

# Hinduism Misinterpreted

## Encyclopædia Britannica insults Hinduism

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This article will highlight some of the misinterpretations of Hinduism in Encyclopædia Britannica, many of which are very offending to any Hindu reader and those who know and respect Hinduism. The author has based this article on the contents of [1]. Text quoted from *Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Student and Home Edition* is in *slanted red* typeface. In the following lines an argument is presented, which shows and questions the biased intentions of a popular reference source like Encyclopædia Britannica. Information conveyed by an encyclopedia should be unbiased, impartial, based on facts, true to the greatest extent, and not anybody's personal opinion. In this light, the article on Hinduism in Encyclopædia Britannica has been examined. The absurd choice of contributors of an article on Hinduism by the authorities of Encyclopædia Britannica will also be analysed. It is felt that Britannica's article on Hinduism is written in a sense that ill-disposes a reader towards Hinduism, whereas this is not the case with Britannica's articles on other religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. After thought and analysis, I have been left with an impression which can be best summarized in the following question: **Why is Encyclopædia Britannica hostile towards Hinduism?**

A Master's level physics text written in English can be read, at least most part of it, by a person who has a Bachelor's in English. But reading a text does not mean that it has been understood! To understand such a text on physics, at least one is required to have adequate knowledge of physics. Generally, a linguist is not a physicist. In this sense, what this person (who does not know physics) would infer from a physics text cannot be relied upon, and of course, before his or her findings are published, they have to be scrutinized. Religion is based on belief, and reliable information on any particular religion can be conveyed by a person who believes in it, has good knowledge about it, and therefore realises it. Authorities of Encyclopædia Britannica had forgotten this fact when they had to publish about Hinduism, but they had well-remembered it when they had to publish material on Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. On the one hand they have chosen people like Rev. Henry Chadwick to write on Christianity, Fazlur Rahman, an *alim*, to write on Islam, and Rabbi Lou Hackett Silberman to write on Judaism, and on the other hand they have chosen Wendy Doniger, who is criticised for her negative portrayals of Hinduism ([2],[3]), as a writer and editor of Hinduism. From the stated writers or editors of Hinduism in Encyclopædia Britannica ([1]), none of them is a Hindu, or of Indian origin, or a holder of Hindu scholarship, e.g. an *acharya*. To write on Christianity, Encyclopædia Britannica chose a Reverend (a priest of the Christian church), for Islam, an *alim* (a Muslim learned in religious matters) was selected, to describe Judaism, a Rabbi (a religious leader and teacher in the Jewish religion) was opted, but for information on Hinduism they had to choose people who have been criticised by Hindus and academia. Why has Encyclopædia Britannica been partial in its choice on religious matters?

The lengthy article on Hinduism (approx.

51 000 words) in Encyclopædia Britannica ([1]), does not depict Hinduism in a positive manner, in general. It looks more of a critique of Hinduism, where several concepts—fairly clear to an average Hindu—have been predicted as tensions and confusions. Britannica has misrepresented the concept and message of Hinduism, and Hindu values have been disparaged. The articles on Christianity, Islam, and Judaism have been written in a very good sense, and the evils of these religions have been subjugated by the way of presentation of those themes. In almost every section of [1], unnecessary contradictions and tensions have been mentioned with exaggeration. Why? It seems that the ambition of Encyclopædia Britannica is to show Hinduism inferior to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, but even then the question is: Why?

Britannica disrespects more than 800 million Hindus by publishing mendacious statements about their religion. Some of these statements are extremely false, concocted, and rude. How painful they are to a Hindu heart, there is no account of that. About Lord Krishna, who is respected and revered by all Hindus, the article says ([1]):

*Krishna was worshipped with his adulterous consort, Radha.*

According to reputed dictionaries [4] and [5], the word *adulterous* is related to *adultery*, and *adultery* refers to sex between a married man or woman and someone who is not their wife or husband. *Consort* means an *associate* ([5]). Neither through Hindu history nor through any reliable Hindu belief it can be stated that Lord Krishna had an illicit sexual relationship with Radha. They are symbols of pure divine love. How could the writers of this text, Arthur Llewellyn Basham, J. A. B. van Buitenen, and Wendy Doniger publish such nonsense? How could authorities of Britannica allow this menace to Hindu belief?

