



American Hindus Against Defamation (AHAD) *an initiative of HinduPACT*



(This report utilizes Samya in Hindu News by [American Hindus Against Defamation \(AHAD\)](#), technology provided by [tattwa.ai](#))

This is AHAD's response to the Southern Poverty Law Center Series: Hindu Supremacy in the United States interview of [Hindu Supremacy: Biju Mathew and Karthikeyan Shanmugam](#).

Published Jan 5, 2025

Debunking Myths About Hindu dharma and Caste in the U.S.: A Balanced Perspective

Abstract

A recent interview published by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) highlighted concerns about caste discrimination in Hindu communities in the United States, equating these structures with supremacist ideologies. The interview, featuring Biju Mathew of India Civil Watch International and Karthikeyan Shanmugam of Ambedkar King Study Circle, emphasized the need for anti-caste legislation and criticized Hindu organizations' responses to these initiatives. This article explores the original claims, provides a counter-narrative grounded in evidence from the CISCO legal case, the Carnegie Endowment report, and the NCRI analysis, and argues for a more nuanced understanding of Hindu dharma and its evolving role in global and diaspora contexts.

Introduction

Hindu dharma, with its diverse philosophies and practices, is often misunderstood and oversimplified in global discourse. A recent SPLC feature draws parallels between caste structures in Hindu communities and supremacist ideologies, calling for stronger legislative action against alleged caste discrimination in the U.S. While addressing discrimination is a worthy goal, this narrative often ignores historical and modern reforms within Hindu society, as well as evidence questioning the prevalence of caste-based discrimination in the Indian-American diaspora. This article examines these claims and presents a comprehensive counter-narrative grounded in facts and evidence.

Original Claims: Caste and Supremacy

In the SPLC interview, Biju Mathew and Karthikeyan Shanmugam argue that caste hierarchies within Hindu communities mirror white supremacist structures, asserting that these divisions manifest as discrimination in the U.S. workplace and society. They advocate for legislation addressing caste discrimination, claiming Hindu organizations resist such measures due to ideological biases. While the interview highlights the need for civil rights activism, it also portrays Hindu organizations as uniformly opposed to progress, simplifying the issue's complexity. Furthermore, it assumes that caste dynamics from South Asia are directly translatable to the U.S., a claim increasingly contested by legal and academic evidence.

Counter-Narrative: Addressing Misconceptions

Caste in the U.S.: Facts and Context

1. **The CISCO Case** A landmark lawsuit by California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) against two Indian-American engineers at CISCO alleged caste-based discrimination. However, in 2023, the California Superior Court dismissed the case against the individuals, citing insufficient evidence. The ruling underscores the challenges in proving caste discrimination in the U.S., where caste is not a legally defined category and its relevance is often extrapolated from South Asian contexts without clear evidence.
2. **Carnegie Endowment Report** The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in a report by Milan Vaishnav and colleagues, surveyed Indian-Americans on issues including caste. The findings challenge the narrative of systemic caste discrimination:
 - o Caste identities exist but do not significantly drive exclusion or discrimination in U.S. social or professional settings.
 - o The report emphasizes the diversity of Indian-American experiences and warns against generalizing caste dynamics from South Asia to the diaspora.
3. **NCRI Report** The Network Contagion Research Institute (NCRI) analyzed social media discourse around caste and found that politically motivated narratives often amplify claims of widespread discrimination. The report highlights that much of this discourse lacks substantiated evidence, relying instead on anecdotal incidents to generalize a perception of systemic caste oppression.

Hindu dharma's Core Philosophy: Unity and Progress

At its essence, Hindu dharma promotes unity and inclusivity. Concepts like 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (the world is one family) and the teachings of texts like the Bhagavad Gita emphasize virtues and actions over birth-based distinctions. Historically, caste, or 'varna,' was a flexible system tied to occupations, which over time became rigid and hierarchical due to societal changes. Modern Hindu reform movements, inspired by figures like Swami Vivekananda and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, have worked tirelessly to dismantle these rigidities and align social practices with Hindu dharma's core values.

The Role of Hindu Organizations in the U.S.

The SPLC interview critiques Hindu organizations for allegedly resisting anti-caste measures. However, many Hindu organizations in the U.S. actively promote inclusivity and equality:

- **Support for Anti-Discrimination Efforts:** American Hindu organizations have expressed support for broader civil rights protections, including measures to address workplace discrimination.
- **Community Development Initiatives:** Hindu temples and cultural organizations often engage in interfaith dialogues, charitable activities, and educational programs to foster mutual respect and understanding.

The depiction of these groups as "supremacist" dismisses their contributions and marginalizes voices that advocate for fairness in legislative approaches to caste issues.

Critical Reflection on Caste Legislation

Efforts to legislate caste-based discrimination in the U.S., while well-intentioned, risk creating unintended consequences:

1. **Misidentification of Caste:** Many Americans, including Indian Americans, lack a clear understanding of caste's cultural and historical nuances, leading to the potential misapplication of such laws.
2. **Unsubstantiated Accusations:** Without robust evidence, accusations of caste discrimination can stigmatize entire communities and reinforce stereotypes.

3. **Legal Precedents:** The CISCO case demonstrates the difficulty in translating caste frameworks to the U.S. legal system, raising questions about the viability of such legislation.

Addressing Bias and Misinformation

Both the Carnegie and NCRI reports highlight how misinformation about caste discrimination is often amplified in media and public discourse. These narratives:

- Ignore the diversity of Indian-American experiences.
- Generalize isolated incidents into claims of systemic oppression.
- Undermine genuine efforts by Hindu and Indian communities to promote inclusivity.

Constructive dialogue, informed by evidence and context, is essential to addressing caste-related concerns without perpetuating bias or stereotyping.

Conclusion: Towards Inclusivity and Understanding

Hindu dharma's journey is one of continuous reform and introspection. From ancient sages to modern reformers like Dr. Ambedkar, the tradition has evolved to challenge inequalities and align social practices with its spiritual values. In the diaspora, American Hindu communities continue to build on this legacy, fostering inclusivity and contributing positively to their societies.

The claims of systemic caste discrimination in the U.S., as discussed in the SPLC interview, are not supported by robust evidence. The legal outcome of the CISCO case, the Carnegie report, and the NCRI analysis collectively challenge the narrative of pervasive caste-based oppression among Indian-Americans. Recognizing these complexities is crucial for fostering a balanced understanding of Hindu dharma and the Indian-American experience.

By moving beyond misconceptions and embracing evidence-based discussions, we can honor the rich diversity of Hindu dharma and support genuine efforts toward equality and justice.