserably because it aroused even more anger against them.

Unable to cite Swamiji's name in their support, HAF then claimed that their report had been "picked up" by the Huffington Post and the Washington Post, when in fact , these were blogs authored by HAF's founders themselves at the media sites, and not carried or cited by independent journalists writing for those media as HAF tried to imply. In this war of words, HAF repeated its claims of being the pre-eminent Hindu body, of its support from many large donors who had contributed millions, and of its "brand value." In this defensiveness, valuable time was lost that should have been used to deal with the issues of substance concerning the report itself.

In the days that ensued, a sharply worded critique was received from Rakesh Bahadur, who has single-handedly fought and negotiated with the Virginia education authorities for two years, in order to correct the Social Studies Standards of Learning (SOLs) and Curriculum Frameworks (CFs). He remarked: "Now HAF issued a report which

describes caste in the same way as it occurs in the textbooks and standards." In other words, HAF is boosting the agenda of the Hinduphobics! Citing examples of how the opponents like to selectively quote Indian and/or Hindu sources to suit their designs, Bahadur remarked that "our opponents just need to refer a few sentences from the report" to neutralize all the efforts by him and his supporters. He developed a table of key mistakes in HAF's report, pointing out that "It is very dangerous to use Varna and Caste interchangeably," and that "HAF report does not give specific references from the scriptures mentioned, but instead gives some general statistics which do not prove anything." Bahadur concluded that "This report represents only the 'HAF perspective' and is not the 'Hindu perspective'. HAF does not speak for all 1 Billion Hindus."

Gautam Sen, a retired academic in the UK and a scholar of geopolitical issues concerning Indian civilization, was also incensed. His scathing criticism focused on how such a report feeds precisely those forces in UK and elsewhere that want to undermine Hindu dharma. He explained that there was considerable momentum built in the UK government and parliament to issue declarations against Hinduism which would have widespread legal repercussions. The HAF report played into the hands of such campaigns to prosecute Hinduism in UK, EU and UN legal frameworks. He felt that HAF had no business meddling in geopolitical matters that were over their heads and that could have severe consequences for millions of Indians, and became the first person to publicly call for the resignation of the HAF leaders:

"I am afraid the highly damaging HAF report on Caste must be repudiated decisively. The personal interests of the individuals in the HAF who sponsored it are of little moment given the damage the report itself has done to Hindus and the negative subsequent fall out that has resulted. I do not know any of these people personally though I have had cordial exchanges with some of them, indeed helped HAF reformulate their first human rights report. But I now believe that the three individuals directly involved in writing, sponsoring and defending the report should offer to resign. Whether that will suffice to restore the credibility of HAF remains to be seen. This is very bad news because they will first condemn caste here in the UK and then it will be ratified at the UNHCR and caste will conflated with Hinduism, which it has always been. Some discreet high level action is urgently required from India to express strong disapproval."

Once the floodgates opened, numerous other voices came out to criticize HAF for what is now being viewed as an **irresponsible and dangerous initiative**.

I will now give my own comments on this report. I have no doubt that we, like all religions, must always be aware of our internal problems and aggressively solve them for our own good. My main point will concern the following: which side in this kurukshetra of civilizations should control the discourse on Hindu matters - the Hindus themselves or outside government bodies in places like Washington?

'Caste' is Now a Dangerous Geopolitical Game

The report writers appear to be naïve and simply clueless about the report's realpolitik impact for India in international affairs. It would be entirely different had the report been circulated for discussion within Hindu spiritual communities seeking to further root out adharma in their societies. All religions are obliged to self-correct, root out the injustices in their midst and remain perpetually vigilant and engaged in this effort. Indeed Hindu dharma calls upon us to do this.

But this report has been written to be explicitly targeted for distribution in places like the United States Congress. Leave aside for a moment, the issue of how HAF believes that they even have the authority, mandate and consensus to represent India to American lawmakers. Hindu Americans, a minority immigrant community, are hardly the perpetrators of caste discrimination in the US, and they seek their advocacy groups to help ameliorate the racial and religious prejudice targeted at them in the media, schools and higher education. HAF seems to have shifted its focus from its intended US based constituency to India's domestic affairs! This is the context in which the report has to be evaluated.