Instead of mentioning the exemplary virtues of Lord Ram and Lord Krishna, their righteousness has been critically examined. Moreover, insane and illusionary fiction has been presented as a fact. In [1], it is stated:

*The story of Rama, like that of Krishna, also has a shadowy side.*

and

*The benevolence and beneficial activity of these figures (Rama, Krishna, et al.) is, however, occasionally in doubt. Vishnu often acts deceitfully, selfishly, or helplessly; . . .*

And then starts the critical examination of virtues of Lord Ram, Lord Krishna, and Lord Vishnu. Is criticism the job of an encyclopedia? The sole task of the writers of [1] was to tarnish the image of Hinduism, its principles, its beliefs, its revered. Has Britannica examined the shadowy sides of Jesus, Mohammad, or Abraham?

The preposterous imagination of the writers of [1] has presented an unacceptable statement which shows their lack of knowledge of Sanskrit language and Hinduism, past and present. The compound word *shivlingam* is composed of words *shiv* and *lingam*. Here *shiv* means Lord Shiv, and *lingam* means symbol. Therefore, *shivlingam* means the symbol of Shiv. *Shivlingam* is known to all Hindus as a symbol of Lord Shiv. In Sanskrit language, it is common that one word has two or more meanings. Reference [6] provides more than 10 meanings of the word *lingam*. I state two other meanings: 1) gender, and 2) the male sex organ. Suppose a Sanskrit language student is asked to fill a medical form in Sanskrit. There it is required to tick or cross the box called *lingam*. Common sense says that in the form to be filled, the word *lingam* means gender. It would not make any sense to adapt the second meaning (male sex organ) for this purpose, certainly not for female applicants. To clarify further, an example from English language will be discussed. In English language, the word PETER can be used in at least three different ways ([4]). PETER can mean: 1) name of a person, 2) to gradually stop or disappear, and 3) a penis. What would it mean if you ask a person, "Are you PETER?"? The answer is obvious, and so is the meaning of *shivlingam*. In [1], it is stated:

*Yet another epiphany is that of the lingam, an upright rounded post, usually of stone, representing a phallus, in which form he is worshipped throughout India.*

and

*One of the most common objects of worship, whether in temples or in the household cult, is the lingam (phallus). Often much stylized and representing the cosmic pillar, it emanates its all-producing energy to the four quarters of the universe. As the symbol of male creative energy it is frequently combined with its female counterpart (yoni), the latter forming the base from which the lingam rises.*

Symbols can be given many meanings, but not all are accepted meanings. The accepted meaning of *shivlingam* is the *the symbol of Shiv*, and not the phallus. It is weird that the foundation on which the *shivlingam* rests could look like a vagina to the writers of [1]. The meaning of *shivlingam* as asserted by Britannica is not accepted by Hindus, then why has Britannica misinformed the reader, and hurt Hindus worldwide? Encyclopedia is not a stage to display insanity. The authors of [1] should restrict their epiphany only to themselves. If *shivlingam* represents a phallus then all cylindrical objects like pens or lipsticks represent a phallus.

The article does not hesitate to mention Hindu "killing" people of other religions, but it never mentions that Hindus were brutally massacred by people of other religions. At this point, three excerpts from [1] have been quoted in the following lines.

