Subaltern Speaks: Season 2, Episode 1 Transcript

Yasamin Jameh [00:00:06] Hello, everyone. Welcome to Subaltern Speaks, a podcast created by the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Toronto for spiritual study and practice where we explore the legacies of colonialism across religions and spiritualities of colonized peoples otherwise known as Subaltern in Post-Colonial studies. My name is Yasamin and I'm so excited to be your host again for the second season of Subaltern Speaks. We received lots of positive feedback from the U of T community for our first season, and we are so excited to present you with a new and fascinating programming for this new season. Today, we have a very special guest with us today Kalpesh Bhatt who along with so many other things is also our research fellow for this year at the Multi-Faith Centre. Kalpesh is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Study of Religion, Centre for South Asian Studies and Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. His doctoral study explores the theoretical challenges that everyday ethical reflections and actions of religious people pose to secular, liberal understandings of agency and autonomy. Focusing on the Bhagavad Gita, Kalpesh examines how modern receptions of premodern sacred texts shape, shape and are shaped by secular conditions, everyday concerns and ethical subjectivation of its practitioners. He also holds a Master of Theological Studies from Harvard University and has directed several films, including an IMAX film on India named Mystic India and Sat-Chit-Anand, a state-of-the-art multimedia show that highlights the dynamics between religion and technology, tradition and modernity. I'm so excited to have Kalpesh with us today. Uh how are you doing Kalpesh?

Kalpesh Bhatt [00:02:09] Hi Yasamin. I'm doing really good. Excellent. And thank you very much for inviting me for this podcast.

Yasamin [00:02:20] Yes. Ah, well, you're welcome. We're so excited to have you. Um, on this episode, we wanted to talk about how um um Hinduism is of course, a religion is one of the biggest most practiced religions in the world. But however, there has been a discourse um in the past decades centuries um that Hinduism is actually a British colonial construct um created when the British came to India around in the 18th century and particularly in the 19th century, which they were at the height of their power there. Um however this topic is obviously very controversial um and there's lots of opposing views stating that it's not a construct. So, today ah we wanted to discuss that and of first of all um to begin to dive into this conversation, we want to know what are what are the origins of Hinduism? What is the origin of the term Hinduism itself? And who are the parties involved in the creation of the term Hinduism?

Kalpesh [00:03:39] Uh yes uh very interesting question. And, as you mentioned, this topic has been long debated and hotly debated

Yasamin [00:03:49] Right

Kalpesh [00:03:50] Okay, so the first this term Hinduism. So, it has two terms, actually not two terms but the main the base term is Hindu with the suffix ism. So, the word Hindu is derived from the ancient Sanskrit word Sindhu which means in Sanskrit, a large body of water. So, like a river or an ocean, something like that. And it is also the original name of what is now known as the Indus River and its tributaries. So, the scholar, Asko Parpola suggests that the brutal Iranian sound changed this s from Hindu to h. So, from Sindhu to Hindu and so the Sindhu to Hindu occurred, he suggests between uh 850 and 600 BCE.

So that's about 2700 years ago. So, the actual term Hindu first occurred as a portion geographical term for the people living in the region around and east of the river Sindhu. They were all Hindu especially for the Middle Eastern, Greek and Roman traders and invaders that came to India in the last two millenniums. And evidence of this can be seen in the 6th century BCE inscription of the Persian King uh Darius the Great.

Yasamin [00:05:32] wow

Kalpesh [00:05:33] So the term Hindu in this ancient records is a geographical term and perhaps did not refer to religion. However, uh one of the earliest known records of Hindu with connotations of religion as Romila Tharpar an Indian historian and Indian historian states is in Avesta. Again, the sacred text of Zoroastrianism.

Yasamin [00:06:01] Wow

Kalpesh [00:06:02] Or Shia

Yasamin [00:06:03] Yes

Kalpesh [00:06:04] Which was compiled between 4th and 6th century BCE, that's 2500 years ago. And in its Sassanian inscription, the term Hindu is found as Hepta Hindu uh which is equivalent to the Rig Vedic term Supta Sindhu, so the Rig Veda is the Sanskrit sacred text one of the oldest extern texts in any Indo-European language, it's more than 3000 years old, and in that text, you find this word Sindhu and Avesta calls it Hindu. Also later, the term Hindu is found in religious sense in the religious context.

Yasamin [00:06:46] Right

Kalpesh [00:06:47In the Chinese text records of the western regions by Xuanzang. He was a 7th century Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar and traveller. And then by 13th century, the term Hindu became so popular that the Arabic name Hindustan, meaning the land of Hindus, became popular as an alternative name of India, which was in India, referred to as Bharat or Bharat varshe.

Yasamin [00:07:20] So, the native of India called themselves um what the,

Kalpesh [00:07:26] Bharat

Yasamin [00:07:28] oh Bharat, oh yes, I've heard that a lot. Yeah.

Kalpesh [00:07:32] Bharat or Bharat varshe these are the terms used in Sanskrit text to refer to that native land. But,

Yasamin [00:07:40] Yup does not defer to religion just it's like a geographical designation, right.

