Eminent author and scholar Rajiv Malhotra has worked vigorously for decades to counter the tsunami of misconceptions about India and Hinduism propounded by Western academia. This misinformation suffuses the media, fills our textbooks, is echoed by Western-influenced intellectuals in India and confounds the minds of Hindu youth in universities worldwide. What is the source of these ideas? Find out in the author’s book, *Indra’s Net*, which we summarize and excerpt from below.

Rajiv Malhotra writes: “*Indra’s Net* is about the ongoing battle over Hinduism’s positioning on par with the world’s major religions. It rebuts an increasingly powerful academic school which posits that Hinduism, as such, has never existed. Hinduism today is dismissed as a potent myth concocted by Swami Vivekananda. This thesis brands Vivekananda’s movement as *neo-Hinduism*, where *neo* implies something phony. "This pernicious ploy is used to fragment Hindu society by pitting its spiritual giants against one another and distorting their subtle and deeply intricate viewpoints. In the political arena, the *neo-Hinduism* thesis claims that Vivekananda manufactured Hinduism in order to unite the Indians against the British—an elitist enterprise undertaken at the expense of suppressing the traditions of the Indian masses. "The ramifications of a discourse that pits contemporary Hinduism against its hoary past are profound and terrifying. The claim denies the existence of an integrated, unified spiritual substratum in ancient India. This battle, therefore, is also an intellectual one, with implications for the very survival of Hinduism as a tradition with a rich past, to be understood on its own terms. "This school of thought represents an insidious, subtle, but nevertheless powerful form of colonialism and conversion. Explicit conversion is not even necessary; one is systemically reprogrammed to believe that one was never a Hindu in the first place; and that one loses nothing by abandoning Hinduism other than the label.”

The Author’s Awakening
Malhotra says he discovered the scope of the “*neo-Hinduism*” thesis in 2012 as a member of an American Academy of Religion panel discussing his book *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism*. In that book he contrasts Hinduism’s unity in diversity with the Western paradigms of monolithic religion. To his surprise, the critics at the panel “barely engaged with the ideas in the book. Instead they were fixated on arguing against the very existence of any unified Hindu tradition. What I knew as Hinduism was now being rebranded as ‘neo-Hinduism,’ a false ideology. I was shocked by the allegation that my reference to the notion of Hinduism marked me as a dangerous person. I wondered: ‘What could be the basis of such an attack? Why was it being represented thus by respected scholars?’”

Malhotra describes his subsequent research into the roots of these allegations. He exposes the history and characters behind the flawed conclusions that have become pervasive assumptions and the default consensus-reality held in academia and modern media. It began, he says, with “the Christian missionaries characterization of India’s past as being chaotic, incoherent and without clear ethical and philosophical foundations.” He quotes T. E. Slater of the London Missionary Society, who wrote in 1902, “The Hindu writings are a product of national genius, but there is no orderly development, no progressive manifestation of truth....they constitute an anthology, not one organic whole. What is styled ‘Hinduism,’ is a vague eclecticism.”

Malhotra continues, “Paul Hacker, a prominent German professor of Sanskrit and Indology, was the first academic to develop this set of ideas in the 1950s. He popularized the term *neo-Hinduism* to refer to the modernization of Hinduism brought about by many Indian thinkers, the most prominent being Swami Vivekananda. Hacker charged that ‘neo-Hindus’ had disingenuously adopted Western ideas and expressed them using Sanskrit.”

Hacker’s protege, Wilhelm Halbfass, was
Dual Agenda
Malhotra argues that Professor Hacker was not an unbiased academic: “What is less known about Hacker is that he was also an unabashed Christian apologist who freely used his academic standing to further the cause of his Christian agenda. He led a parallel life, passionately advocating Christianity while presenting the academic face of being neutral and objective.”

Halbfass never translated any of Hacker’s works on Christianity, which would have exposed this side of his work. However, long after Hacker’s ideas had spread, Halbfass confessed in a biography of Hacker that his ideas were problematic for being so rooted in his Christianity: “Hacker presents himself as an Indologist and historian,…yet through all the documentation and analysis, we also hear the voice of an advocate of the European tradition and, more specifically, of a Christian theologian.” See: www.sunypress.edu/pdf/53259.pdf

Reverberations in Indian Intelligensia
Malhotra states that Hacker’s ideas have become accepted as truth by the large majority of Western academics. He cites numerous references to Hacker and his ideas by top professors of Indian studies in key US institutions. Malhotra notes that the myth of neo-Hinduism has spread to mainstream media, popular portrayals of India, and government policy-making. Leftist, secular Indian writers have adopted this self-alienated world view of their own history and spiritual culture. India’s eminent historian Romila Thapar wrote a widely cited article stating that the Hinduva political movement had created a new form of Hinduism by artificially collapsing the earlier pluralistic and variegated realities of India into a neo-Hinduism monolith.