The defenders of HAF's report focus on how and why caste related problems must be addressed. Indeed, they must be and are being addressed, by political parties in India and by thousands of Hindu spiritual leaders, NGOs, activists and engaged citizens. Unfortunately, HAF seems unconcerned about the implications of using Western rather than Indian political and legal forums. I have raised these concerns: Are the legal mechanisms of USA, UK, EU and UN the right forums that ought to be brought to bear upon India's issues? What has been the Western governments' track record over the past several centuries of bringing such "human rights" to others around the world? Did India not learn its lessons from the colonial experience in this regard? Such legal bodies are not forums for metaphysical debates. They are mechanisms for international interventions.

Given that HAF declares caste in India to be "a human rights violation," the consequences under International Human Rights Law (to which India is a signatory) are unavoidable. Naively, the report later on (page 56) tries to cover HAF with a contradictory statement that "caste-based discrimination in India should be treated purely as an internal matter of a sovereign state and that India's caste problem should not become internationalized by NGOs who want secondary gain." Imagine that a family member goes public to apologize for child abuses or other criminal activity occurring within his home, and later in his written confession says, "but we don't want the police to interfere with our family's internal affairs." Does HAF assume that such a confession will not bring prosecution! On what grounds, with what expertise, with who's counsel and by what right has the HAF "pleaded guilty" and incriminated us all, not just psychologically but also potentially politically and financially?

Similarly, after supplying detailed ammunition on caste abuses occurring today, the report contradicts itself by asserting that caste is not to be equated with apartheid or race (page 45-6). This assertion cannot be a simple one-liner that will be taken at face value. It would need a comprehensive argument on why caste as described so graphically by the report is *not* apartheid or race. The report has 20 pages (pp. 58-77) of several numbered lists with highly sensational and graphic stories of caste based atrocities, such as rapes, sex trade, denial of access to temples and water, common food areas, inter-caste marriages, economic exploitation, manual scavenging, bonded labor, violence, government bias, police custody, etc. ***How does HAF plan to prevent the Christian missionaries (that have supplied most of these examples in the first place) from equating it with apartheid and race?***

The report cites that there were 33,615 human rights violations in 2008 in India, without having done any due diligence on the reliability of such precise cases. Anyone dealing with such statistics in India knows that there are numerous rival statistical claims on whether such data is valid. In India it is very easy and common to file a "report"; hence, to legitimize such statistics that are mere "claims" simply plays into the hands of Hinduphobics who have a machine to gather such data on Hinduism and distribute it globally. HAF's 20 pages of random anecdotal incidents that are largely a rehashing of secondary data and hearsay has opened a mine field. It will serve as great fodder for Hinduphobic textbooks and media, precisely the kind that HAF has in the past tried to fight against.

HAF appears to be unaware of the extensive discourse developed by Hinduphobic groups in international fora to mobilize foreign intervention against India, using precisely

the type of data that HAF is now providing. For instance, there are specific petitions and proposals that foreign investments should be linked to employing certain minority groups in India, with Christian and leftist groups being trained over the past several years to take advantage of this, and thereby fill their own pockets. Undoubtedly, such interventions are a way to put Indian Christians in the driver's seat, because they hold the key positions of control in such mechanisms, and they have the international experience and momentum to carry this out. Just as President Bush's Faith-Based Initiatives were criticized as a way to financially empower USA's Christian organizations in the name of social service, so also this international lobbying in recent years is intended to channel international aid and corporate investments towards Christian organizations in India.

The report mentions Dalit Freedom Network (DFN) but is too soft on them, and it could be used by them to boost their credibility. HAF must point out DFN's treacherous role in promoting the Afro-Dalit identity combined with "empowerment training" (read: "activism and militancy"). Years ago, I debated Vijay Prashad, the US based communist, on his role in this movement. DFN's political power base emerges from the Washington connections of its lawyer, Melody Divine, who works in the office of US Congressman, Trent Franks of Arizona. DFN is *not* a Dalit group as assumed in Indian circles. It is run by white right-wing Christians out of a church in Colorado. The Articles of Incorporation filed at the Secretary of State's office says that it is a religious group. Joseph D'Souza, its poster boy, is a radical Christian featured on the website of Pat Robertson's 700 Club, a group for fundamentalist Christians. Kancha Ilaiah, another poster boy of DFN, is not a Dalit. He has claimed that Hinduism is a "spiritual fascist cult." (<http://www.rediff.com/news/2001/jan/17inter.htm>) Clearly, it is a hate group and a fake Dalit group. I wish HAF had read the recent book, titled, "*Post-Hindu India*," by Kancha Ilaiah, in order to understand the grand designs being sponsored by these global players.

