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Theme: Hinduism and Materiality

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Articles should relate to the study of any aspect of Hinduism. As such, the study of Hinduism is broadly conceived to include, not merely the traditionally recognized areas within the discipline, but includes contributions from scholars in other fields who seek to bring their particular worldviews and theories into dialogue with Hindu studies. Articles that explore issues of history, ecology, economics, politics, sociology, culture, education and psychology are welcomed.

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Correspondence Address

**The Managing Editor: Nidān c/o School of Religion & Theology
Private Bag X10, Dalbridge, 4041, Durban, South Africa.**

Tel: +27(31) 260 7303/3120 Fax: +27(31) 2607286

Email: vencatsamyb@ukzn.ac.za

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Preface

In an attempt to internationalize Nidān, we have embarked on a partnership with **Prof. Pankaj Jain** (at the Department of Anthropology, Department of Philosophy and Religion Studies, University of North Texas, USA.) who has become the guest editor of this volume. We hope to continue this partnership into the future. I wish to thank Prof. Jain for undertaking this editorial responsibility of this volume and introducing a theme: **Hinduism and Materiality**. The articles published in this volume deal with material culture in Hinduism as well as Hindu spirituality. We hope that readers will find these articles illuminating and useful in understanding Hinduism and the various issues related to it. **All the articles have been externally peer reviewed before being published in this volume.** We thank the authors for choosing to publish their research work in Nidān.

Editor

Prof. P. Pratap Kumar
University of KwaZulu Natal, Durban, South Africa

Contesting Hindu Material and Visual Cultures, Forging Hindu American Identity and Subjectivity

Jonathan H. X. Lee
San Francisco State University

Abstract

Based on the 2010 Census, there are roughly 1.85 million Indian Americans residing in the United States.¹ They comprise the third largest Asian American community in the U.S., following the Chinese and Filipino Americans. Indian cultural influence in America dates back to the early 19th century, and has deep and rich roots.² Western culture admires yoga, the Eastern concepts of internal and external peace, sexual chastity, and vegetarianism, yet, at the same time, it fancies products like flip-flops, underwear, and doormats sporting images of Hindu icons. Are these two fads contradictory or do they illustrate something about the interplay among modernity, secularization, and religion? The West likes to consume everything Hindu, from *nag champa* incense to Hindu icons and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Recent trends reveal problematic misappropriation of Hindu icons for sale in unexpected and uncommon places (i.e., bikinis and flip-flops shoes). What is the interplay between Hindu/Hindu American activism against capitalistic misappropriation of Hindu icons and their subjectivity and identity? How can we analyze and re-think assumptions about the secularization thesis? The examples analyzed in this article provide rich material to re-think modernity

¹ U.S. Census Bureau

http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_10_DP_DPDP1&prodType=table (last accessed May 30, 2011).

Indian Americans are people of Indian origin who have migrated to the United States since the 17th century, either directly from India or from Indian communities in the diaspora (e.g., Europe, Australia, Middle East, Southeast Asia, South Africa). Indian Americans—also known as “Asian Indian,” “Eastern Indian Americans,” and “South Asians”—are generally considered part of the broad heterogeneous umbrella label “Asian American.”

² During the 19th century, Indian traders came to the United States carrying silk, linens, and spices. The early immigrants during this period were largely Sikhs who came as railroad workers and agricultural laborers because of severe famine and impoverishment in the Punjab region of northern India. During the same time, many Indians came to the United States in pursuit of higher education and later immigrated permanently when they secured jobs. Historically, there has also been a large migration of Indian professionals to the United States, such as doctors, engineers, researchers, etc., creating a “brain drain” in India. Immigrants who became legal residents and citizens often brought their siblings, parents, and other family members as well. While the early Indian immigrants were concentrated only in few larger American cities (Chicago, San Francisco) and states (California), Indian families and large Indian communities exist in every state.

and its insistence on secularization, even if it employs Hindu religious iconography. The purpose of this article is not to “explain” Hindu/Hindu American protests, but rather to investigate the questions it evokes.³ Hindu/Hindu American activism against the corporatization and fetishization of their Hindu deities critiques the logic of capitalism, while simultaneously giving rise to a Hindu/Hindu American identity and subjectivity.

