

Subject: Formal Complaint and Request for an Independent Review of “*Lived Hindu Religion*” Course at the University of Houston

To: University of Houston President Renu Khator

Cc: Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost, Diane Z. Chase, and Chairperson, U.H. Board of Regents, Tilman Fertitta

From: Vijendra Agarwal

Date: April 28, 2025

Dear President Khator,

Thank you for the University’s response to my earlier email. It appears that the response was similar, if not the same, to what was sent to the Coalition of Hindus in North America (CoHNA). I appreciate it, but find it unsatisfactory. CoHNA is copied on this email.

I am writing again to **formally file a complaint** about the “*Lived Hindu Religion*” course currently offered at the University of Houston. While I deeply value the principle of academic freedom, I believe this course, in its current form, may **misrepresent key aspects of the Hindu tradition**, introduce political bias, and marginalize the lived perspectives of students and practitioners. These issues raise serious concerns about academic integrity and institutional accountability.

1. Misrepresentation of Hinduism and Civilizational Context

Scholars such as David Lorenzen and Klaus Klostermaier have well-documented that “Hinduism” is a colonial-era term, emerging from Persian mispronunciations of *Sindhu*, a geographic designation (1, 2). The more internally coherent term is *Sanātana Dharma*, which reflects the tradition’s Indigenous, civilizational ethos, grounded in an eternal and pluralistic view of spiritual life.

Unlike Western constructs of religion that center on dogma or singular institutions, *Dharma* encompasses a holistic and experiential framework—philosophical, ethical, and ritualistic. Neglecting these distinctions in instruction, or reducing Hinduism to modern political categories, risks flattening a richly textured tradition into a simplistic narrative.

2. Political Bias, Pedagogical Overreach, and Ideological Framing

A student reports that the course includes statements labeling India’s current Prime Minister as a “Hindu fundamentalist.” While political perspectives can be valid objects of study, **their inclusion without scholarly framing or balanced counterpoints violates pedagogical**

neutrality. These discussions may have a place in courses on contemporary Indian politics but seem misplaced in a religious studies course centered on lived experience. Regardless of political leanings, such assertions, especially when presented without scholarly framing or counterbalance, raise red flags about **ideological bias** in a classroom meant to explore religious practice.

The **American Association of University Professors (AAUP)** advises that:

“Faculty should avoid the persistent intrusion of material that has no relation to the subject, or the use of the classroom to promote a partisan point of view (3).”

Moreover, the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA)** warns that the ideological capture of curriculum content undermines both intellectual rigor and pluralism (4).

3. Student Concerns Dismissed Without Substantive Review/Due Process

What I understand is that a Hindu American student raised concerns about the course’s framing and ideological slant. Based on available communications, the University dismissed the complaint with a vague invocation of “academic freedom.” It appears that the university sidestepped the need for a fair academic review without conducting any content review or consultation with subject-matter experts. This response falls short of institutional responsibility and risks **creating a hostile learning environment** for students from the very tradition the course claims to explore.

The **Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR)** has previously noted that when **instruction marginalizes or misrepresents a religious or ethnic group**, institutions may be subject to review under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Furthermore, the lack of proper action by the university may discourage students from voicing concerns in the future. It may also violate the spirit, if not the letter, of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits exclusion or marginalization based on ethnicity or belief (5).

4. Request for Independent Review

Given the above, I respectfully request once again that the University initiate an **independent academic review** of the “*Lived Hindu Religion*” course. This review could include:

- Distinguished scholars of Hindu traditions, such as Dr. Jeffery D. Long, Elizabethtown College, and Dr. Vasudha Narayanan, University of Florida,
- One or more scholars from institutions such as the **Hindu University of America**, which offers specialized academic courses/training in Dharmic studies,
- Rajiv Malhotra, an ‘*Academic Hinduphobia*’ author and a ‘*Snakes in the Ganga*’ co-author. His scholarship critically examines ideological narratives in academia,
- Members of curriculum oversight boards are trained in academic neutrality and pluralism.

This is not a call for censorship. Rather, it is a call for **academic due process and integrity**. A religious studies course titled "*Lived Hindu Religion*" should represent a balanced, respectful, and informed exploration of its subject, not an ideological critique masquerading as scholarship.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I respectfully request a written acknowledgment of this complaint and an outline of how the University intends to proceed. Dr. Khator, time is of the essence because the matter needs resolution with urgency.

Thank you.

Citations:

1. Lorenzen, David N. *Who Invented Hinduism?*, New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006.
2. Klostermaier, Klaus K. *A Survey of Hinduism*, 3rd ed., SUNY Press, 2007.
3. American Association of University Professors. *Statement on Professional Ethics*, 2009.
<https://www.aaup.org/report/statement-professional-ethics>
4. ACTA. *Civic Disengagement and the Erosion of Academic Freedom*, 2023.
<https://www.goacta.org>
5. U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. *Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964*, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/hq43e4.html>