Without pointing any of this out, HAF does acknowledge that DFN is missionary sponsored, but fails to distinguish between missionary motivated pseudo-Dalit organizations and genuine dharmic Dalit emancipation movements in the following vague statement: "We acknowledge that Hindu society has historically failed the SCs, and the Dalit movement is merely reaching out for allies in its quest for emancipation." (p.43) HAF should have studied scholars like Dharmapal, rather than conflating organizations like DFN with genuine social emancipation movements. Furthermore, to state in a blanket way that the "Hindu society has historically failed Dalits" is a statement borne out of historical illiteracy. In fact, Hindu Dharma has continuously

generated great movements from within to secure the rights and human dignity of marginalized sections of the society even though colonial impoverishment affected the social emancipation process. Sri Narayana Guru, Mahatma Gandhi, Ayyan Kali are a few such examples where the Hindu society at large stood by Dalits and suppressed sections of the society. These need to be boosted, and not superseded by foreign interventions.

The report also gives credit to communists/leftists as solution providers for the "Hindu" problem: "There are also attempts to fight caste-based discrimination through the spread of Marxist (commonly referred to as Leftist in the Indian context) ideology that denies all notions of God and religion." (p.9) The report fails to explicitly bring out the fact that Indian leftists do *not* get rid of caste identity, but channel it and use it for their own purposes. People of Arundhati Roy's ilk are busy re-educating the Munda tribes of central India that they are the "original Indians," and that both "Aryans" and "Dravidians" are foreign invaders who have victimized them. This is inter-community civil war, not a "liberation" from caste identity.

The report also praises E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (EVR) whose organization later gave birth to the present DMK party of Karunanidhi. This is yet another simplistic statement thrown into the report without any attempt to analyze this movement in detail. This movement today is precisely what the aggressive "Christian Dravidian" movement builds on. It is these folks who tried to destroy Ram Sethu; who have seized many Hindu temple assets; who have replaced official Hindu holidays with Christian ones; who have created a religious apartheid against Hindus in general and Dalit Hindu children in particular in government educational concessions; and who have devastated Hindu social capital in every manner they possibly could. Emboldened by the Dravidianist polity there was even an unsuccessful attempt by the Church to change the name of Kanya-Kumari to 'Kanni Mary' (Virgin Mary).

HAF claims that DMK "mainly represents the shudra castes of Tamil Nadu, preaches vehement atheism along with social reform." That is a very shallow and obsolete view. Today, this organization represents a conglomerate of interests with the common thread of being "anti-Aryan" and "anti-Hindu", for if there were no Aryan invasion then why would there be any need for a "Dravidian" identity movement in the first place? Those Hindus (such as HAF) who rightly fight the Aryan theories must understand that Dravidianism is its mirror image, and one cannot exist without the other. In order to intensify Dravidianism as a political force, the Aryan theory has to be constantly kept alive in the public consciousness. Nowhere in the world is a government more

dependent on the Aryan theory for its survival than the DMK government. This is why they are supporting the church in its aggressive advocacy of a new history and politicized religion according to which the Tamil classics (both the *Saiva Siddhanta* and the *Thirukural*) were created under the Christian influence of St. Thomas! Yet HAF praises, without any semblance of analysis or discussion, that EVR was a great "reformer who successfully transferred social, political, and economic power to the numerically dominant shudra castes of Tamil Nadu." (p.43) This is a perfect example of how superficial knowledge can lead to counterproductive conclusions that defeat the writers' own stated goals!

