"Hindu Mythology" is not Mythology:

The Purāṇas in the Context of Dharma

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Abstract

The limitations of the concept of "religion" are evidenced in the use of the term "Hindu mythology" to refer to the Purāṇas of Hinduism. A more inclusive schema of "dharma" allows for the Purāṇas to be understood outside of the Eurocentric categories of religion, mythology, and philosophy. This reclamation of the Purāṇas through the concept of dharma is an effective intervention in resisting colonial legacies.

Key Words

Religion, mythology, Hinduism, Hindu mythology, Purāṇas/Puranas, Hindu religion, dharma, postcolonialism.

The origin of the word "religion" and its development demonstrate the challenges of understanding its meaning today. Its history of exclusivity and current inability to include the many existing supernatural or spiritual beliefs evidence its limitations as an all-encompassing term for any type of metaphysical, spiritual, or theological practice. This is revealed in the widespread use of "Hindu mythology" to refer to the Purāṇas of Hinduism. Building on existing scholarship regarding the trinary relation among religion, secularism, and superstition, in this paper I argue that a similar Eurocentric conceptual schema defines the relation between religion

and mythology today.[1] In place of religion, I offer a more inclusive term, dharma, which allows the Purāṇas the freedom to be understood outside of the Eurocentric categories of religion, mythology, and philosophy. Relying broadly on postcolonial methodologies, I argue that reclaiming the Purāṇas in relation to the category of dharma makes an effective intervention in resisting colonial legacies.[2]

I. Background: Religion and Dharma

The concept of religion is incapable of encompassing the diverse theological and spiritual practices of the world, evidenced by its history and development. The word "religion" is limiting and exclusive, since "religion is not a universal entity but a culturally specific category that took shape among Christian-influenced Euro-American intellectuals and missionaries."[3] Prior to the 7th century (i.e., before the birth of Islam), Christianity had little contact with other traditions that it did not deem simply as "pagan" and therefore did not require a term to discuss religion in the sense that it is known today. The Protestant Reformation and subsequent split in Christianity led to a political need to describe the resulting plurality of Christian practices. As a result, the term "religion" came to be used to describe the type of Christianity one followed.[4] Later, as the two other Abrahamic traditions came to be seen as "legitimate," the definition of "religion" expanded to encompass four kinds of religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and

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[1] The trinary relationship that I reference is founded upon Jason Ānanda Josephson's work in *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. This was originally published under the name Jason Ānanda Josephson, which is how I cite it in the bibliography, but I refer to him as Josephson-Storm in the text, which is the name under which he currently publishes.
[2] Spivak.
[3] Josephson-Storm, 14.
[4] Griffiths.

paganism.[5] Any other belief that we today consider as "religion" fell under this last category.[6] Griffith explains that "the idea that there is a genus called 'religion' of which there are many species did not gain much currency until the seventeenth century. It is, by and large, a modern invention."[7]

While non-Abrahamic traditions now fall under the classification of religion, these practices are still understood through a Christian lens. Religion "is a fundamentally Eurocentric term that always functions, no matter how well disguised, to describe a perceived similarity to European Christianity."[8] The criteria upon which traditions are judged are largely based upon the structure of Christianity. For example, the absence of a god in Buddhism, the idea of eternal truth in Jainism, the lack of authorship or origination of Hinduism, the unavailability of any official doctrine or scriptures of Daoism, etc. are all interpreted as "shortcomings" or "missing pieces" of these traditions that ~~now~~ lead to the questioning of their validity. This study generally avoids the term "religion." Instead, I propose to replace its exclusive and limiting nature of religion with the concept of dharma.

The concept of religion fails in regard to the Purāṇas because the deeply philosophical nature of the Purāṇas renders them ill-fitting under the limitations of what is deemed as the "Hindu religion." However, they can be classified under the field of "Hindu dharma," a more culturally authentic term that proves effective in understanding the Purāṇas as not simply "Hindu mythology."[9] The term dharma originates from the Sanskrit root of *dhr*, which means to hold or bind together. The etymology of dharma emerges from South Asia and is employed in Hinduism,

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[5] Josephson-Storm, 33.
[6] Masuzawa.
[7] Griffiths.
[8] Josephson-Storm, 23.
[9] Because, in what follows, I am arguing that dharma is an inclusive category that can (and has been) used cross-culturally, I am not italicizing it or otherwise marking it as "foreign."