Introduction

This essay explores misappropriations of Hindu icons on popular garments and items that are mass produced for retail. The foci of this research are two contemporary cases, one involving American Eagle Outfitters (AEO), the other the globally popular fast-food conglomerate, McDonald’s. An investigation of material culture, in particular material religion, requires critical engagement with the secularization thesis that sees the disappearance of religion with modernity that ultimately results in the secularization of daily life. It also questions the fundamental assumption of the secularization thesis apropos modern society, and reveals its shortcomings. The secularization thesis does not account for the affinity between capitalistic consumer culture and religion. In short, it does not account for the fact that religion can be “for sale.” This is not a new fact about religion. It also overlooks the role of people who make decisions and who are consumers of religion, implicitly or explicitly when it is for sale. The two case studies are anchored by a critical exploration of secularization and consumption, further grounding the theoretical framework of this study. The aim is not to interpret the actions and motivations of Hindus/Hindu Americans, but rather, to question and re-think the discourse on modernity and its relationship to religion. The examination of Hindu material religion and both the successful and unsuccessful attempts to sell it in the global market place brings into question the shortcomings in the secularization thesis, and the ways in which ethnic and religious identities inform the logic of capitalism. Hindu and Hindu American protest of corporate misappropriation of Hindu deities is simultaneously a critique of the secularization thesis and the logic of capitalism and is an expression of Hindu ethnicity and subjectivity.

Secularization Thesis and Material Religion

The discourse on modernity and secularization is often anchored to the relationship between the state and religion. For example, Giorgio Agamben⁴ and Michel

³ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

Foucault⁵ provide critiques of modernity's narrative vis-à-vis sovereignty and biopower, which, when applied to the condition of religion in modern societies, brings up questions concerning the relationship of religion to the state. Both Agamben and Foucault view modernity critically, prompting us to reconsider the alleged "progress" made with modernization. However, Agamben calls upon us to not forget state sovereignty and the violence that it is capable of stimulating, while Foucault paints a picture of a new form of discipline in modern life and society that is oppressive. Both authors are discontent with modernity, both see biopolitics emerging—although different versions of it—becoming increasingly tragic and manipulative on modern subjects.⁶ They reject the Enlightenment discourse of progress, reason, emancipation, and argue that in modernity, new forms of power and knowledge have resulted in new forms of domination.

Although Agamben and Foucault are dissatisfied with the conditions of modernity, they do not discuss what happens after modernity. For this, we turn to Georges Bataille in *The Accursed Share*.⁷ Characterizing the modern condition with an emphasis on Weberian rationality, Bataille's dissatisfaction with modernity extends to the notions of rational production and consumption, compared to archaic society where there is a consumptive behavior beyond utility, which he equates with "sovereignty."⁸ Bataille's notion of sovereignty is not politically defined. He sees sovereignty as an issue of consumption, in which the sovereign individual consumes but does not labor. Bataille laments modern man's inability to grasp and understand the attraction of the sovereign power of the past, attributing it to our necessity to understand our acts in rational terms. He sees the ability to lose oneself in moments of consumption or enjoyment as "moments of sovereignty."⁹ Moments of sovereignty are described as being akin to ". . .

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

⁶ For Foucault, biopolitics or biopower is a technology that appeared in the late 18th century for managing populations, incorporating some aspects of disciplinary power or non-sovereign power, which he argued regulates the behaviors of individuals within the social body. By changing his emphasis from discipline to biopolitics, Foucault shifts his discourse from one of training, normalizing, naturalizing the actions of bodies to focus on managing the births, deaths, reproductive processes, and illnesses of a population. Foucault sees biopolitics as a consequence of governmentality, which is a mode of thinking toward government that started to emerge in the 18th century, first as art of government, and later, as a full-fledged government.