Kalpesh [00:07:47] The biogeographic designation or name was Bharat or Bharat varshe but Hindu as a religious context was used even in Indian text and text outside India, like, as I said Avesta by the Chinese in the Chinese records and also in India, like, as David Lorenzen argues, that the term

Hindu was used in the religious sense by pointing to the distinction between Hindu and Turk, Turk is Muslims with medieval poetries of Kabir and

Guru Nanak. In a similar vein, the term Hindu was also used to distinguish Hindus from

Muslims in the 16th century Bengali Gaudiya Vaishnavism texts such as Chaitanya Charitamrita and Chaitanya Bhagavata. So, this term was earlier used as a geographical category, but then immediately followed by that in the religious sense to refer to the religion, religious practices and beliefs of people of India. So, the term Hindu had been very popular for a couple of millennia.

Yasamin [00:09:07] Mm-Hmm

Kalpesh [00:09:08] But the term Hinduism with the suffix in ism,

Yasamin [00:09:12] Yes.

Kalpesh [00:09:13] which it was introduced into the English language in the 19th century, early 19th century to denote the religious, philosophical and cultural traditions native to India. And again, an Indian historian, Rupinder Singh, suggests in our work that the term Hinduism was first used by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a Bengali activist and intellectual in the early 19th century.

Yasamin [00:09:44] So he was a he was a native of the of India. He wasn't um,

Kalpesh [00:09:50] Yes

Yasamin [00:09:51] he wasn't British?

Kalpesh [00:09:52] No he wasn't British.

Yasamin [00:09:54] Oh Interesting.

Kalpesh [00:09:55] So also also when Wendy Doniger here at this University of Chicago and others argue that the term Hinduism was coined by those Indians who opposed British colonialism,

Yasamin [00:10:09] Mm-Hmm

Kalpesh [00:10:10] and who wanted to distinguish that Age-Old Hindu traditions from other religions, such as Islam, Christianity or Buddhist. So, this is kind of briefly how old the term Hindu and Hinduism are and their origins.

Yasamin [00:10:28] Wow. So, it was originally um an exonym um a name like Hindu or Hinduism was an exonym for um referring to the people of the Indian subcontinent by the outside people, not the natives themselves, and it uh eventually got embraced by the people by by the you know 19th century, it eventually got embraced um as a endonym, correct?

Kalpesh [00:10:59] uh the word Hinduism in 19th century but the word Indo

Yasamin [00:11:03] Mm-Hmm

Kalpesh [00:11:04] was like many centuries before that.

Yasamin [00:11:06] Oh OK.

Kalpesh [00:11:08] Even two-thousand years before that. The word Hindu was used in a religious context even in the Indian texts and also uh in the text and inscriptions in Eurasia, Middle East, Chinese texts.

Yasamin [00:11:24] Right? OK. Well, that's very interesting. Ah, very fascinating. I was wondering, so when does in all this? When does the whole notion that Hinduism is a colonial construct emerge? And I'm wondering, to what extent is Christianity implicated? You know, the Christianity, the Protestant Christianity brought by the British implicated in this construction of this notion? Because from what it seems, um, the term Hinduism almost becomes in the 19th century, Hinduism, becomes as like a position to like the Abrahamic faith it is because of course, in India there is lots of Muslims, lots of Christians. There is also like people like who are neither of those like the Parsis, or Zoroastrians, there's so many other religions. So, Hinduism almost becomes like other for like all the other non-Abrahamic non monotheistic religions. So, I'm wondering, when does in all this, this notion of it being a colonial construct emerge?

Kalpesh [00:12:39] Uh, yes, very good question. Uh, I think it needs to be explored ah from many different perspectives.

Yasamin [00:12:48] Mm-Hmm

Kalpesh [00:12:49] So, the notion that Hinduism is a colonial construct is actually a relatively recent western academic construction done in the second half of the last century. So, in 1960's Paul Hacker and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, they argued that the concept of Hinduism is a construction of the West. So, Smith contends that Hinduism does not refer to an entity, rather it's a name wrongly given to a prodigiously diverse systems of beliefs and practices, as if they formed one homogeneous system of doctrines. So, according to Smith, this misconception was the result of the use of Christian and especially uh I would say, Protestant conception of religion as systems of doctrines. So, then there were also other scholars like Raymond Schwab and P.J. Marshall, who examined the colonial and missionary descriptions of India and situate the colonial construction of Hinduism with the

European discourses and the needs of colonialists, both in the colonies and at home. So,

Marshall's book, The British Discovery of Hinduism, in that he shows that many Orientalists works on Hinduism, but looks much concerned about India and its religions, but rather about their own own issues and controversies with Christian theology and practices.

Yasamin [00:14:36] Wow, putting themselves like at the centre instead of the local Indians. Yeah.

Kalpesh [00:14:41] Exactly so. And they did not explore what Hinduism meant to millions of Indians. It was primarily what we need to get at our home. So similarly, this Bernard Cohn and

others argue that the colonial study of India had constructed Hinduism and thereby shaped a predictable India that could be classified and hence dominated and controlled. So, this was the argument, so this resembles very much, I would say, Orientalism.

