

Research Proposal/Prospectus

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Introduction

In this research proposal, I would like to focus on the cultural appropriation of Hinduism and Indian culture, specifically within the lens of commercialism and fashion, the reclamation of these cultural aspects from the Hindu and Indian communities, and the motivations for appropriation. I aim to discern how cultural appropriation in these sectors has positively or negatively affected members of these communities and how it may affect their daily lives or perceptions of themselves. I will also ascertain the extrinsic/intrinsic motivations for appropriating Hindu iconography and Indian dress. In doing so, I will further research the consequences of this appropriation in the lives of wrongdoers and whether they are remorseful for their actions and realize their transgressions.

My topic of cultural appropriation in Hinduism and Indian culture is one that I have always held close to heart. For personal interest in the topic, I am Hindu and have Indian ancestry, but my background is also of West Indian and Caribbean descent, specifically from Guyana. Being Hindu has been deeply ingrained in my life from a young age. As a result of being intertwined deeply in my religion and culture, I became very protective of the two. That protection has roused my discernment of cultural appropriation of religion and culture. Seeing how it gets swept under the rug from media to day-to-day events motivates me to delve into the matter more.

My goals in researching this topic would be to move past my preconceived biases and gain further insight into the minds of those who have experienced appropriation or appropriated Hinduism and Indian culture. My personal experiences have increased my stakes in the topic, but it will only further my desire to research more deeply, as my care will contribute considerably to my research efforts. I am eager to keep writing reflexively in this process to check my

subjectivities, to reflect on my research proceedings more, and to uncover more findings about this subject.

Problem and Purpose Statement

The cultural appropriation of Hindu and Indian people has been a long-standing issue for these communities in commercialism and fashion. T-shirts in trendy stores are readily available, depicting imagery of Lord Ganesh and Goddess Lakshmi, to name a few. Consumers will buy these items under the impression that the image printed on them is “cool” or “spiritual,” lessening the sacredness of the object. The younger generation will paste gems on their forehead for festivals or to participate in trends, mimicking the bindi, without caring for the placement's meaning. Others may oil their hair to create sleek hairstyles but jeer at those who have slicked their hair for years through their Ayurvedic principles. These are a few of the wrongdoings that implicate society regarding the appropriation of Hindu and Indian communities.

Studying this phenomenon garners importance in understanding Indian culture and the Hindu religion and developing cultural competence not to commit these wrongdoings. Many of those of the Indian culture or Hindu religion have lived their lives in which they are persecuted for their beliefs, iconography, or practices. Only once their religion or culture becomes a trend or watered down for the masses does society accept their practices. The importance of this topic and taking accountability for acts such as these cannot be understated.

Other articles focus on cultural appropriation but less on the implications of Hindu and Indian communities and even less on those that appropriate the culture or religion. There is a need for research to discover the reasoning for appropriating this particular culture or religion, how these communities become marginalized, and how these appropriators permit their actions. The purpose of this research study will be to develop an understanding of the cultural appropriation of the iconography of the Hindu religion, aspects of Indian culture, and the impact of appropriation occurrences and the reclamation of these happenings for the members of Hindu

and Indian communities. At this stage in the research, cultural appropriation of the Hindu religion and Indian culture will be generally defined as experiences and images of misappropriation that outsiders of these communities have incurred. I aim to discern how cultural appropriation in these sectors has positively or negatively affected members of these communities and how it may affect their daily lives or perceptions of themselves. I will also ascertain the extrinsic/intrinsic motivations for appropriation and research the consequences of appropriation in the lives of wrongdoers and whether they are remorseful for their actions and realize their transgressions.

Literature Review

My research looks at the cultural appropriation of the Hindu religion and Indian culture, specifically within the lens of commercialism and fashion, the reclamation of the religion and culture post-appropriation, and the external or internal motivations or influences for individuals that appropriate the culture or religion. Designers, fashion trends, and individuals have claimed Indian culture and Hinduism for their profit or acclaim. This review will outline other peer-reviewed articles that have touched on this topic or exemplified why more research needs to be conducted on the matter. These articles range from mentions of henna, the bindi, performative experiences with religious imagery, and the merchandising and commercialism of such parts of the religion and culture.

The number of research articles I have selected all speak to different aspects of my topic, problem statement, and research questions. Some focus on cultural appropriation and why it is significant, some specifically on the appropriation of Hindu iconography in festivals and clothing, some on parts of Indian culture that are more “trendy” or fashion-oriented, such as henna and bindis, and some on the ramifications for those that appropriate. Some articles provide a general overview, while others show research on a particular sample or combine the two. However, these pieces of research speak little to the lived experiences of those who have dealt with cultural appropriation, directly to those who commit acts of appropriation and their rationalization for doing so, and how the commercialism of these practices has become more accessible and normalized.

