The Final Sacrifice:
A Dead “Hindu,” A Missing Body, and a $10 Million Dollar Life-Insurance Policy

Deepak Sarma
Department of Religious Studies, 111 Mather House, 11201 Euclid Avenue, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH 44106-7112
deeak.sarma@case.edu

Abstract
Sarma explores the legal and religious challenges that face both Diaspora “Hindus” as well as the judiciary system in the United States. He does so by examining issues that he encountered while working as an expert consultant in 2005. Linking the complexities of the case of the “Final Sacrifice” with current methodological controversies in “Hindu” studies, Sarma shows that there may be much more than merely a body that is missing.

Keywords
Hindu, Hindus, Hinduism, Hindu Diaspora, religion and law

Introduction
When asked if I could be an expert witness for a case involving “Hinduism,” my first concern was that I was to represent an imaginary religious tradition that has no set doctrines, beliefs, or practices. How was I to claim epistemic authority when there is no such generic or monolithic form of Hinduism about which I could generalize? What principles would I have to jettison if I were to be an expert witness? Rather than being an upholder of dharma (justice) would I be a mere perjurer, falsely claiming authority in what is only a chimera?

What was already turning out to be a financial windfall was also becoming a methodological gold mine! Little did I know that the entire case itself revolved around the ambiguity in the range of practices that are classified under the contrived term “Hinduism” and that the complexities of the case would raise methodological issues that are relevant in the discipline of “Hindu” studies and Indology.
To this end, I will begin with an analysis of the term “Hindu.” Next I will offer a summary of the basic points of the case as they pertain to the methodological issues to which I referred. After exploring the extenuating and controversial circumstances of the case, I then shed light on the theological, methodological, and judicial problems generated.1

But first, what is “Hinduism”? And, how can I possibly deny its existence when more than 750 million people are categorized as, or self-identify, as “Hindus”?

“Hinduism”: An Empty Category

Though “Hinduism” is often heralded as the “oldest religion,” it is possible to argue convincingly that it is among the youngest of the world’s religions. This claim, which at first glance seems implausible, is justifiable if one examines the history of the invention of the term “Hindu” itself and its original uses.2

Students in introductory courses to Hinduism are often surprised to learn that Hinduism does not have a founder as does Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. They are even more surprised to learn that Persians first used the term “Hindu” and, moreover, that they used it as a geographical, rather than a religious, term. In the singular the term referred “to the country through which the Indus [river] flows,” while in the plural it referred to the people who inhabited this land.3 The term slowly evolved (devolved?) into a religious one when it was used by Muslims, by Christian missionaries, by British colonizers, and later appropriated by colonized “Hindu” reformers such as Rammohan Roy.4 Consequently the term has developed a life of its own, outside the imagination of its first creators and, ironically, has become the means by which the majority of “Hindus” self-identify.

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2 This section on the origin of the term “Hindu” has appeared in “Hindu Leaders in North America?” in Teaching Theology and Religion, 9-2, (2006), pp 115-120.