Jainism, and Buddhism. The meaning of dharma connotes universal or natural laws that include ritual practices and social order; essentially, dharma is understood as the nature of a thing. For example, the dharma of fire is to burn and cause burning, or the dharma of ice is to be cold and to cause cooling.[10] It is important to note that dharma is always understood in context, and can therefore vary accordingly, as seen in the changing dharmas that correspond to the various phases of a person's life. The dharma of a person in their brahmacharya (student) stage of life would be to attend school, learn knowledge from their teacher, focus on honing skills, etc. Thus, dharma connotes a right way of being, which is not the same for everyone or everything. Reflecting its sense of right correspondence and order, dharma is heavily context dependent. Adharma is the opposite of dharma, so there may be a wrong way or an incorrect way, but one dependent on context. The universality of dharma is in its potential to be used cross-culturally without doing conceptual damage to other traditions, because it is such an overarching, largely-encompassing concept.

The intention is not to translate or substitute dharma for "religion"; my aim here is not to replace English words with Sanskrit equivalents as pushback against Western ways of thinking. Though in recent times, dharma is often translated as "religion," the two are not synonymous, for dharma encompasses more than the term "religion" can. Rather, dharma is offered as an entirely new concept in lieu of religion to understand better the nature of the Purāṇas without the rigidity of Eurocentric concepts. Within the constraining boundaries of religion, the Purāṇas can only be classified as mythology. The idea of religion requires slicing other traditions to fit its definition (which is largely dictated by the structure of Christianity), regardless of context. In the West, philosophy and religion have long been viewed as separate, different, and opposite. For example,

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[10] Goenka.

Western scholarship on Daoism conventionally divides the tradition into types: the so-called religious Daoism and the ostensibly philosophical Daoism, though ample scholarly disagreement exists about whether such distinctions are consistent with division of thought in the tradition itself, if there even is a difference.[11] Similarly, the lens of religion forces a division between so-called Hindu religion, mythology, and philosophy when the three are all intricately intertwined and do not require distinction. They are not so easily separated, as evidenced by the very nature of the Purāṇas: a set of texts containing stories both real and historical that disseminate philosophical knowledge while inspiring devotion to religious figures.

Utilizing dharma is not only more inclusive, but it also helps bridge the Eurocentric distinctions among philosophy, religion, and mythology that has been projected onto the Hindu context. The encompassing concept of dharma is required to demonstrate that the Purāṇas cannot be simplified or categorized as "Hindu mythology" precisely because its flexibility allows for concepts like philosophy, religion, and narratives such as the Purāṇas, to coexist without need for distinction. Thus, given the confines of religion and the inclusivity of dharma, the goal of this study is to create an alternate framework for understanding the Purāṇas, utilizing a post-colonial approach to address the misuse of the word "mythology" to describe the Purāṇas. This alternate framework is dharma. I do note, however, that contemporary Hindi uses the term "dharma" to translate the English word "religion." Accordingly, the term, "Hindu dharma" is used to refer to the "Hindu religion" today by many Hindu followers. My contention here is that dharma is the larger category, which includes not only Hindu dharma but indeed "religion" as well.

II. "Hindu Mythology"

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[11] Littlejohn.