⁷ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volumes II & III*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

⁸ Bataille sees the outcome of the Marxist project (Stalinism and communism) as more disturbing than bourgeois surplus. With bourgeois surplus, the state takes surplus from the laborer and makes decisions on what to do with the surplus, a moment of caprice or whim; with state socialism, there is a totally planned rational economy, and the state makes decisions on how workers will live and what workers can do, which becomes a total society of necessity.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 203.

deeply rhythmed movements of poetry, of music, of love, of dance The miraculous moment when anticipation dissolves into NOTHING.”¹⁰

Bataille and Foucault both find the pre-modern sovereign power appealing because there was a collective effort of non-productive build-up of access to the divine, which everyone gets to enjoy; however, in modern capitalist society, no one gets to enjoy it. Bataille is on to something when he discusses consumption, because in ancient China and India there were consumptive laws, laws regulating ritual offerings, clothing and dress—which juxtaposes social status with degrees of consumption and levels of sacredness. Modernization shatters this hierarchy. More importantly, Bataille suggests that the game is not over because modern subjects are able to discover sovereign moments within the system. Examining material culture, especially religious representation in material pop culture, is only tangentially related to the state if one takes for granted the state’s role and support of capitalism. However, one wonders if the purchase of flip-flops and bikinis with Hindu icons on them are examples of the moment of sovereignty that Bataille is referring to? Hindu/Hindu American protests of AEO and McDonald’s are indirect critiques of the state in that they are acts of decolonization, because historically the state was the primary colonial agent. Is this act of consumer protest a moment of sovereignty as well?

What Things Reveal

Material culture refers to the design, construction, modification, and use of physical objects to both create and express meaning within a culture. In studying the material culture of Hindu American communities, all things are significant expressions of meaning—from the literal contents of religious icons purchased at the local mall or ethnic store, from slippers to saris, from a dozen types of rice to curries, and from Hindu home shrines to mega temples.

Material culture can serve as a means of resistance to forces of globalization and homogeneity. The wearing of traditional clothing or the incorporation of design elements into non-traditional items of apparel—such as henna designs or turbans—publicly signals a preservation of identity. Material culture can also constitute or bolster new hybrid cultural forms, such as when, out of economic necessity, immigrant Hindu American communities pool resources to create a *mandir* (temple) to house deities that in India would not be enshrined together. Very different combinatory impulses are displayed in the creation of Indian salsa or in Indian American hip-hop culture, in which non-traditional musical instruments and modes—as well as fashion and marketing strategies—are expressively employed. The problem is not with the marketing of Hindu material culture per se, but rather, with the producers of the products for sale. Are they Hindu/Hindu American or corporations? The disdain for one, and support for the other reveals the logic of capitalism that underlies the formation of Hindu/Hindu American

¹⁰ Ibid.

subjectivity and identity. It is logical in modern society for Hindus/Hindu Americans to market and sell material Hinduism, but not acceptable for corporations, especially those that are not self-identified Hindu. Does this mean that everything is not available for sale? If so, what does it say about the secularization thesis and about the actors who will not purchase Hindu material culture produced by a corporation?

Material Hinduism for Sale?

America has been fascinated with Hinduism since the late 1950s *a la* the Beatles and other notable personalities as they traveled to Rishikesh in pursuit of mystical experiences and enlightenment.¹¹ Recently, America's "enhancement" with Hinduism is expressed in the 2011 November cover of *The Newsweek*, which depicts President Barack Obama in a dancing Lord Siva pose with the title, "God of All Things." In 2008 the former fashion model and reality game show TV hostess, Heidi Klum, dressed up as the goddess Kali for Halloween.¹² Hindus worldwide criticized Klum's costume, while fans and non-Hindus supported her freedom of self-expression. There is a series of controversy involving the use of Hindu icons on mundane objects, protested by Hindu Human Rights organizations as well as other Hindu American organizations. The worldwide campaign to protest cases of corporate transgressions in using Hindu deities include, for example, the challenge of Roberto Cavalli's bikinis in England featuring the likeness of the goddess Lakshmi;¹³ lunchboxes.com's use of images of the goddesses Durga and Kali and gods Krishna and Ganesha on children's lunch boxes; and the image of goddess Kali on toilet seats. In the U.S, they challenged Lost Coast Brewery's depiction of Ganesha on an India Pale Ale beer bottle;¹⁴ Monarch Beverages' use of a distorted image of Siva on its energy drink; and CafePress.com's sale of thongs bearing the sacred Om symbol and images of Siva. These cases illustrate several things about Hinduism in the West, in particular in America: 1) Westerners are enchanted with Hinduism; 2) there is a market for Hinduism in the western world; 3) the archetypal secularization thesis on the disappearance of religion with progress and modernity is, once again, questioned.