The report says that the chief responsibility for solving caste based discrimination lies with Hindu institutions, "because they have the authority and following of nearly all members of all communities and castes." It is not at all clear what "Hindu institutions" HAF is referring to. Hinduism is not an organized religion that is institutionalized (in the manner of the Vatican in Catholicism, for instance.) Moreover, traditional Hindu institutions such as the *mathas* and *pathashalas* have been tremendously weakened in their influence over the Hindu masses, through colonialism and the politics of post-Independence India. The political, educational, cultural institutions and the media are predominantly controlled by secularized/non-Hindu interests; that is where the nexus of power in modern India rests. Many of the traditional Hindu groups that do have the capacity to initiate such changes have been highly regulated and controlled by government machinery in most Indian states. Political as well as missionary motivated leadership is increasingly encroaching this space of social authority, and creating more and more conflicts. In West Bengal and Kerala, the communists have controlled the institutions for many decades. In the states of the northeast as well as in Jammu and Kashmir, one can hardly claim that "Hindu institutions" control the authority. India's national security authorities admit that approximately one-third of all districts in the country have Maoist establishments, many of which literally control the local law and order - not any "Hindu institution" in charge.

If there is a necessity to present caste in international forums, the first Hindu advocacy report should feature the great work already being done by major Hindu organizations, and the concrete results they have produced since independence. This advancement is not trivial, even though **a lot more work needs to be done**. It would be irresponsible and not in the best interests of the downtrodden to undermine the Hindu organizations' programs that are being successful, and replace them with imported programs brought under International Human Rights Laws. There are so many Hindu organizations working hard on the ground on this issue, that deserve recognition, but unfortunately,

only the church related and leftist groups are given international recognition. Christians participate in world forums by putting themselves on a strong footing, presenting all the great work they claim to do. They never start on a weak footing with any kind of "apology" externally. Where is the Christian apology for the slaughter and rape perpetrated during the Inquisition in India and subsequent atrocities by its missionaries, or the Islamic apology for terrorism done in its name? Why must Hindus grovel just to gain standing in front of Western institutions?

Can we imagine an Islamic group, that claims to be champions of Islam, to spread a report that condemns Sharia Law as a human rights violation, and that gives 20 pages of graphic and sensational incidents of Sharia based violations? The effects of this would be to support those who want Sharia Law outlawed by international bodies. Indeed, there are movements against Sharia Law, and a small number of liberal Muslims can be found among them. But these Muslims are not empowered and are on the fringes of legitimacy as spokespersons for Islam. They are not accepted as the voice of mainstream Islam.

I cannot imagine a Christian or Muslim group taking their cases of abuse within their community to some foreign capital, and submitting it to foreign legal authorities to get them involved in dealing with it. That's what many Indian rajas did before British colonial authorities when they had disputes among themselves, which they could not resolve internally.

HAF certainly has the right to position itself as a movement that seeks to undermine Hinduism's institutions in the same manner. ***But in that case, HAF should make its intentions public in front of its donors, and it should stop claiming to be speaking on behalf of the majority of Hindus.*** The report flies in the face of HAF's posture that it speaks *for* Hinduism, rather than *against* it.

This report will surely make HAF popular among the pseudo-secular crowd, Christian and Muslim groups, and Western academics of the kind one finds in RISA and AAR. HAF is free to cozy up to whomever it wants, but as a publicly supported organization, it has to be held accountable and answer to the serious concerns of its public constituency as to whether, and to what extent, it has been co-opted and is seeking to serve its own political/PR interests and/or the interests of others (such as its executives) whose interests may not align with those of the Hindu community.

Contradictions, Errors, Omissions and Misrepresentations

HAF conflates the traditional varna-jati two-dimensional structure with modern day one-dimensional "caste". It gives some lip service to the distinction, but fails to keep these notions separate. It slips quickly into conflating all three of these terms into a hotchpotch mess. The report claims to have found 30 mentions of "caste" in *Bhagavad Gita* and up to 20 verses mentioning "caste" in *Rigveda*. This backward projection of "caste" on to Vedic texts is a mix up between Vedic and western frameworks, which becomes a major pitfall for them. It shows a complete failure to understand the paradigm of Vedic thought, which they simply map on to the modern western social studies paradigm.

The failure to use dharma categories is typical of those who see Sanskrit terms as merely having symbolic (and perhaps "chauvinistic") significance, failing to appreciate that these terms are simply non-translatable. Thus, they end up collapsing the whole tradition using pseudo-secular categories from western social sciences found in US textbooks, which, ironically, HAF wants to fight against.