Just as the boundaries of religion render the Purāṇas as mythological, so limitations of the English language mistakenly translate the Purāṇas into "Hindu mythology." Though the Purāṇas were initially composed in Sanskrit, they were all translated into the major Indian languages, the vernacular languages used by the people to pass onto their families. Now, these stories told through children's storybooks have also been translated into English. To articulate the connection between the thought of these stories as mythological—with the translation of the Purāṇas as "Hindu mythology"—I conducted empirical and theoretical research. I read children's storybooks, which are the most common written form to share the Purāṇas. The storybooks are a simplified version of the Purāṇas that are geared toward sharing the stories of the gods and goddesses to young Hindus as an easy and accessible way for them to learn about their tradition. These are stories that I heard from my grandparents and from books I had read as a child, so I am well-versed in these narratives. This time, in rereading and closely analyzing these books, I searched for the tension between the Purāṇas themselves and the way the authors explained their extrapolated body of literature. The children's books that I selected were stories of some of the main gods and goddesses: Ganesha, Vishnu, Krishna, Devi, and Shiva. This research yielded the popularity of the use of "mythology" in all of the storybooks as the descriptor for the tales about the deities.

These findings informed the next step in my research: interviews with local Hindu-Americans in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, with ages ranging from fourteen to ninety years. That dialogue sought to enhance understanding of the perspectives, opinions, and knowledge that the Hindu community outside of India possesses about a host of topics on the religion with which they identify. Specifically, the goal of the interviews was that of gathering knowledge on the associations between Purāṇas and mythology as understood by Hindu-Americans. The choice of

translating "Purāṇas" into "mythology" has deep implications, often not understood by the translators or the English-speaking Hindu community that absorbs and then utilizes the translations. Among thirty interviews, seven people said that they would not describe the stories of the gods and goddesses as mythology while six people said that they would. Three people said that these stories are both mythology and not mythology. Others mentioned that they are "kind of" mythological, maybe mythological, and not necessarily mythological. One interviewee declared that it is not applicable to describe the stories as mythological. However, the responses of describing the Purāṇas as mythology are different. Out of twenty interviews, seven people said that the stories are not mythological, and five people said that they are. Two interviewees answered that the stories are both mythological and not. One person said that they could be mythological, but that they do not know. Five interviewees did not answer because they did not know what the Purāṇas were. The associations between the Purāṇas and Hindu mythology were not as easy to decipher from the interviews as they were in the storybooks.

What became apparent was the general agreement about the importance of the Purāṇas. Every interviewee described the purpose of the Purāṇic stories as that of imparting values and morals of the Hindu dharma. While there were acknowledgements to the significance of the stories as being other than that of imparting lessons of the Hindu dharma, every person in some way mentioned that these stories were meant to pass down important principles. Many of the interviewees described these principles or morals as generally being "life lessons." Some of the interviewees who seemed to understand the more subtle nature of the Purāṇas explained that they seek to convey the teachings from the Upanishads. The Upanishads are part of the Hindu scriptural texts that contain the philosophy of the Hindu dharma. As one interviewee put it, "The

Purāṇas try to tell stories which try to simplify [the Upanishads] so we can implement it into our day-to-day lives."

To grasp the reasoning behind possible descriptors of the Purāṇas as mythological, I asked the interviewees if they believed the stories to be real. The most popular answer was both "yes and no." Four interviewees said they believed the stories were real while two said they did not. Three interviewees mentioned that asking about the reality of the stories was not applicable, and two said that they could reflect real events while one said that they did not know if the stories were real or not. A majority of interviewees mentioned that they do believe in the reality of stories to some extent, so it seems contradictory that stories that constitute a reality for a majority of the world's population, followers of the Hindu dharma, are classified and referred to as "Hindu mythology." Upon receiving these answers, I asked the participants to define "mythology" to gain an idea of how they understood the meaning of the word. They all had varying answers, which then influenced their decisions on how to categorize the Purāṇic stories. Seven people defined mythology simply as stories, not related to truth or historicity. Ten people mentioned "fictional," "made-up," and "not truth" in their definitions of mythology. However, and interestingly enough, people changed their understanding of mythology in relation to "Indian mythology." As one interviewee explained, "mythology, for me, is made-up stories. But when I used to refer to Indian mythology, I didn't refer to it as made-up stories. But it just seemed to be the perfect word." Four interviewees understood mythology as being a mix of truth and fiction: "Mythology to me is a mix of truly made-up stories, but also mixed with probably and often real-life stories that had significant importance for some event or in some period of time that then took on much larger than life status to teach something or to emphasize the importance of something over time." Many interviewees emphasized the purpose of myths in their definitions,

rather than providing an actual definition. Nine people mentioned that myths have some kind of teaching or symbolic/cultural significance to them. Asking this question provided insight into the interviewees' lack of understanding of the definition of mythology and the consequent implications of misnaming the Purāṇas as "Hindu mythology."