Cultural Appropriation and its Significance

Arya gives a brilliant breakdown of cultural appropriation and why it is a crucial subject to speak on in the first place. She writes about the subject as it becomes more frequently

addressed. Arya (2021) states that “integral to the definition of cultural appropriation is an asymmetry of power between two cultures that involves the majority/dominant culture taking from the marginalised culture. This aspect of the powerful taking from the less powerful is not emphasized enough,” which underscores its importance succinctly (p. 3). More often than not, the imbalance is not recognized, as Arya emphasizes. Especially since it is usually between a majority and marginalized culture, in these instances, when the majority culture appropriates, these aspects of appropriation are seen as exotic but instead regarded as “other” if it comes from the marginalized culture.

Arya (2021) speaks on this phenomenon further, expressing that those “belonging to a marginalised group are used by a majority/dominant culture for aesthetic reasons...marginalised groups do not enjoy the same privileges or rights to self-expression, which makes crucial the need for them to have ownership of their culture” which exemplifies why it is imperative to retain that ownership (p. 4). More often than not, creating an aesthetic is what the majority group seeks, without thinking of the possible repercussions of that creation based on a culture or religion. The group taken advantage of is not afforded the same luxuries as the appropriators. This idea provides a stellar introduction to the more specific examples in the rest of the literature.

Appropriation of Hindu Iconography and Practices

Arya (2005) speaks directly on the material culture that is found in Hinduism and its effects when it is not regarded as sacred by those who may need to be culturally aware. They specifically mention designers of large fashion houses, such as Roberto Cavalli (p. 594). Cavalli, in particular, was given the opportunity by the Hindu Human Rights organization to right his wrongs. Still, he decided not to go, therefore not taking any further accountability on the matter. Arya also posits an apt point I would be remiss not to include. They speak about the act of

handling religious objects in Hinduism and how there is a reverence there that may not be utilized with the handling of materials that those unaware of the religion may need to learn. For instance, calling back to Cavalli's clothing, namely swimwear and underwear depicting Hindu deities, the clothes were meant to be worn in one's private regions. This is entirely dissimilar to how one should handle Hindu imagery, which Arya (2005) likens to "the manner of hallowed sports shirts, for instance, which are pinned up, framed, and crucially unworn...they would escape the unclean taint of the wearer and be treated as markedly different," a point that I have not seen referenced in other literature (p. 600). If Cavalli, in this instance, or others who culturally appropriate knew the significance of handling Hindu iconography, perhaps they would be less inclined to do so.

Velayutham and Wise write about a specific instance of appropriation, which offers my research an in-depth look into an act. In Sydney, Australia, the LGBTQ+ community held what is known as their Sleaze Ball, which occurs every year. In 1999, they themed the ball "Homosutra" as a reference to the Hindu Kamasutra. Like many who appropriate the Hindu religion, it was meant to seem like an exotic or otherworldly event. Deities were featured in imagery throughout the venue, and Velayutham and Wise (2001) state that "the most prominent feature of the evening was that, through being sexualized, the traditional symbolic meanings of most of the deities were significantly distorted or misrepresented. For example, the *tilak* and *muthra* were replaced with... erotic objects," weaving the sacred and sacrilegious together (p. 144). While the Kamasutra is a text on sexuality and eroticism, it is the fact that it was denigrated by those who chose to mispair its meaning with deities and showcase them in that manner.

Mitra speaks directly on the merchandizing and commodification of the Hindu religion, which provides a larger picture of the process and how it may lead to appropriation. They write

about “how the Hindu religion has succumbed to the world of advertisements, mass production, and marketing in the United States,” succinctly describing one of the issues at play (Mitra, 2016, p. 113). In particular, they speak on the transnational process of those who have emigrated from India and how their culture and religion are sustained or detracted by that immigration. Mitra (2016) notes that “by converting the meaning of religion, rituals, festivals, and even the gods and the goddesses into object and commodities, the marketplace has...desecrated the diasporic religious world,” exemplifying that the relationship between its commodification and marketability to the general populace cannot be separated from its religious and spiritual meaning (p. 115). They also speak specifically about digital media's role in this affair, a point that I would like to dissect further in my research. Mitra starts elucidating this topic but does not discuss the commodification specifically of henna or its normalization in society as temporary body art. They speak on the role of digital media, but it would be essential to look at social media's part, too, especially in a fashion context. These platforms become more ingrained in society as time passes, where many appropriation instances occur or are shared.