There is name-dropping of scholars in many places of the HAF report, leading Gautam Sen to write that some scholars have been "cited to insinuate intellectual legitimacy without really bothering with what they have had to say."

The report does not seem to understand varna when it says: "Historically, the *varna* system was more of a normative concept with little basis in social reality." (p.6) It mistranslates Kshatriya as merely king/soldiers, when in fact all governance, politics, legislation, courts and attorneys, and even NGO activism, are forms of Kashatriyata today. It fails to appreciate that untouchables were not only determined by ritual impurity, but also those who lost in battles against invading Muslims were turned into slaves, and often castrated as a condition for having their lives spared. Many jatis were made landless by the British in the system of "lagaan" (as explained in the popular movie) and draconian zamindari for colonial tax collection. The "gypsies" of Europe (whose self identity is "Roma people") are the untouchables of modern Europe, who were first taken as slaves from India to be sold in the slavery bazaars of Central Asia during Islamic rule. (See, for example the PhD. dissertation by Scott Levi, titled, "*Hindus beyond the Hindu Kush: Indians in the Central Asian Slave Trade*." A short summary is available at: <http://www.jstor.org/pss/25188289>. There have also been other dissertations written on slavery inside India during Islamic times, as well as under British rule.) Many of these Indian slaves in Central Asia eventually won their freedom, and ran in directions away from India, reaching various parts of Europe where they got

reclassified as the "gypsy" underclass. Yet the report asserts: "With the notable exception of Japan, the issue of caste-based discrimination is mostly confined to South Asian communities, and is generally one where Hindus are both the perpetrators and victims." (p.12)

A large part of the problem is the report's convoluted structure filled with contradictions, and lack of a clear thesis that is argued cogently. Nor is there any concrete call to action. This leads to ambiguity, such that anyone can use selective quotes from it as ammunition to make whatever case they choose to. In many instances, the report seems to be arguing against itself a few pages later, or it gives evidence pointing in one direction but makes an assertion in the opposite direction.

While also claiming to be protecting Hinduism from its opponents, it supplies ammunition to the opponents, such as: "Hindus must acknowledge that caste arose in Hindu society, that some Hindu texts and traditions justify a birth-based hierarchy and caste-bias, and that it has survived despite considerable Hindu attempts to curtail it. Caste-based discrimination represents a failure of Hindu society..." (p.1) It goes on to apologize on behalf of Hinduism over and over again, such as the following examples of scolding:

"The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) rejects explanations for the current situation that are occasionally proffered to gloss over caste-based discrimination: that India has laws in place that impose penalties on those who practice such discrimination, as well as laws that promote a robust system of caste-based affirmative action; that stratification of society existed, and continues to exist, in various forms in other countries besides India; that caste is likely a corrupted form of what was intended as a system of division of labor in ancient India and that this fact alleviates collective responsibility; that the much-maligned Manusmriti (one of the many ancient texts of Indian social law) was never the law of the land; and that caste-based discrimination exists even amongst Christian, Muslim and Sikh religious communities in India." (p.9)

"The caste system, as it has developed in the Indian subcontinent, is a birth-based hierarchy. What makes this caste system unique is that (i) its hierarchical and discriminatory presuppositions have pervaded and permeated very deeply in Indian society to an extent not seen anywhere else in the world; and (ii) it has withstood most attempts aimed at ending the practice right up until now... Unlike most social hierarchies, the caste system positioned the priests at the apex of the societal pyramid, even above the kings and princes, and has had the support of some of Hinduism's

numerous religious texts, especially those that dealt with rituals, law, and social organization. This functioned to embed it into the more orthodox elements of the belief system and in a way that has allowed it to survive to present day." (p.4)

"The whole system, along with its taboos and restrictions, is authenticated by religion or canon, thus implicating Hinduism in the eyes of many." (p.6)

The report's suggested solutions are hardly new, original or based on actual field work to establish their practical viability. For instance, the whole section on "Police reform" is a superficial view of too broad an issue, entailing a massive bureaucratic reform, one of many such "reforms" cited that would each require a whole written volume by experts and not just a few sweeping sentences. Such superficial treatment renders the exercise useless from a constructive standpoint. It is the sort of proclamation that college undergraduate social groups announce in every campus to "solve world problems."