Hindus have expressed their displeasure and dissatisfaction with the misappropriation of Hindu icons on toilet seats, thongs, and bikinis. Corporate and capitalist misappropriation of Hindu icons represents a form of cultural colonization and secularization that is problematic for Hindus and Hindu Americans. Naresh Kadyan says,

¹¹ Jane Naomi Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 5.

¹² "Heidi as Goddess Kali" <http://www.potlee.com/divine-intervention/heidi-as-godess-kali/> (last accessed May 30, 2011)

¹³ Vinita Dawra Nangia "Was Goddess Lakshmi on bikini a deliberate ploy?" *The Times of India* (May 17, 2011); and Hindu Human Rights <http://www.hinduhumanrights.org/campaign.html> (last accessed May 30, 2011)

¹⁴ Sonia Chopra, "Stop insulting South Asia—Indian American sues firm over Lord Ganesha's picture on beer bottle" *India Daily* (May 19, 2005). <http://www.indiadaily.com/editorial/2783.asp> (last accessed May 30, 2011)

"You don't have to be religious to feel disgusted at seeing a picture of Goddess Lakshmi on a bikini bottom. It is simply disrespectful and cheap."¹⁵ Kadyan's comments reveal an anxiety about the fetishization of Hinduism, as well as the attempt to decolonize Hinduism, especially since secularization in India occurred through colonization. Therefore, in the post-colonial historical context, an Indian American law student who filed a lawsuit against Lost Coast Brewery for "hurting the sentiments of Hindus worldwide" reveals aspects of Hindu American agency and attempts to decolonize their religious traditions and subjectivities.¹⁶

This article explores the clash between Hindus/Hindu Americans and corporate America. In particular it will focus on two case studies involving AEO and McDonald's, apropos the Hindu American community. This examination reveals how activism informs the interplay between Hindu icons, ethnic and religious identities, and Hindu American subjectivity. It also argues that exploration of material culture, in things that are not overtly religious (i.e., French fries) provides data to critically engage and analyze the secularization thesis that religion and other folk traditions will disappear with modernization and historical progress. Moreover, it illustrates that patterns of modern consumerism do not follow the linear logic of rational capitalism, but instead is informed by issues of ethnicity and identity.

The academic study of Hinduism in America has received considerable attention, especially as documented in the narrative and institutional history of Hinduism in America.¹⁷ However, anyone interested in the topic at hand faces formidable difficulties in terms of the paucity of available published works investigating Hindu American (and Asian American) material and visual culture.¹⁸

American Eagle Outfitters

In April 2003 the popular teen and young adult clothing company, American Eagle Outfitters (AEO), introduced flip-flops with the image of Ganesha in its summer

¹⁵ Naresh Kadyan, "Respect be given to the Hindu's God and Goddess" Care2petitionsite <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/1/respect-be-given-to-the-hindus-god-and-goddess/> (last accessed May 30, 2011)

¹⁶ Chopra, "Stop insulting South Asia—Indian American sues firm over Lord Ganesha's picture on beer bottle"

¹⁷ For example: Wendell Thomas, *Hinduism Invades America* (Kessinger Publishing 2003); Sunrit Mullick, *The First Hindu Mission to America: The Pioneering Visits of Protap Chunder Mozoomdar* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 2010); Gerald James Larson, "Hinduism in India and in America" *World Religions in America: An Introduction*, Jacob Neusner, ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); and Elizabeth Reed, *Hinduism in Europe and America* (Forgotten Books, 2010).

¹⁸ Related to material culture is Jaideep Singh's "The Racialization of Minoritized Religious Identity: Constructing Sacred Sites at the Intersection of White and Christian Supremacy" *Revealing the Sacred in Asian & Pacific America*, edited by Jane Naomi Iwamura and Paul Spickard. New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 87–106.

line.¹⁹ Ganesha is the elephant-headed god who is the son of Siva and Parvati; he is one of the more widely venerated Hindu deities because he is believed to be able to remove any obstacle. Immediately after releasing the Ganesha flip-flops, two Indian American community organizations, IndiaCause and American Hindus against Defamation (AHAD), launched a campaign to recall and remove all the flip-flops from the 929 retail AEO stores and its online catalog.²⁰

AHAD complained that, since Ganesha is a popular Hindu god, his likeness on flip-flops is a transgression against his sacredness because the feet are considered populated. A Hindu blogger who signed the petition writes:

I was taught growing up not to put your feet on or towards God, but now his image is on the sole of somebody's shoes! I don't think Jesus print[ed on] toilet paper would go over well in the Christian community so why do they feel this is acceptable?²¹

A Hare Krishna devotee added that Hare Krishnas protested AEO as well, fearing that the next round of flip-flops will have Krishna's likeness on it.²² Shortly after the successful petition and a protest in front of several retail stores, on April 29, 2003, Vice President and General Counsel for AEO, Neil Bulman, issued a public apology stating:

Pursuant to your request, this letter follows up on the email to you yesterday from our customer service department, which confirmed that American Eagle Outfitters will remove from its stores the flip-flop shoe that include [sic] a likeness of Lord Ganesh (Ganesha).

Our goal at American Eagle Outfitters is to make AE-brand merchandise that is fashionable and affordable for our customers in an inclusive and equitable environment. We value diversity and respect the ideal of freedom of expression of all religious and cultural beliefs.

On behalf of American Eagle Outfitters, please accept this letter as our formal apology for our use of the image resembling Lord Ganesh on this product. Again, this letter confirms that we will remove these flip flop shoes from our stores in order to maintain the good will and our customer relations with the Hindu community.

¹⁹ American Eagle Outfitters targets 15–25 year old girls and guys. It ships to 76 countries worldwide and maintains 929 stores in the U.S. and Canada. American Eagle Outfitters <http://www.ae.com/web/index.jsp> (last accessed May 30, 2011).

²⁰ IndiaCause Facebook <http://www.facebook.com/pages/India-Cause/110923362272524#!/pages/India-Cause/110923362272524?sk=info> (last accessed May 30, 2011). IndiaCause is one of the leading Indian websites for News, Resources, Information, Analysis, and Activism.

²¹ IndiaDivine.org <http://www.indiadinive.org/audarya/spiritual-discussions/32490-shoes-hindu-god-images.html> (last accessed May 30, 2011).

²² IndiaDivine.org (last accessed May 30, 2011).

We appreciate your interest in the AE brand and hope that you will continue to be satisfied customers of American Eagle Outfitters.²³

AHAD notes that this campaign is the fastest-growing protest petition in its history. It gathered more than 4,200 online signatures in 36 hours and 250 signed-signatures on paper.²⁴

Other cases and protests have not been as successful. The lunchbox.com protest, led by Hindu Human Rights, did not receive an apology or a removal of its products from its online store. Instead, when Hindu Human Rights met with D.J. Jayasekara, managing director and designer of lunchbox.com, Jayasekara claimed, "there is a market for these designs," adding that he would ". . . continue to supply that market regardless of the offence . . . [it] causes to Hindus worldwide."²⁵ The lunch boxes are marketed as "bringing beauty and mystery to your mid-day meal with the alluring, but deadly, Kali lunchboxes."²⁶ Hindu and Hindu American complaints against these lunchboxes were based squarely on religious ideology and ethnic-cultural nationalism: 1) the lunch boxes render Hinduism a commodity when Hindus see it as deeply religious and personal; 2) the lunch boxes prorogate and promote religious transgression as Hindus and their gods are vegetarians, but non-Hindus may unknowingly place meat products in the lunchboxes; 3) they feel that this type of mundane and secular appropriation of images of sacred Hindu deities reinforces stereotypes and Orientalizes Hindus and Hindu Americans. On the other hand, there are others who do not view these lunch boxes as deliberate attempts to defame or attack Hinduism per se. Instead, they understand it in strictly capitalistic terms as lunchbox.com's attempt to engage consumers with the "exotic" and the "other."²⁷ "Such marketing tricks aim at shocking and then holding the probable consumer's attention. It is a way of jolting the consumer by providing him the forbidden."²⁸

This controversy illustrates the importance of Hindu icons among self-identified Hindus and Hindu Americans. The visual and material religious culture is expressively connected to the formation of their identities—religious and ethnic—which they perceived as being misappropriated with Ganesha's image on flip-flops. The understanding and verbalization that it is a religious transgression since it encourages

²³ "AHAD Claims Partial Victory in American Eagle Outfitters Flip Flop/Lord Ganesh Depiction Issue" *Hindu Vishwa: Voice of Hindus in North America* 30:2 (April-June 2003).