Appropriation of the Indian Culture and Practices

Maira writes expressly on the aesthetic and commodification of Indo-Chic and henna as a more palatable form of body art for those unaware of its cultural significance. Like the Velayutham and Wise piece, this article also offers a close examination of a group, but this time, it is those who are of the Indian culture and share that with others outside the culture. They write about a subset of college students from Northhampton, Massachusetts, who hold a Mehndi Night to share in the practice with those who want to participate, hopefully, in its cultural appreciation. However, Maira (2002) says, “It became clear that Indo-chic is often seen as primarily as a South Asian/white American interchange...representations of Indo-chic intensify the politics of cultural

appropriation, for even if cultural exchange is seen as a two-way street it is rarely understood as a many-forked circuit affecting different groups” illustrating the care one must take in the line between cultural appreciation and appropriation (p. 146). Even with the enjoyment of receiving henna, perceived as body art or temporary tattoos, one must understand and appreciate its cultural significance. Maira takes a closer look into a group that shares their culture with a multicultural night but does not bring up the topic of appropriation, just an appreciation.

Nilsson speaks on the culture of the bindi and tikka and its cultural appropriation in society and the media. They specifically look at the hashtag #reclaimthebindi on Tumblr blogs of those of Indian culture who critique individuals who have culturally appropriated these aspects. This article serves as a point of reference for how those in the Indian culture may respond if presented with cultural appropriation, but not as an example of a just way to deal with individuals who have committed the act. Nevertheless, it provides a picture of possible mental and emotional reactions to cultural appropriation. Nilsson (2022) states that “treating Indo Chic as a microaggression helps to explain desis’ experiences of cultural appropriation as offensive and racist, and may also explain why some wearers of Indo Chic do not understand or acknowledge these effects,” as we are met with both sides of appropriation instances (p. 563). Nilsson also goes into greater depth on how these online spaces serve as a place for those of the Indian culture to find solidarity in their appropriation experiences. Nilsson’s article specifies how those with these experiences have reacted but does not speak directly to those involved, instead utilizing their social media to find out their opinions or feelings.

Ramifications for Cultural Appropriators

Adongo’s article researches cultural appropriation by Western fashion brands and the implications and possible resolution of conflicts through legal mediation. This article provides an

excellent viewpoint of the potential consequences and cultural awareness that may be found in the aftermath of appropriation occurrences. Adongo provides an example of Nike releasing a new colorway of the Air Force 1 that depicted imagery of the mola pattern originating from Panama. At the same time, Nike said it stemmed from Puerto Rico. Nike apologized for this mistake, but the people of the Guna community in Panama are still seeking financial remuneration. Throughout the article, there are many different illustrations of communities that feel parts of their culture were unjustly taken or depicted wrongfully. So, they seek an apology or compensation for what is rightfully theirs. Adongo (2021) writes, “Fashion corporations may sometimes not feel a need to ask for permission before using elements from marginalized communities. Rather, they believe their status and exclusivity of their products legitimize their right to create and sell whatever they want,” perhaps offering more profound insight into what those who culturally appropriate think to justify their actions (p. 385). While providing legal implications to these transgressions, Adongo calls out that action should be taken. Adongo provides specific implications and compensation for what those who have committed cultural appropriation may experience in the aftermath of their actions. Still, there is no particular rationalization of the behavior of those who committed the acts and whether those individuals have developed cultural competency since.

In reviewing this literature, I found bits and pieces of what I wish my research to hold. While the articles on cultural appropriation in the Hindu religion and Indian culture provide valuable insight into specific acts that transgressors have committed and some insight into the other side of the relationship, I would like to know the lived experiences and reclamation of those who have experienced the appropriation. It would be incredibly illuminating to hear the experiences of those on both sides of the conflict to ascertain the reasonings. The commercialism

and merchandising of the religion and culture are interspersed throughout most of these articles but do not go into depth on the modern-day normalization of doing so. Overall, there is much more space to research and develop an understanding of cultural appropriation from the wrongdoers and those affected. I will go into more detail on the experiences of those on both ends, how it has affected their lives, and what has occurred in the aftermath regarding reclamation and cultural competency. These articles provide an excellent starting point to facilitate my own research.

Research Methods/General Research Plan

The methods of qualitative research that I will use to conduct my research to develop an understanding of cultural appropriation of the Hindu religion and Indian culture will be phenomenology, narrative research, and grounded theory. These methods will be essential in obtaining analysis for answering and speaking to different aspects of my research questions and purpose statement.

For phenomenology, it will be critical to study individuals of the Indian culture and those of the Hindu religion to ascertain more in-depth knowledge of cultural appropriation that they have experienced. Phenomenology “studies the meanings people make of their lived experiences” to conduct the research process (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 71). Doing so will emphasize how individuals in these communities make sense of the appropriation they have felt or seen in their lives.

With narrative research complementing the phenomenology, I will hone in on specific instances of cultural appropriation experienced by individuals of these two communities. Narrative research is described as the “collection of personal narratives; based on recognition that people are storytellers who live storied lives” (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 71). By interviewing a small number of individuals and asking them to share their experiences, specific details or patterns may emerge as they tell their stories.