HAF's methodology is flawed. It asked prominent Hindu spiritual and religious leaders to provide their positions on caste in very specific ways. The questions were worded as leading questions, intended to receive a certain kind of response. (For instance, they did *not* ask for information about what these Hindu organizations were *already* doing to help the under classes. That would have produced a different kind of report.) Most Hindu groups sent back some old materials they had written on caste in an unrelated context, and did not write anything fresh specific to this inquiry. HAF made the entire Section 8 of its report out of such materials. The questions and the responses did not touch upon the deeper issues I have raised here. Furthermore, HAF positioned this material as an endorsement of the report which it was not meant to be. HAF credited these groups for "taking time out of their very busy schedules to support HAF's initiative." This was name-dropping to boost the report's credibility. Most of them had never read the HAF report.

De-Colonizing HAF

'Caste' is an imported word in the Indian lexicon that is often mixed up with the indigenous terms, *varna* and *jati*. The three terms are not interchangeable, and the mapping of dharmic terms to Western terms that do not correspond correctly results in major distortion and ambiguity in the substance of the report. The loss of indigenous categories in the report led to a loss of dharmic framework to understand and hence deal with issues from within the tradition, which *does* have a long history of addressing social issues internally without external intervention.

Jati refers to an age-old Indian social structure that goes across the boundaries of religion. It means "community" that is frequently an occupation-based group identity that emerged when skills (and hence professional capital) were passed down to one's children. This system of transmitting expertise as a form of social capital led to ultra specialized closely-knit communities for various kinds of work. The modern education system (which India has not successfully implemented on a universal scale) tries to provide expertise that is independent of the parents' occupation, potentially creating a more level playing field to compete based on expertise. Mobility of employment brings greater inter-mixing of communities, as evident in India's metropolitan sectors. Hence, the issues are more correlated with education and employment mobility than with religion any longer. Though caste *abuses* are to be denounced, it is rash to try to eliminate jati in an absolute manner.

Prof. Vaidyanathan of the prestigious Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, has spent years researching the role of jati-based economic empowerment. He cites World Bank and Indian government statistics to show that a large number of jati-based groups have used their internal cohesion to rapidly climb up the economic ladder. This phenomenon is what has made the "bottom of the pyramid" (a term coined by C.K. Prahalad) thrive in India, and has turned the rural areas into the fastest growing markets for industry. Referring to this kind of benefit of jati, Kalyanaraman says, "It is our social capital. We don't have to become apologists." Tom Friedman's "flat world" is a great idea for the top tiers of Indian society, but its trickle-down effect has not reached the bottom of the pyramid.

The western model of a society made of atomic individuals has led to the breakdown of families and communities. In such a model, the government social security is the only recourse for those who are handicapped, who fall on hard times, or are in old age. There is no local community support available very often. We know how this experiment has failed in the US where the social security system is virtually bankrupt. Is it ethical to export this failed model to India? In a poor country like India, the central government has even less chances of providing a safety net of social security to its vast population. Traditionally, the jati served as the safety net one turns to in times of distress. What would be the social security for Indians once devoid of closely knit communities that are held together by centuries of traditions and bonds? Already, in westernized cities such as Delhi, many elderly are being thrown out of their homes in this new era of western modernity that has arrived. There are "old age homes" now being built in Delhi for the first time. HAF better have a substitute in place, *before* dismantling the old structure too hastily.

Jati cohesion has also been a form of collective bargaining of rights, and even during Mughal and British times the rulers had to face their power of collective bargaining. Dissolving jati became a British strategy to get rid of local power that was in the hands of Indians. Today, when a jati structure gets eradicated, the vacuum left is often filled by church-run or madrassa-run collective identities. The church "congregation" and Islamic "umma" are the alternative "new jatis" waiting to take over. Thus, the role played by jatis for resisting against conversions must be understood.

