The “translation” of non-Abrahamic religions such as Hinduism proves to be a particular challenge; indeed, its classification as “religion” at all is highly controversial. Religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism can be traced back to identifiable founding prophets; they have a holy book, a standard doctrine, they are monotheist and worship takes place within the community or parish. None of this is the case for Hinduism. Hindu traditions differ in terms of their deities and practices; there are specific regional rituals; there is no doctrine and no book that is accepted by all within the faith; there is no fixed membership of a particular denomination and the boundaries with other religious traditions are blurred. Furthermore religious aspects are often closely tied to cultural and social phenomena such as the caste system.

Our analysis of selected textbooks regarding the representation of the “World Religion of Hinduism” has demonstrated how difficult it is to do justice to such a complex and nuanced religious and social system. It has also revealed, however, that representations have improved over the past few decades. Previous portrayals that were often orientalising, truncated and even deprecating have to a large extent been replaced by nuanced and respectful descriptions of Hinduism as an alternative faith, knowledge of which can inspire a broadening of one’s own perspective and an enrichment of one’s own lifeworld.

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THE WORLD RELIGION OF HINDUISM: ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE IMAGE OF INDIA IN GERMAN TEXTBOOKS

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Nowadays, textbooks are only one source of information amongst others; nevertheless, due to their role as authorised compulsory reading, they play an instrumental part in shaping the images of geographical spaces, cultures and religions that are presented to young people. If we pay serious attention to the significance of textbooks, we discover a clear demand for the representation of “foreign” cultural worlds and religions. There is a call to allow pupils to approach the latter impartially and with curiosity, to encourage them to learn to understand and respect different ways of thinking and living. The task of the textbook authors is then to render comprehensible the cultures and religions less familiar to us; to “translate” them.

The term to “translate” is to be understood in its sociological and cultural sense, and is part of our entire social practice: We translate between different cultural contexts, yet also between different ways of shaping our lifeworlds within one and the same cultural context. Here it is intercultural translation that particularly demands a certain sensitivity and a heightened awareness of problems. Philosopher Walter Benjamin spoke in his day of the asymmetry and power relations that exist in the translation process. Thus we face the fundamental question as to whether and how translation can take place without the differences being levelled out or subsumed under one’s own categories, and also without giving rise to irreconcilable confrontations between different lifeworlds.

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The question as to the “truth” was thus always present in the religious education classroom. This basic mind-set dramatically hindered open and objective inquiry into other religions and thus also Hinduism. In the older textbooks the representation of Hindu life and faith serves as a paragon of the exotic and oriental connotations woven into depictions of “foreign” ways of life:

1. Hinduism is seen as one religion with the result that it is – due to its diversity of religious traditions – perceived as inconsistent, incoherent and diffuse, a “confusing phenomenon” and “difficult for anyone” to understand properly.

2. Hinduism is portrayed as the religion of India per se; as a religion that has existed for millenia and has shaped the social structure, life, thought and deeds of all people as a fait social total (Mauss). This not only marginalises non-Hindu religions with their concepts of being, transcendence and social life (Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and also Islam); it also ignores alternative faiths within the Hindu tradition itself.

3. Hinduism is reduced to trans-historical basic dimensions and thus defined in terms of its essence (the caste system as an unyielding corset of humankind: fulfilment of duty and acceptance of fate as taught by the doctrine of reincarnation; stages of life and the search for redemption as the final destination of all people.)

4. The image of the Hindu form of religion and lifeworld reproduces the Brahmanic worldview as described in the Sanskrit texts as the knowledge giving power to elites. Texts are perceived to prescribe the actions of all relevant persons; i.e. texts are used to extrapolate everyday activities.

5. A concept of the human being is created that denies the individual the ability to operate subjectively and to make his or her own decisions, but portrays him or her as a submissive agent within a cultural and religious system that determines all aspects of life.

While more recent textbooks do still mention the “foreign” nature of Hinduism and possible difficulties in understanding it, the diction of the texts rather suggests the style of a challenge. Nowadays, authors emphasise the “broad plurality” of this complex religion and the pupils are asked to investigate it intensively, as it opens our eyes to many religious phenomena that cast into question our own systems of living and believing “in an exciting manner”: a wealth of multifaceted diversity, different fundamental ideas of people, the world and its history. Hinduism has also, so the textbooks explain, “given rise to an impressive philosophy, its own ethos and multifarious art”, and newer forms of Hinduism promote ideas such as “tolerance, non-violence and harmony with nature”; indeed, ideas “of great significance to humans for the future”.