Malhotra writes: “One of the mainstream’s loudest critics of this so-called nationalist neo-Hinduism is the journalist Pankaj Mishra, who has written for The New York Times and published widely acclaimed international works. His opinions influence English-speaking Indians who regard him as authoritative. In his article [2004] ‘The Invention of the Hindu,’ he articulates his thesis that ‘Hinduism is largely a fiction, formulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.’ He regards Hinduism as a construct of colonialism that was enthusiastically and dangerously endorsed by Indian modernizers and reconfigured as a global rival to the three big monotheisms. Hinduism, he claims, did not even exist prior to the arrival of Muslims in India, and then it got crystallized by the British.”

EIGHT MYTHS
Malhotra implores Hindus to “do their homework” and gain an in-depth understanding of the issues. “My goal is not to force readers into an ‘either/or’ position, but to encourage more participants to enter the debate.” In Part I of Indra’s Net, he explains that from the basic premise of neo-Hinduism originating from Hacker’s Christian agenda, eight myths have developed. Readers who understand these issues will recognize them as they emerge in different arenas of the public discourse about Hinduism.

MYTH 1: India’s optimum state is Balkanization
“One of the most dangerous assertions being made is that India’s natural state is one of Balkanization (division into smaller regions). In other words, before colonialism, it was never unified. Those who hold this view believe India should be returned to that state, largely by disempowering Hinduism, (because it is considered a unifying force believed to benefit only the elites), and by empowering the forces of fragmentation. “Such a discourse on the fragmentation of India has been used to stir up internal divisiveness and conflict—ironically, in the name of human rights. [Malhotra’s book Breaking India shows how this has come about, along with its political ramifications.]”

Theories of the coherence and diversity of India have been dismissed by alleging that such claims necessarily imply an imposition of homogeneity and hegemony. As a corollary, there is the conclusion that Indians ought to simply deny any unified positive identity based on their own past, and instead seek a common identity based on the further importation of modern Western principles of society and politics. Those few individuals who dare articulate Indian coherence are characterized as dangerous and accused of fascism, identity politics, fundamentalism, links to atrocities, oppression of Dalits, tribal communities, minority religions and women. This misconception denies India’s cultural unity based on the dharmic traditions.”

MYTH 2: Colonial Indology’s biases were turned into Hinduism
“In general, the colonial Indologists presented Hinduism so as to depict the heathens as lowly and uncivilized, requiring evangelization. Many Europeans labored hard to recover Sanskrit texts, did important philological work and struggled to understand Hindu traditions, but through their own lenses.

“It is tendentious and untrue to claim Indians passively read their own texts under the tutelage of Europeans, without any sense of their traditional meanings, (adopting a Western definition of Hinduism).

“Being open to influence from others does not render a culture ‘inauthentic.’ Hinduism has always insisted that its traditions are interpreted and practised in the context of time, place and custom.”

MYTH 3: Hinduism was manufactured and did not grow organically
“A basic claim is that contemporary Hindu leaders, particularly Vivekananda, Gandhi and Aurobindo, invented an artificial new religion called Hinduism.

“This shows a serious misunderstanding of Indian culture. Since earliest times, prominent Hindus have disagreed among themselves. New ideas were constantly introduced to challenge old ones. Vivekananda should be seen as updating the tradition for modern times, not as fabricating something

Born in 1950, Rajiv Malhotra is an Indian–American research, writer and speaker on current affairs as they relate to civilizations, cross-cultural encounters, religion and science. A successful entrepreneur in the information technology and media industries, he took early retirement at age 44 to pursue philanthropy, research and public service. He established the Infinity Foundation for this purpose in 1994. His Yahoo discussion group has over 5,000 members, and he has 115,000 Twitter followers. See www.RajivMalhotra.com for more and to order a copy of Indra’s Net."
The neo-Hinduism camp claims that Vivekananda and his heirs articulated Hinduism in a new way, using the English language in a European idiom. “The notion that there are mutually conflicting stages of tradition, modern and post-modern, is a Eurocentric one. Dharma encompasses traditional, modern and post-modern attitudes—in parallel, not in conflict.”