*From time to time Hindus, especially Shaivites, took aggressive action against Buddhism. At least two Shaivite kings—the Hephthalite invader Mihirakula (early 6th century) and the Bengal king Sasanka (early 7th century)—are reported to have destroyed monasteries and killed monks.*

and

*These strands converged at the end of the 20th century in a campaign to destroy the mosque built in 1528 by a lieutenant of the Mughal emperor Babur in Ayodhya, a city that has traditionally been identified as the place where Rama was born and ruled. In 1992 Hindu militants from all over India, who had been organized by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP; "World Hindu Council"), the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS; "National Volunteer Alliance"), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP; "Indian People's Party"), destroyed the mosque in an effort to "liberate" Rama and establish a huge "Rama's Birthplace Temple" on the spot. In the aftermath, several thousand people—mostly Muslims—were killed in riots that spread across North India.*

and

*It is hardly the case that Muslim rule was generally loathsome to Hindus.*

In [1], there is no mention of genocide of Hindus and demolition of Hindu temples by the Mughals [7], or sabotage of Hindu schools (*gurukuls*) during the British rule. Did Muslims, Christians, or Jews inflict any acts of ethnic cleansing ever? According to the articles of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in Encyclopædia Britannica—No! There is no mention of Hindu suffering during the Mughal empire, neither in the article on Hinduism ([1]) nor in the article on Islam ([8]) in Britannica. In recent affairs, as the 1992 Ayodhya episode has been mentioned, there is no mention of hundreds of thousands of Kashmiri Hindus who have been forced to leave their homeland by Islamic militants ([9],[10]). Ethnic cleansing of Hindus is not an issue for Britannica. If one consults an encyclopedia to know about a religion, then he or she is interested in the concept of the religion. Other details, as

stated above in this paragraph, are not required. Still, if Britannica wants to publish such material then the publishing should be fair, and all religions should be treated in the same way. But this is not the case! In Britannica's article on Judaism ([11]), the atrocities imposed on Jews have been well-mentioned. Given below is a text from [11].

*In the 20th century, particularly after the events symbolized by Auschwitz (a Nazi death camp in Poland, where approximately one million Jews were killed)*

...

The struggle of Hindus in surviving the attacks of Muslim invaders in the past, and the present day pain of Kashmiri Hindus has not been mentioned anywhere by Britannica. Do Hindus feel pain without pain?

There is no good mention of good deeds of Hindus or Indians in Britannica's article. It seems that Britannica wants to make sure that no Hindu feels proud after reading about his or her religion in Britannica, and people who would like to know about Hinduism from Britannica get the worst possible impression about Hinduism. The wisdom of Hindu thought has been kept in dark by Britannica, forget highlighting it. Words are very playful, little adjustment and toning can make a great difference. The language used to write Hinduism in Britannica is English but this English has a different "sense" than the English used to write Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The editors of [1] have ridiculed Hinduism. They have mentioned, to a great extent maligned, Hindu history with such confidence as if they were witnessing the events themselves. Britannica's article ([1]) talks about one of the greatest spiritual orders in the world—Hinduism—but there is no reference to spirituality in a spiritual way. Britannica has well propagated the essence of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, but in case of Hinduism, it has not. As an example of usage of language, an excerpt from Britannica's article on Islam ([8]) has been stated.

*In Baghdad the tomb of the greatest saint of all, 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, is visited every year by large numbers of pilgrims from all over the Muslim world.*

In the above mentioned excerpt, the phrase: *the greatest saint of all*, sounds very positive. There is nothing wrong in stating your beliefs with pride, especially when it is a presentation of your core, your culture, your true self. But Britannica did not give Hindus a chance to present their religion, and the ones who were given the privilege to speak, have vilified and traduced Hinduism.

Mahatma Gandhi is called *father of the nation* by Indians. About present-day obedience of his teachings, Britannica says ([1]):

*Although the memory of Gandhi continues to be revered by most Indians, his policies and principles carry little weight. The great bulk of social service*

*is performed by government agencies rather than by voluntary bodies, whether Gandhian or other.*