A synopsis of the new teaching materials on Hinduism shows that today pupils are provided with more nuanced information on the historical and regionally differing holy writings and religious teachers; and also on the philosophical systems, the plurality of deities and paths to redemption. The pupils also learn a great deal about religious life, for instance about everyday religious rituals at home, the festivals and temple visits. The materials also present religions that have emerged from Hinduism such as Buddhism, Jainism and...
Sikhism. The pupils learn about Hindu reformist movements (neo-Hinduism) and about political figures such as Gandhi. The materials also point to the politicisation of religion in the current form of Hindu nationalism, and a further chapter focuses on the “fascination in the West”, discussing yoga, transcendental meditation and the Hare Krishna Movement.

A critical reader will notice both content-related and rhetorical improvements to the representation of the Hindu social structure and also the continued presence of stereotypes and shortcomings. Current portrayals of the “caste system”, for instance, have barely altered in terms of content since the 1970s. Additional reference is made to the “Untouchables” who are considered “ritually unclean”, live in poverty and are excluded from the caste system.

Nevertheless, there is one significant difference between the older and more recent textbooks. While in the past the pupils had to settle for a static description of the caste system, nowadays they learn that, in real life, the situation is rather different and in many aspects always has been. The monolithic and essentialist portrayal of the caste system is set in clear proportion via references to social and historical change, societal critique and the influence of Enlightenment ideas. The “Untouchables” in particular are (rudimentarily at least) a focal aspect of reform-related discussions and even important reformers seem to be worth mentioning. A considerable amount of space is dedicated to Bhimrao Ambedkar (himself an “Untouchable” and later Minister of Justice in the Nehru cabinet), and pupils are presented with the critical ideas, campaigns and struggles of the “Untouchables” in general.

Particularly the example of the “Untouchables”, however, reveals the still highly reduced nature of the information in the textbooks. The pupils do not learn, for instance, that the struggles for acknowledgement of the “Untouchables” go back as far as the 19th century; they do not learn that the “Untouchables” sought a new self-consciousness and also utter an accusation against society by using the name “Dalit”, a Maharati word for “torn”, “broken” or “oppressed”. Nor do the textbooks mention the “affirmative action” established by the Indian constitution which reserves seats for Dalit and other marginalised groups in academic institutions, administrative organisations and parliaments. Most importantly, no one mentions that the concept of being “untouchable” has been formally abolished by the constitution. When considering the translation of “foreign” religions and cultures for the classroom, as well as when analysing texts written for use in schools, there are five areas of particular importance: topic, rhetoric, value judgements, factual information and image selection.

Nowadays, authors go to great lengths to refrain from explicitly negative value judgements and seek to portray other religions as legitimate and enriching aspects of global cultural diversity. Textbooks have also made clear improvements regarding the topic area and present an appropriate spectrum of relevant themes. Problems are rather
still to be found in the area of factual information. Even in the improved textbooks with a more respectful approach there are still passages that contain errors, primarily gaps and omissions (as in the example of the “Untouchables”). Nor have the textbooks succeeded in employing a consistently neutral rhetoric free of implicit value judgements. The emphasis on the foreignness and “otherness” of Indian people and their religions, for example, may give rise to emotional blockades on the part of the reader. It is interesting, however, that – in the new materials – the textbook authors seek to simultaneously dismantle the blockades that they may be in the process of generating, such as by producing convincing arguments as to why we should learn about Hinduism. This, however, creates the impression of a certain discrepancy and inconsistency that may confuse the reader. A further criterion for producing and analysing textbook texts would thus be consistency in the argumentation and portrayal.

To summarise, portrayals of Hinduism have a long and difficult path ahead before achieving clear progress, an appropriate translation and representation. This becomes particularly evident when considering the shortcomings still to be found in the factual information, the ambivalent rhetoric and lack of consistency. On the whole, however, they also bear witness to serious efforts towards intercultural learning and the respectful presentation of other cultural or religious forms of thought and practice for teaching in schools.

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Cf. Sebstian Murken, Gandhi und die Kuh: Die Darstellung des Hinduismus in deutschen Religionsbüchern, Marburg, 1988, p. 15.


For reasons of space, the analysis of the illustrative material has been omitted here. Particularly in the older textbooks, images are in a position to convey Orientalism and exoticism, yet also a fixation on religion and fanaticism.