There were some interviewees who believed that calling the Purāṇas "mythological" is incorrect. One interviewee said, "Purāṇa means old or really ancient, so you cannot just say just because it's ancient, it's mythology. If that's the case, we haven't seen the dinosaurs; dinosaurs can be mythology as well." Another said, "I don't know if [mythology] is a very accurate term because I don't think there's enough evidence to confirm or deny a lot of these stories. But just because there's no evidence, that's not a reason to say that it's mythology. It could just as well be history, just really old history." There were some people who mentioned that there is "scientific evidence behind these stories. The medicine that we're discovering now, if you look back into some of these Puranas from years and years ago, there's evidence of this happening. I don't think it would be a mythology if there's evidence. Even things like the moon cycle, that was described in so many of those scriptures, and at least the science is there, so I don't think it's mythology if science backs it up." These particular answers provide further reasoning against using "Hindu mythology" to describe the stories of the Purāṇas.

III. Purāṇas and Mythology

This study thus seeks to demonstrate why the translation of the Purāṇas as "Hindu mythology" is inaccurate and undermining. In understanding why the Purāṇas should not be understood as mythology, both concepts merit clarification. The Purāṇas are a collection of Sanskrit literature consisting of various stories about the various gods, goddesses, and living

beings of the Hindu belief and history. These stories tell the lives and events of many of the

Hindu deities, and have been orally passed down for centuries. They have been composed from

the 4th century BCE to about 1000 CE.[12] The word "Purāṇa" means "old," and "the special

subject of the Purāṇas is the powers and works of the gods."[13] There are eighteen main Purāṇas

and innumerable supplementary Purāṇas. Each Purāṇa has five parts, also called *pancalaksana*:

"(1) Sarga: Creation of the Fundamental elements of the universe; (2) Visarga or Pratisarga:

Creation of variety in the universe; (3) Manvantara: The period of the Manu—the ministers of

dharma; (4) Vaṁśa: the description of the lunar and solar dynasties; and (5) Vaṁśānucarita: the

lives of individuals born in these dynasties."[14] The Purāṇas ~~seek to~~ disseminate the very

philosophically complex teachings of the Vedas, and thus catered to the people of the time who

could neither commit ~~to~~, nor had opportunities, to learn Sanskrit and study the knowledge of the

Vedas. The Purāṇas are thus the most popular way of learning Hindu dharma. Most Hindu

followers know about Hindu dharma through the stories they were told as children from their

grandparents, the *kathas* (religious discourses) they heard in temples, on river banks, and other

important places, and the storybooks they grew up reading.[15] The Purāṇas reveal the "Absolute

Reality/Self" that is "also the theme of the Vedas and the Upanishads, but the method of

revealing is unique in the Purāṇas" because "they teach through stories, some historical and

others metaphorical [but] all full of lessons." This type of teaching is known as "śikṣa pradhana

(education-oriented)," which means that "the stories are told in order to teach lessons."[16] Thus,

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[12] Sri Swami Sivananda.
[13] Sri Swami Sivananda.
[14] Swami Tejomayananda, 192.
[15] "Hinduism Basics."
[16] Swami Tejomayananda, 191.

though the Purāṇas may not be factual or historically accurate, they hold credibility in the lessons and wisdom they impart.