²⁴ "AHAD Claims Partial Victory in American Eagle Outfitters Flip Flop/Lord Ganesh Depiction Issue" 15.

²⁵ India Divine.org <http://www.indiadinive.org/audarya/hinduism-forum/178773-defamation-against-hindus-around-globe.html> (last accessed May 30, 2011): 15–16.

²⁶ Religion News Blog "Indian Deities, Western Products: Ignorance or Crass Marketing?" <http://www.religionnewsblog.com/9007/indian-deities-western-products-ignorance-or-crass-marketing> (last accessed May 30, 2011).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

the pollution (i.e., feet) of a pure entity (i.e., Ganesha) is telling. Hindus and Hindu Americans understand the act of selling and wearing these flip-flops as a form of colonization of Hinduism and, by extension, their subjectivity and identity by non-Hindus, by capitalism, and by the western world. The Hindu and Hindu American protest against AEO and its victory is an example of acts of decolonization among Hindus both in India and within the diaspora. Moreover, it says something about the logic of capitalism and its attempt to market and sell religion in modern society. A logic that did not take into account the power of ethnic and religious identity, which, employed critically and forcibly, can put capitalism in its place.

McDonald's French Fries

In May 2003 McDonald's settled a law suit with several Hindu and other vegetarian religious and non-religious organizations for misrepresenting their French fries as "vegetarian." This case began in 1990 with Harish Bharti, a vegetarian Hindu American and Seattle-based lawyer, who had the habit of identifying the ingredients in his putatively vegetarian food. During this period, fast food franchises such as McDonald's, Wendy's, and Burger King advertised that they were switching from the use of beef tallow to vegetable oil to fry their foods. Since the new French fries did not taste like the fries cooked in beef tallow, McDonald's added beef flavoring in processing French fries to maintain its popular flavor profile. McDonald's followed U.S. government food guidelines that allowed labeling the new fries as possessing "natural flavor"—which is truthful. However, because of the hype over the switch to vegetable oil for frying, vegetarians assumed that the new and improved fries were "vegetarian." Hence, the accusation of false advertising by McDonald's from its vegetarian customers.

Bharti sued McDonald's in 2001, and that grew into a law suit involving a number of lawyers and vegetarian organizations. Ultimately, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Muslims, vegetarians, and vegans joined the law suit—the Jews because the beef flavoring was not kosher and the Muslims because it was not *halal*. In 2002 McDonald's settled the suit by agreeing to a 10 million dollar settlement and a formal public apology. The apology read, in part,

McDonald's sincerely apologizes to Hindus, vegetarians and others for failing to provide the kind of information they needed to make informed dietary decisions at our U.S. restaurants. We acknowledge that, upon our switch to vegetable oil in the early 1990s for the purpose of reducing cholesterol, mistakes were made in communicating to the public and customers about the ingredients in our French fries and hash browns. Those mistakes

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included instances in which French fries and hash browns sold at U.S. restaurants were improperly identified as “vegetarian.”²⁹

Part of the settlement required that the full apology be printed in *Veggie Life*, *India Tribune*, and *Hinduism Today*. Hindu groups that received a settlement from this lawsuit include: Hindu Students Council (\$500,000); Hinduism Today Endowment (\$250,000); Council of Hindu Temples of North America (\$200,000); Sri Siva Vishnu (SSV) Temple (\$50,000); and International/American Gita Society (\$50,000).³⁰

Some may question the fuss made over McDonald’s French fries having a little coating of beef flavoring. Is the fuss rational? Consider that cows are sacred animals in India, and that Krishna, a beloved and popular Hindu god, is at the center of religious texts that expresses admiration for the cows. In these tales, Krishna is represented as a cow herder. From these tales, Krishna is represented as a *gopala*, which translates to the Lord of Cows.³¹ Krishna is also identified with *govinda*, who is “the one who brings satisfaction to the cows.”³² Shereen Bella notes that “even the popular McDonald’s chain in India carries no beef.”³³ Does cultural acknowledgement and awareness explain the protest against McDonald’s beef-flavored French fries?