Indeed, modern Indian democracy is increasingly driven by jati and similar identity formations. The two main political parties in India are becoming smaller in the percentage of votes they get, and the majority of votes in the elections go to the hundreds of small parties that focus on a given region, jati or combination. One must study the way these parties function by becoming a voice for a modern caste identity. ***The "caste problem" today, is a problem of perverted secularism for politicians' self-interests.*** It is the result of modern democracy that encourages vote bank politics and fragmented parties, and this is why Arun Shourie has proposed a US style central presidential system.

'Kshatriya Malpractice'

Sticking to my principle that professional critiques must focus on issues of substance, and not personalities, I would like to assert that there has to be a category of discourse dealing with Kshatriya Malpractice (a phrase I am coining), just as there is professional discussion on medical and legal malpractice. The point is that the intentions might be good, and I am willing to give the HAF leaders the full benefit of doubt as to their good intentions. But as in the case of medical malpractice, there can be Kshatriya Malpractice despite all the good intentions. The following is a list of specific lessons to be learned from this scandal in order to develop the notion of Kshatriya Malpractice further:

1. Confusing internal work with external kurukshetra: Those representing Hindu dharma must differentiate between what is an internal issue to resolve problems, as opposed to external issues in the global kurukshetra of today. They must avoid feeding ammunition to the likes of World Vision, Dalit Freedom Network, USCIRF and many others, by supplying them powerful quotes from a report by Hindus that support what these hostile organizations have been pushing for years, and that directly contradict the positions taken by Hindu groups in the forefront of important battles regarding the portrayal of Hinduism in the education system, etc. Any internal reforms or changes require *internal* deliberation and

cooperation focused on grassroots activities and work, rather than issuing vague policy statements that make a lot of noise, but do not achieve any changes in the ground reality. The forum for beneficial changes is within India, not Washington DC.

2. Control over the debate: For a variety of reasons, the discourse on issues such as caste has been controlled in international circles by forces hostile to Hindu dharma - including Christians, western political hegemonies, Marxists and pseudo-secularists. Is HAF now supporting that discourse? Did it do a careful analysis of this point the way Rakesh Bahadur has pointed out forcefully? To the extent that such issues need to be addressed externally, such discussions should first focus on and compile the immense progress that Hindu groups have made in reducing social abuses, and present that. There should also be focus on the axiom that those in glass houses should not be the first to cast stones - i.e., what is the legitimacy of Western institutions in addressing internal social issues of India when they are plagued by the social ills of racism, growing wealth inequality, etc.?
3. Strategic planning capability: The board should evaluate its strategic thinking competence, and whether this kind of project was ill-conceived and poorly executed. It should introspect: What credentials does HAF have, and more particularly, the named authors of the report have, to claim to talk about caste and its position in Hinduism? What field work was done, how much of the scholarship was HAF's original scholarship and to the extent it was not, how reliable was the secondhand data that HAF relied upon for its findings? Does HAF or the authors of this report have the adhikara or the authority to give broad statements that define what the "original" Hindu scriptures had to say about jati/varna? Also, on such a sensitive issue that would have serious ramifications for others working for the Hindu cause, why was consultation with other Hindu bodies and activists eschewed during the multiple years it took to write this report?
4. Accountability to donors: Just like politicians who make aggressive campaign promises and later find themselves trapped to deliver, one is left wondering whether HAF promised too many things for the money it raised, and hence had to act in panic to bring the report out. To show that funds are being well utilized, it has to periodically make a big splash in the media, and show how the media is covering it. The idea is to make the older generation of Hindu Americans feel proud that "our Hindu boys and girls" are becoming prominent, as if that ought to be a goal in itself.