**MYTH 4:** Yogic experience is not a valid path to enlightenment and tries to copy Western science

“The importance of anubhava (the direct experience of higher states of consciousness attained in meditation) in Hinduism is denied by the neo-Hinduism camp, which claims that authentic tradition, especially Advaita Vedanta, considers only the sruti (Vedic text) as the path to moksha (enlightenment). This makes Vedanta and yoga appear mutually incompatible and denies that Hinduism is a coherent, unified and continuous system.

“But meditation practices and exalted experiences are at the very foundation of classical Indian texts. Indeed, many cutting-edge Western cognitive scientific research programs have evolved under the profound influence of dharmic traditions.”

**MYTH 5:** Western social ethics was incorporated as seva and karma yoga

“The neo-Hinduism camp claims that Vivekananda, Gandhi and Aurobindo imported their emphasis on social responsibility and social action from Christianity. While there was some Western influence, concepts such as seva and karma yoga were present in the prior tradition. Loka sangraha (service to others) and bhakti (devotional surrender) derive from ancient Hinduism, with roots in the Bhagavad Gita and earlier. The application of these old ideas to new contexts, such as the social degradation created by colonial rule, is not a discontinuity or contradiction.”

**MYTH 6:** Hinduism had no prior self-definition, unity or coherence.

“Hinduism is claimed to have had no self-defined and conscious understanding of its own distinctiveness from other religions. Neo-Hinduism is said to have been built by distorting a mishmash of prior traditions having irreconcilable texts and local customs. “Westerners tend to denigrate Hinduism as random, fragmented, chaotic and without unity because it has no central authority or ecclesiastical structure, no closed canon or ‘Bible’ of sacred texts, and no ‘creeds’ to which members of the faith must subscribe. The Western notion of unity and coherence is based on an obsession for control, expansion and hegemony, exemplified in the way a large multi-national corporation (such as the Roman Catholic Church) functions. But top-down structures and reified codes of orthodoxy are not the only mode of unity. The Kumbha Mela illustrates Hinduism’s decentralization beautifully.”

**MYTH 7:** Hinduism is founded on oppression and sustained by it

“Hinduism is accused of violating the rights of minorities, women and others. But dharmic culture is better able to absorb multiple communities, metaphysical points of view and new scientific developments than do the Abrahamic religions: dharma has no need to reconcile itself with an absolute history, nor was it formulated under any centralized governance or adjudicating authority.

“The neo-Hinduism thesis also demonizes Sanskrit as oppressive and fossilized, thus discarding centuries of cultural and philosophical development and the sense of unity that predated colonialism. The Western equivalent would be to dismiss the entire corpus of Greek and Latin literature and philosophy for being corrupted by its elitism.”

**MYTH 8:** Hinduism presumes the sameness of all religions

“While defending contemporary Hinduism, I do not treat every one of its tenets as sacrosanct. I actually agree with the neo-Hinduism camp in criticizing the assertion, attributed to Vivekananda and many of his heirs, that all religions are paths to the same goal. I am troubled by the tendency to see all religions as offering equivalent things in the hope of reconciling them in a kind of perennial philosophy.”

**Responding to the Myths**

In Part II of Indra’s Net, Malhotra responds to these myths with a narrative and lexicon that can serve as ideological tools in the public square

**Historical Continuity, Foundations**

“Indian thought prior to colonialism exhibits both continuity and change. The consolidation of what we now call ‘Hinduism’ be-

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**TIMELINE**

**Evolution of the Neo-Hinduism Notion**

- **1950:** Malhotra begins his analysis at the University of Bonn, in Germany, where Professor Paul Hacker coins the term Neo-Hinduism. A renowned Indologist, he was also a Lutheran with a Christian agenda who later converted to Catholicism.
- **1970s:** At the University of Pennsylvania, Prof. Wilhelm Halbfass (born in Germany) translates and publishes Hacker’s writings in English, which are injected into US universities nationwide. Halbfass brings Hacker to teach at UPenn.
- **1970-90s:** In India, studies programs in UK universities, Hacker’s teachings are transmitted from German into English
gan prior to colonialism. Colonial indologists disrupted the historical continuity of Indian thought, selectively appropriating Indian ideas that fit their own narrative and rejecting those that did not. But Indian systems do not carry the burden of having to reconcile their latest ideas with a standard, canonized, non-negotiable history.