Some may argue that the case against McDonald’s is more critical because of the real and immediate religious transgressions that unaware Hindus and Hindu Americans may inadvertently commit should they consume the French fries that are not vegetarian. Even after the lawsuit was settled, McDonald’s continued to coat French fries with beef flavoring. However, the lawsuit reveals something about Hindu and Hindu American subjectivity and agency. It may also be interpreted by some as an act

²⁹ “McDonald’s Fries: Not Done Yet: \$10 Million Settlement—including \$250,000 for Hinduism Today—appealed” *Hinduism Today* <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=3811> (last accessed May 30, 30110)

³⁰ *Hinduism Today* (last accessed May 30, 30110).

Other claimants include Guru Harkrishan Institute of Sikh Studies (\$50,000); Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America (\$450,000); Muslim Consumer Group for Food Products (\$100,000); Jewish Community Centers Association (\$200,000); Star-K/Torah.Org (\$300,000); Orthodox Union (\$150,000); The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life (Hillel) (\$300,000); CLAL (\$50,000); Vegetarian Resource Group (\$1,400,000); North American Vegetarian Society (\$1,000,000); ADAF Vegetarian Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group (\$600,000); Preventive Medicine Research Institute (\$550,000); American Vegan Society (\$500,000); Loma Linda University (\$300,000); Vegetarian Vision, Inc. (\$250,000); Supporting Excellence in Education (\$900,000); Tufts University (\$850,000); Produce for Better Health Foundation (\$500,000); Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (“CDC”) (\$500,000);

An appeal was dismissed in June 2005, and the final disbursement made during the first week of July, 2005.

³¹ Shereen Bella, “Indian Americans: Nature and Animals” *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife*, edited by Jonathan H. X. Lee and Kathleen M. Nadeau. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Press, 2011, pp. 500–501.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

of decolonization, which may be interpreted as, invoking Bataille, a moment of sovereignty in modern life.

Why Things Matter

The Hindu activists discontent with AEO is rooted in the belief that placing one's foot upon the image of a deity is considered extremely disrespectful in the same way their discontent with McDonalds is based upon the belief that the corporation is being insensitive to Hindu religious and cultural sensitivities. The activists are also informed by issues concerning religious piety and the respect for Hinduism which drives the protesters' expressions of ethnic identity and cultural nationalism. Objects with Hindu religious icons matter—or should matter—to us because it is not only about Hinduism per se, or religious transgressions or religious piety. Instead, these things matter because it makes known the power of ethnic identity and cultural nationalism in our modern world. For Hindus and Hindu Americans, as well as for Sikh Americans, Muslim Americans, Christian and Jewish Americans, religious identity and ethnic identity are fused together. The Enlightenment project of progress and movement toward secularization did not account for the growth and centrality of ethnic and religious identity and identity politics. Does this mean that secularization is impossible? Identity is tied to subjectivity: Subjectivity is fundamentally about life and survival. The images of Ganesha on flip-flops or Sri Lakshmi on bikinis and toilet seats are not religious transgressions, but rather, attacks on Hindu and Hindu American identity and subjectivity. Just as the attack on 9/11 is not a religious act, but rather on attack on American identity and subjectivity, that is, the life style that we represent—capitalism. The assassination of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011 is not religious, nor is it an act of revenge, but an act of displaying American identity and subjectivity. These things, in and of themselves, do not symbolize the importance of ethnic and, by extension, religious identity and subjectivity; rather, it is what we do with or to the things that is revealing.

Conclusion

The goal of this article is to question current discourses concerning the relationship between modernity and religion. I draw upon the critiques of modernization by Agamben, Foucault, and Bataille who all argue that modernity has created power structures which use coercion and domination to take away individual autonomy in all areas of life including the marketplace. This critique of modernity, can be challenged by Hindu/Hindu American responses to the (mis)appropriation by corporate America of Hindu deities for the marketing of footwear and corporate marketing of fast-food products which claim to be 'vegetarian' when in fact they are flavored with beef. The success of Hindu/Hindu American organizations in receiving written apologies and financial settlements from corporate America underlines three points: The first point is that the success of Hindu activists in challenging corporate America's insensitivity to their religious values is indicative of a moment in which individuals can indeed exercise

their own authority over the choices they make in the marketplace. The second point is that choices made in the marketplace by both consumers and producers are not shaped purely by the dictates of capitalism but also by religious and cultural issues, especially by ethnic and religious identities. The third, and final point, is that the success of Hindu activists prove that religion is still an influential force in society and that the secularization thesis, which holds that religion will cease to exist in the face of progress and modernity, has failed to be proven correct.