5. Due process hijacked: HAF first publicly announced this project to publish such a report at a WAVES conference this past summer in Trinidad. At that time, I and many other scholars present were alarmed at the possible implications and fallout of such an initiative if undertaken without due care. We joined together to formally protest to HAF that what they had presented briefly of this project would be inappropriate to publish, without a detailed review by the rest of us. But HAF chose to proceed exclusively, and only involved those few who would agree with them. When I pointed this out after the report was released, I was viciously rebuffed for expressing my useless views on matters that I felt were critical to consider. People are concerned with the lack of internal due process to give Hindu voices an opportunity to express their positions. There was too much Washington style private lobbying to gather "votes" that say simple things like, "I support HAF", etc. An organization claiming to be the voice for 2 million Hindus in America cannot act unilaterally while at the same time expecting to be recognized as the "pre-eminent" voice for Hindus. If HAF wants to act unilaterally without being held accountable to anyone, then it will have to stand alone and cannot be assured of the support of the community at large.
6. Crisis management: The board should also evaluate whether the crisis management was unprofessional and in bad taste, making things even worse for HAF. The personal attacks launched by board members for the first four days of the scandal backfired on them very seriously, and it took them too long to recognize the damage they were causing themselves by going ballistic against their critics. Rather than trying to build consensus behind the scenes *before* publishing a controversial report, they fanned the flames of what has turned into a blog war.
7. Exclusivity: A Hindu advocacy group must represent the other Hindu groups as well and not only itself. HAF has been accused by many persons of usurping other Hindu groups' contributions in its quest for prominence. Also, it should not try to assume the policymaking role exclusively.
8. Need for mandate: One should introspect whether a Kshatriya group can legitimately try to represent Hindu dharma without any mandate (such as election of board members) from those it claims to represent. Serious consideration should be given as to whether corporate governance of the organization should be reformed to make it more transparent and accountable.
9. Media and PR brand management: Issuing letters to the editor and other press releases is one thing. It is an entirely different thing to issue an ill-conceived report that is presented as a definitive Hindu position on a complex and sensitive

topic just to make a PR splash on International Human Rights Day, and to win points from US governmental bodies and the US mainstream press. Was there disregard for the collateral damage that would be caused by the report to the Hindu community, and a breach of HAF's moral and dharmic duty to its constituents and supporters? This is what I mean by malpractice. I agree that HAF must become important in order to represent us effectively, but has there been too much craving for personal media coverage, and "who" supports the report as the overriding criteria of success?

10. Sellout vulnerability: I do not wish to accuse HAF of selling out at this point. But some caution is needed to prevent that from happening. I regret the reliance upon Prof Diana Eck of Harvard as the endorser to make HAF feel legitimate. She has worked *for* us and *against* us in the past, and is very political. Of course we need important persons as friends. But on whose terms? In the past, colonial rulers won over a segment of the colonized by making them feel "important" and "legitimate", and in the bargain squeezed out those voices that were more challenging. This is how resistance gets diluted over time, be it corporate management dealing with a labor union, or an imperial power dealing with natives in the frontier. Seeking appointments in Washington, coverage in the western press, and endorsements from western academics is fine, provided that this does not take priority over uncompromising loyalty to one's client.

The New Washington Politics on Hinduism

The recent mid-term elections has been a big boost for right-wing Christians joining the US Congress in large numbers starting in January, 2011. Obama is on the defensive and eager to make "deals" with them, sacrificing those items to their wishes that he does not consider critical to his own agenda. Hinduism has always been on the brink of US Congressional sanctions and US pressure that would amount to interference in India on the ground of "human rights." I have warned of this for over a decade, such as in my series of articles on Rediff.com about the role of South Asian academics in feeding such anti-India policies.

The new buzz of excitement in these radical right-wing Christian circles is that this is the right time to introduce bills in the US Congress whose ultimate effect would be to pressure the Indian government on certain social policies. Demands will be made that could try to: (1) open the floodgates for massive faith-based funding from overseas, in the guise of human rights, far more openly than before; (2) enact laws or policies in

India to curtail Hindu voices further; (3) require that US corporate activities and investments in India should give employment preference to certain "minorities" and "oppressed" peoples, and Christian groups have prepared their ground forces in India over several years to pounce on this opportunity and claim the lion's share of the benefits; and (4) start prosecuting caste-based "human rights violations" under international laws.

I fear that HAF is acting under the pressure to either soften its stand in defending Hinduism, or face the music that could sideline it in these debates. The carrot available, if it plays ball according to the way the game is managed, would be that they would get a seat at the table of debates that would give them prestige. This is a dangerous game for HAF to enter without adequate supervision and wider consultation from its Hindu support base. Being prone to quick media brand recognition is a typical weakness that gets exploited as a vulnerability. Mere sincerity and good intentions are not adequate safeguards against this, when the stakes are so high. HAF might end up as the fools who've fallen into the trap set by knaves.