To better understand why individuals commit cultural appropriation, I will use grounded theory to understand better. Grounded theory is defined as “research done to generate or discover a general theory or abstract analytical hunch based on the study of phenomena in a particular situation(s)” (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 71). By studying the phenomena through phenomenology and narrative research and speaking to those who have committed cultural

appropriation, I will work towards more insight regarding those that appropriate. By doing so, I will acquire a general explanation of why they did what they did.

I plan to collect data and select my research participants by speaking to those of the Hindu and Indian communities and procuring a sample size of individuals who have appropriated the religion and culture. More specifically, I will interview research participants for data collection, look at written accounts if available, create a theory, and meld stories together. For the Indian and Hindu communities, I could seek out those who attend weekly events at a temple or those at a university who are in an Indian-based club. For individuals who have culturally appropriated the culture and religion, I would send out a survey or something similar to recruit those who have had that experience.

For data analysis in phenomenology, I will sift through interviews or any other material that may speak to an individual's experience with cultural appropriation and look for prevalent quotes or trends that stand out to contextualize more. For narrative research, I will combine the stories to see the common trends and find connections between them. For grounded theory, I will look at the phenomena at play with the research participants and then link that phenomena to other present historical or social phenomena to create a working theory.

To account for bias, trustworthiness, rigor, and validity, I will have to check my own biases throughout the process, vet my research participants, and obtain research from enough participants to ensure that the results are valid. By limiting my own biases, I will be an objective third party in the process. I would vet research participants, especially as they recount their experiences. I will get better validity by interviewing a larger sample size of multiple people in these communities and ensuring my research questions are clearly defined.

Research Questions

Overarching Inquiry Question: How can we gain insight into cultural appropriation as it relates to the iconography of the Hindu religions, traditions of Indian culture, and the impact of appropriation on Hindu and Indian communities?

- **Central Question 1:** What are the lived experiences of those in Hindu and Indian communities who have experienced cultural appropriation?
 - **Subheading Question 1:** What can those in these communities do to reclaim their religion and heritage in these events?
 - **Subheading Question 2:** How do acts of cultural appropriation make members of these communities feel mentally, physically, or emotionally?

Rationale/Explanation: This central question and subheading questions will answer my proposed problem statement because it will allow for interviews of those in these communities who can share their encounters with cultural appropriation. They will unpack their part in these experiences and ponder how the encounters make them feel, either positively or negatively.

- **Central Question 2:** Why do outsiders of the Hindu religion and Indian culture commit acts of cultural appropriation?
 - **Subheading Question 1:** How do these outsiders rationalize their behavior as they perform these acts?
 - **Subheading Question 2:** How do outsiders develop cultural awareness and competency not to carry out such acts in the future?

Rationale/Explanation: This central question and subheading questions will answer my proposed problem statement because they investigate cultural appropriators. These questions will dive deeper into their motivations, remorse or lack of, and justification for their actions.

- **Central Question 3:** How does commercialism of aspects of Hindu and Indian culture make appropriation more normalized?
 - **Subheading Question 1:** Why has henna become a more palatable beauty trend in everyday settings for the masses, who may not acknowledge its cultural significance?
 - **Subheading Question 2:** Why is the bindi regarded more as a fashion statement rather than seen for its religious and cultural contexts?

Rationale/Explanation: This central question and subheading questions will answer my proposed problem statement because it explicitly names aspects of Hindu religion and Indian culture that are majorly appropriated and their normalization in society. A more thorough understanding may be developed by specifying certain appropriated traditions.

Conclusion

This research proposal has looked at the cultural appropriation of the Hindu religion and Indian culture, the need for reclamation from these marginalized groups, and the possible motivations for appropriators. This topic is especially pertinent today and continues to hold validity as more and more instances of appropriation come about. It is especially rampant through this digital age and social media. It is vital for these communities to retain and seek power in the traditions of their religion and culture and to stand in that power even more so when they experience appropriation. There should be ramifications for those that appropriate, even if it means fostering a space where those who have experienced these acts can speak to the transgressors to speak openly about the significance of doing so. It is crucial to hold these spaces, to call out appropriation when we see it, and to reclaim what is rightfully theirs.

There needs to be more of these spaces to ascertain the lived experiences of those who have experienced appropriation or why those who appropriate choose to do so in the first place. There is more and more normalization surrounding the commercialism and merchandizing of this religion and culture that gets swept under the rug while no consequences are reaped. There is so much more work to be done regarding cultural competency as well, especially how it garners importance in the wake of appropriation. This research proposal seeks to create lines of open communication on appropriation, understand where others are coming from when they experience appropriation, hold those accountable for their misdeeds, and educate those open to developing their cultural competency. In fulfilling the problem and purpose statement, expanding on the literature, conducting the research methods, and answering the research questions outlined here, we will get closer to achieving results for this proposal.

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