From the above mentioned statement what does one learn about Hinduism? The statement is not required at all in an encyclopedia article on Hinduism. Though it would be interesting to know if Britannica had conducted a nation wide survey in India to find out to what extent are Gandhi's policies followed there. There are many organizations in India (too many to name) that have been inspired by Gandhi and are propagating his policies and principles even today. There are many Indian non-governmental organizations that conduct considerable social service, esp. at the time of national calamities. Indians have generously donated to the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF) to help humanity. I fail to comprehend on what grounds Britannica has made these claims. At this point, it should be added that Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS; "National Volunteer Alliance") that has been termed as a "militant" organization by Britannica, is very much respected in India and is known for its social services. If it would have been a militant organization then it would have been permanently banned by the Indian court of law. Fundamental nature of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS; "National Volunteer Alliance") has been elaborated in [1] but there no mention in [1] or [8], how the want for an only-Muslim state led to the partition of India. This resulted in the creation of Islamic state of Pakistan in 1947. Does not this show the intolerant face of Islam? One can say that there is no need criticise a religion in an encyclopedia article about it. Fine, but this rule should be applied equally to all religions. Britannica has failed to do this.

The Christian church has been very well mentioned in Britannica's article on Christianity. In [12], an entire section with subsections has been written on *Church and social welfare*. It is mentioned how the Christian church has healed the sick, taken care of widows and orphans, and done good to society. Article [12] also elaborates Christian beliefs in charity and prosperity of all. Some excerpts from [12] are mentioned below.

*The Christian church has responded to the matter of human illness both by caring for and healing the sick and by expressing concern for them.*

and

*In the early church, the care of the sick was carried out by the deacons and widows under the leadership of the bishop. This service was not limited to members of the Christian congregation but was directed toward the larger community, particularly in times of pestilence and plague.*

and

*The Christian congregation has traditionally cared for the poor, the sick, widows, and orphans.*

In the above mentioned lines there is nothing to impugn; it is generally true. The contrast is

striking when one reads Britannica's view on Hinduism. There is no mention of the social work done by Hindu organizations, e.g. provision of free schooling and medical care, helping the needy, etc. There are many temples in India that offer all visitors a complete meal for free, but writers of [1] are blind to see the good done by Hindu organizations and temples. In everything they have tried to find a sexual angle. What was guiding them? About Hindu temples, all they have to mention is erotic art of Khajurao, where they have once again misinterpreted the details, and not to mention again, they have ridiculed Hindu customs and beliefs with their false assertions. In strict sense, the term *devadasis*, is used for a lady who has surrendered herself to God. About them [1] states:

*The god's handmaidens (devadasis) performed before him at regular intervals, watched by the officiants and lay worshipers, who were his courtiers. These women, either the daughters of devadasis or girls dedicated in childhood, may have also served as prostitutes. The association of dedicated prostitutes with certain Hindu shrines can be traced back to before the Christian era.*

Are these words trying to prove the connection between Hindu shrines and prostitution? Several cases of sexual abuse and sex scandals concerning Christian clergy have been exposed ([13],[14],[15]). Does [12] mention these cases? Of course, not! Well, these things are not "religion" and need not to be mentioned in an encyclopedia article on religion. But is it fair that when Britannica mentions Hinduism, it spurts whatever ugly it feels, and when it mentions Christianity, it hides whatever ugly it wants?

In the lines above, only a few of the many objectionable statements of [1] have been mentioned and analysed. In general, Britannica's article on Hinduism ([1]) is absolutely deplorable. The intention of my work is not to encourage religious rivalry. This writing is about Hinduism; it does not intend to show other religions in bad light. It was the reprehensible treatment of Hindu sentiments by Britannica that inspired this work. Academia and related works should endorse equality of all religions. Encyclopædia Britannica has been very unjust and despicable in its writing on Hinduism. This can be felt very strongly by anyone who knows about Hinduism. Comparison of Britannica's articles on Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism explicitly asserts that it has treated Hinduism unevenly and abhorrently. It is strongly needed that Britannica replaces its mal-information about Hinduism with information and facts that are true, honest, and in which Hindus believe. After all, it is about their belief. Only in this way religion, which is based on belief, can be interpreted with the belief that it is truly interpreted and not maliciously misinterpreted.

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