Just as the Purāṇas are the most popular way for Hindus to learn about their tradition, so etic understanding of Hindu dharma draws from the Purāṇas, resulting in the misnomer of "Hindu mythology." For instance, "it is the Purāṇas that British scholars had in mind when they mocked the literature of the Hindus as fanciful, hyperbolic, and absurd."[17] Similarly, the common perception of Hindu dharma as a "polytheistic religion" is founded upon the misunderstandings of the Purāṇas. However, outsider interpretations of the Purāṇas are unlikely to comprehend their complexity, depth, or purpose. And, unfortunately, the popularization of Hinduism as it expands beyond its originating land leads to widespread misconceptions of the tradition. One manifestation of these misunderstandings is the use of the term "mythology" in reference to the Purāṇas. As the English language arrived in the South Asian world, along with the ever-growing immigrant community that now resides outside of India, the stories of the Purāṇas became translated into "mythology." The stories that convey the philosophy of the Vedas and the Upanishads as well as explain Hindu dharma have become widely known as "Hindu mythology."

We must define the meaning of myth to understand why the Purāṇas have been misconstrued as mythology. Scholars describe myths as important to human cultures; myths "express the beliefs and values" of the people belonging to a culture. They serve as a foundation to the worldview of a people and contribute to meaning-making practices. They "tell the stories of ancestors and the origin of humans and the world," and they also "describe origins or nuances of long-held customs or explain natural events."[18] Ultimately, the intention of myths is to place

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[17] Lal.
[18] Mark.

humans in the world. Myths are narratives "written with the intention of being truthful" and thus include "creation stories, including stories found in religious texts" as they explain our origins and help us understand the meaning of life.[19] It would seem that the concept of mythology aligns with the purpose and components of the Purāṇas, explaining why some interviewees do believe that the Purāṇas are mythological. Additionally, according to mythologists and anthropologists, "myth" means "sacred narratives of traditional societies generally involving superhuman beings, etc."[20] This definition is an accurate description of the Purāṇas in their aim to synthesize the overwhelming nature of Brahman as all of existence by using manifestations of supernatural beings, gods, and goddesses. Therefore, the use of the word "myth" in anthropological and mythological studies matches the definition and aim of the Purāṇas, and this has translated into the widespread use of "Hindu mythology" to name the stories of the Purāṇas. From religious discourse to academic scholarship on the subject to public-school education, "Hindu mythology" is a phrase that I, myself, have become familiar with and use to refer to the Hindu pantheon and its accompanying narratives. As my interview results also demonstrate, many Hindu-Americans also widely misuse mythology to describe the stories of the Purāṇas.

However, though it may seem that myth is synonymous with Purāṇas, further inquiry into the concept of mythology is necessary to demonstrate the dissonance between the two. The etymology of "myth" reveals its Greek parent word "mythos," "which has a range of meanings from 'word,' through 'saying and story,' to 'fiction.'"[21] The Greek word *mythos* contrasts its counterpart *logos*. *Logos* referred to truths that could be argued or proven, whereas the claims of *mythos* had unquestioned validity.[22] Due to the nature of myths, which are the narrations of

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[19] Goldman.
[20] Heehs.
[21] Buxton, et al.
[22] Buxton, et al.

events that do not require validity or proof, "it is sometimes assumed that they are simply stories with no factual basis," and thus, the word "has become a synonym for falsehood or, at best, misconception."[23] *Logos* was of demonstrative truth, associated closely with philosophy, and *mythos* was of "authoritative pronouncements."[24] These two, in their opposition, have led to our modern bifurcation between philosophy and religion as well as science and religion. Both philosophy and science are treated as dealing with objective truths, whereas religion is relegated to the private sphere and often treated as not an accurate or correct way of understanding the world. This separation, a product of Western culture, was imposed onto Indian society, more specifically onto Hindu dharma, thus leading to the categorization of the Purāṇas as "mythology."