“The claim that Hindu seva (social service) was appropriated from Western and Christian ethics is baseless. The example of Sahajanand Swami (1781-1830) illustrates the role of traditional Hindu leaders and organizations in launching large-scale seva movements without importing any colonial models.” Malhotra also cites many pre-colonial Hindu textual references to social responsibility.

Malhotra replies to the charge that an emphasis on yoga and meditation, as highlighted by Swami Vivekananda, did not exist in what some scholars say is the authentic Indian tradition of Vedanta. Malhotra details Hinduism’s ancient nexus between experiential spirituality and formal scriptural/philosophical discourse, noting that “Differences between Shankara and Patanjali have been exaggerated by the neo-Hinduism camp to imply that Shankara rejected the subject states of personal realization.” Anyone familiar with the range and depth of Adi Shankara’s work knows that he was both a dedicated practitioner of raja yoga and a devout bhakta of the Hindu Gods.

Hinduism’s Open Architecture

Malhotra offers this alternative to the depiction of India as a fragmented culture: “Everything that exists—divinity/God, individual creatures, and the material world—constitutes an integral unity. This unity—in-diver-
sity is captured in the metaphor of Indra’s net, an infinite number of nodes of light which each contain and reflect all the others, forming a single web. Hinduism may be defined as a unified portfolio of ideas, practices and traditions, a toolbox for discovery. The use of such tools has led not to a dogmatic belief but to a framework with an open architecture.”

Digestion, Self-Destruction, Defenses

Malhotra advises Hindus to be aware and hold strong in the face of the plunder of the dharmic religions. “The integral unity of Indra’s net is under siege from something insidious. I refer to the widespread dismantling, rearrangement and digestion of Hindu traditions into Western frameworks. “Digestion works in a series of steps, and only by understanding the entire process can one understand its ultimate consequences. First, the ‘desirable’ elements (such as a subset of yoga) are separated from the rest of the source tradition, thereby rupturing its integral unity. These separated elements then get ‘scrubbed’ to remove the dharmic contexts in which they are naturally found so as to ‘secularize’ them. Finally, they get re-contextualized either as Judeo-Christian or as Western science, while the dharmic sources get erased or else denigrated as inferior. As a result, the predator culture boosts its power at the expense of the source that is digested.”

Malhotra closes his book with some specific strategies. “I have coined the terms ‘porcupine defense’ and ‘poison pills’ to refer to those qualities of dharma that the predator cannot swallow. By making these qualities explicit and including them in the definition of dharma, we can protect it from predators. These qualities then serve as a deterrent to digestion. Take for example the ‘Hindu Good News.’ We are all originally divine (sat-chit-ananda) and not originally sinners. There is no such thing as original sin. We simply do not have the problem that Christianity offers to solve. The laws of karma and reincarnation are non-negotiable, and we have no need of a savior. Such a poison pill disrupts the DNA of the host predator which is bound to the belief in one life.”

The author continues, “After hundreds of interviews with U-Turners of the past 20 years [Westerners who began to adopt Hindu beliefs but then reverted to former faiths], I am convinced that many of them would have given up Judeo-Christianity if their gurus had explained what in Hindu dharma is indigestible into their religion of birth. This is especially true in the early states of romantic engagement when the seeker is overwhelmed by what Hinduism offers, and is willing to relinquish his or her earlier religious narrative, but does not yet have any idea what this would entail. The problem has been our gurus’ frequent lack of understanding of the serious differences between Hinduism and the Abrahamic religions—or their desire to obscure and under play these for purely strategic reasons—resulting in a lack of clarity and courage.”

While not all will agree with Malhotra’s conclusions or his recommended strategies, his book is thought-provoking and well researched, representing decades of studying and defending against the anti-Hindu assault. It provides background, both useful and detailed, that can be marshalled to counter the tenacious misconceptions about India and Hinduism influencing global media and public education from middle school to the university.

2000 onward: In India, Marxist, leftist, “secular” intellectuals, including Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) professors and graduates, echo Hacker’s ideas. Anyone espousing a Hindu cause in the public forum is branded a nationalist fundamentalist.

1990s to now: The Neo–Hinduism thesis about the nature of Hinduism and the nation state of India become accepted doctrine among Western intelligentsia in many universities, as Hacker’s ideas propagate through the ivory towers of higher education, filtering down into students’ minds and out into mainstream media.