For most Hindus, the automatic English word that comes to mind to translate the stories of the Purāṇas is "myth." This has long been established as normal, and most Hindus are unaware of the weight that the word carries. The ignorance of the deeper implications of the use of "myth" causes most Hindus to describe their epics, the stories of their deities, and their history as "mythological." I discovered this both in my readings of children's books and the interviews that I conducted. These books that narrated the stories of the Purāṇas in a simple way catering to an audience of children that spoke English, they often called themselves "mythological." However, the gods and goddesses themselves were never described as "mythical," which demonstrates that their existence is unchallenged; they are considered to be non-fictional. Rather, the collection of stories they belonged to, the wider category that the Purāṇas and the epic stories fell into, is referred to or translated as "Hindu mythology."

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[23] Buxton, et al.
[24] Buxton, et al.

This classification of the Purāṇas as Hindu mythology is also a product of Western culture. Similar to the invention of religion in Japan, mythology is not a category that previously existed in the Hindu dharma.[25] This is partially evidenced by the interviewees' difficulties finding a word in an Indian language that signifies "myth." In my interviews, I asked the participants to translate "mythology" into the Indian language that they spoke. I did not get a clear answer. There were four hesitant translations. One translation was purāṇa katha, which means "older tales," but the interviewee clarified that this did not mean "imaginative tales." Other translations were: purushāṇam; kalpaṇic, which was clarified as meaning "imaginative stories" but qualified as "maybe" translating mythology; and katha or goshti, which translates just as "stories." The other ten interviewees did not know a translation of mythology in their respective Indian language. There does not exist a word in an Indian language that encapsulates the concept of mythology because within Vedic society, there was no need to denote a belief or a practice as false or fictional. The all-encompassing universalization of Hindu dharma includes all paths of belief or thought. Whereas Abrahamic traditions universalize by dictating a binary between right and wrong that applies to everyone, Hindu dharma universalizes via the acceptance of everyone as Hindu, following different paths to the same spiritual truth. The concept of mythology is thus foreign and superfluous within the context of dharma. Stories or narratives like the Purāṇas might be critiqued for being used out of a justifiable dharmic context, for being adharmic, but they would not be labeled as *mythological*.

The reason for the classification for the Purāṇas as mythology is partially due to the limited nature of religion. The lens of religion forces the separation between what is considered "religious" and what is deemed "mythological," based upon arbitrary conditions that ignore

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[25] For example, see Josephson-Storm, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, 47, 82, 85, 96.

cultural context. Thus, the Purāṇas, though they are recognized as part of the Hindu religious tradition, do not fit into the confines of the concept of religion and are thus labeled as mythology. And though these stories, as evidenced earlier, disseminate complex and advanced Hindu philosophical teachings, the Western concept of philosophy as being objective and evidence-based restricts the Purāṇas from entering this category. Therefore, this case study demonstrates a trinary relation among religion, philosophy, and mythology in an imitation of Josephson-Storm's trinary relation among religion, secularism, and superstition. Josephson-Storm sees "a trinary formation in which the 'real' (or in its political form, the 'secular') is negated by 'superstition,' which is turn negated by 'religion.'"[26] In my trinary relation, philosophy replaces Josephson-Storm's secularism, and mythology takes the place of superstition. Thus, philosophy is negated by mythology, which is negated by religion. This trinary form demonstrates the relationship among these three concepts, revealing the way in which these Eurocentric understandings fall short of accommodating the position of the Purāṇas in relation to Hindu dharma.

The Purāṇas cannot be classified as religion, philosophy, or mythology, because they are all three. These texts could be considered religious because they "generate in them devotion to God, through concrete examples, myths, stories, legends, lives of saints, kings and great men, allegories and chronicles of great historical events."[27] They are philosophical because they "present philosophical truths and precious teachings in an easier manner" and "give ready access to the mysteries of life and the key to bliss."[28] They could also be said to be mythological because they cannot necessarily be proven to be historically accurate or factual. However, the way they disseminate knowledge refutes their association with the mythological notions of

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[26] Josephson-Storm, 5.
[27] "Hinduism Basics."
[28] Mark.

"myth" with "falsehood" or "fiction" is significant in understanding why this word should not be used to describe the stories of the Purāṇas. The immediate assumption upon hearing "myth" often leads to undermining the truth or validity of the myth due to its connotation as that of a "false nature" or "falsehood," and these connotations that still linger essentially tint the use of the word "myth." The associations of myth are intricately tied into the word itself, so it remains challenging to separate the two. Even with efforts to reclaim the word or change its definitions, it will still carry with it these implications and further complicate the description of Hindu dharma. In his introduction to his book on the meanings of the stories of the Purāṇas, Pattanaik prefaces his discussion by explaining that "the Hindu worldview can be startling to those accustomed to a Western thought process, until we challenge the old definition of myth ('the irrational, the unreasonable, the false') and embrace a new definition ('subjective truth expressed in stories, symbols and rituals, that shapes *all* cultures, Indian or Western, ancient or modern, religious or secular')."[32] However, asking for a change in perspective does not eradicate the previous understanding of the word. Calling for a dramatic revision of the meaning of "myth" cannot and will not erase its history of association with the notion of falsehood or fiction.

Claiming "Hindu mythology" to describe the Purāṇas invalidates its stories, which may undermine the authority and subjective truth of Hindu dharma. Thus, following the work of Chakrabarty, I ask for a project that "provincializes" Europe while also treating Hindu dharma as equal with other dharmas (religions).[33] My argument here also draws from Spivak's work on Subaltern Studies, in which "because of the violence of imperialist epistemic, social, and disciplinary inscription, a project understood in essentialist terms must traffic in a radical textual

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[32] Pattanaik, xiii.
[33] Chakrabarty.

practice of differences."[34] The problem here is that Hindus, in their translation of Purāṇas to

"Hindu mythology," "acted in the interests of the [Europeans] and not in conformity to interests

corresponding truly to their own social being".[35] As such, I call to "untranslate" the original,

authentic, Sanskrit word of Purāṇas, and instead use it to describe and name these stories that

dominate a large part of Hindu and Indian culture. Given that there is no equivalent English

translation of "Purāṇas," I argue that the original term should be used instead of our attempting a

translation that falls remarkably short at capturing the actual nature of the work.

However, reclaiming the original word of Purāṇas is accompanied by complexities. The

word "Purāṇas" cannot be fully understood in its original sense since it has been translated as

"Hindu mythology" for so long. Even when using its Sanskrit term, it is impossible to erase its

history of association with its English counterpart of "mythology" due to the complications of its

subaltern nature. As Spivak explains, "for the 'true' Subaltern group, whose identity is its

difference, there is no unrepresentable Subaltern subject that can know and speak itself," because

this group has defined itself in terms of differences from dominant colonial norms. This relates to

the issue of employing the word Purāṇas, because rather than using it completely in its own

original term and context—which is largely impossible due to our neocolonial world—we use

the word to refute the use of "myth."[36] Moreover, "Purāṇas" is also used in another way—that of

combating colonialism, imperialism, and Hindu-inferiority.

To conclude, calling the stories of the Purāṇas "Hindu mythology" or describing the

Hindu pantheon of deities and their stories as "mythological" results in an ethnocentric, Western

lens that fails to accommodate the Hindu cultural context. I call to end the use of "Hindu

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[34] Spivak, 27.
[35] Spivak, 27.
[36] Spivak, 27.

mythology" and to instead reclaim the original Sanskrit term of "Purāṇas" to describe the stories of the gods and goddesses. The aim of this paper is to explain that the narratives of the Purāṇas are not mythological; they are historical and of philosophical significance not only to the believers of the tradition, but to everyone, and merit such respect. This is a knowing but unspeakable reclamation, because describing the Purāṇas as not mythological automatically puts the two (the Purāṇas and mythology) into conversation. The colonial legacy of the Purāṇas will never be erased, but we can still try to move forward in our neocolonial world by trying to speak this reclamation. Therefore, using the Sanskrit term of "Purāṇas" to describe the content of the Purāṇas will challenge the use of "Hindu mythology" and elicit further discussion for an inclusive world of dharma rather than the restrictive world of religion. This conversation begins by halting the use of "Hindu mythology" and reclaiming the Purāṇas both in name and in content.

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