Yasamin [00:15:18] Yes.

Kalpesh [00:15:19] This is that Western discourses and assumptions limited the

Orientalist descriptions of the West, which are intrinsically related to the colonial project and process of acquiring power and dominance of the West. So, this concepts um were in place in the second half of the last century. But then came this resistance of and refutation of this concept that it was a colonial construct.

Yasamin [00:15:57] Right

Kalpesh [00:15:58] They said that the most radical position in recent years,

Yasamin [00:16:02] Yes

Kalpesh [00:16:03] has been articulated like this uh colonial construct that radical position is articulated by this German Indologist Heinrich von Stietencron.

Yasamin [00:16:18] OK.

Kalpesh [00:16:19] So according to him, the unity of Hinduism is a 19th century Western invention,

Yasamin [00:16:26] Mm-Hmm

Kalpesh [00:16:27] which conceals a plurality of distinct religious traditions and sects, those the so-called sects of Hinduism. And he says that before 19th century there was no uh surprise sectarian Hindu religious identity or even Hindu religious unity. There was nothing like that before the century. So, the several scholars have strongly presented this thesis that the colonizers represented the diverse Indian reality in an essentialist manner as a religion called Hinduism in order to classify and control the colonized India.

Yasamin [00:17:16] Wow, this is this is really like it touches base with like a lot of things that I had read in the past about India um and like British colonialism there. Um, you know, I've always been interested about you know the creation of the name, the category of IndoEuropean languages or as they used to be called before Aryan languages. Um, that of course became more controversial in the first half of the 20th century because the events and wars in Europe. But um it was always fascinating to me how um like a lot of like British philologist, um a lot of British people uh scholars who studied languages, um they always like suspected that all these European languages and also like Persian language and, you know what not, they all were related. And finally, when they came to India in the 18th century, um they realized, yes, that root languages like Sanskrit um and all of a sudden, um they started, create, you know, focusing a lot like, that really resonates with me when you say, like um the British, instead of like studying Hinduism and the people of India for their own sake, they started like applying themselves and their own history and their own notions of supremacy and imperialism. They began to apply that to like uh history of the Indian subcontinent,

namely, like you know the history of Sanskrit and Aryans and all that and they appropriate that basically once something that was like the history of the Indians of that the people of that region kind of becomes like a European discourse. And that's how we see like throughout the 19th century like the term Aryan, which was it simply means like noble in like uh Sanskrit and um like, it's separate, but it's like a separate notion, a distinct notion kind of becomes appropriated by the by the Europeans, first by the British. And then we also see like by the French and then later the Germans, where they kind of like tie it to their own politics unto their notions, to their own notions of supremacy over other races in the world and to justify their colonialism? And I mean, to me, that was like because I'm Iranian myself. I mean, I think I've said that before. I'm part, partially Iranian. And I mean, I'm used to like the kind of like the term Aryan of Iran is the root word. It comes, it means Aryan, the root word, Iran is Aryan. Um, so, we're like, we identify ourselves as Aryan, but somehow like, what the West perceives as Aryan and what it connotates, it's like, radically different cause they something happened in the 19th century where this term Aryan got co-opted and used for like uh basically racism and you know white supremacy and imperialism, which is awful. But yeah, to me, that just seems like such a perversion, but also like, extremely fascinating how, like British discovery of India was the root of this. And you know, people like William Jones, he was a like a philologist in the 18th century comes to mind. He like basically made the term Indo-European.

Kalpesh [00:20:41] Uh, I would just add that, you know, it's primarily you can see this two trends. One is Orientalism.

Yasamin [00:20:49] Yes, yes.

Kalpesh [00:20:50] And Western academic category of religion. This two explain the colonial construction of Hinduism. So, the scholar's postulate that Hinduism as one religion that unifies all this doctrines and texts and practices and gods that existed in the subcontinent. But it it solves this colonial needs of domination on the one hand and on the other, the Western Christian conception of religion, which is now then a secular category religion with a specific set of core characteristics or essence. So, this two things like the academic category religion and Orientalism are two of them are kind of the essence of making Hinduism as colonial construct.

Yasamin [00:21:46] Yes, so that leads us to our next question, which is um, I just want to dig deeper about why many scholars are opposed to this view that Hinduism is a colonial construct. And I want to get into the counter arguments that they present to refute this notion. So, I'm wondering, what are the historical basis for the, for the counter arguments and also the philosophical basis for these counterarguments, if you could get a little into that?

Kalpesh [00:22:17] Uh, yes. Actually, in the last two decades, many, many scholars have effectively and rigorously deconstructed this notion of Hinduism being a colonial construction. And as you said, through various perspectives, historical, philosophical and theoretical, there is like by theories of religion. Uh, so, uh you know in earlier in the first question, I mention mentioned some historical data and evidence that the term Hindu had been in use in religious context for many centuries. And then I said that the term Hinduism of as religion was the 19th century construction. Uh, nonetheless, scholars have challenged even this 19th century construction of Hindu beliefs and practices as Hinduism being only colonial or specifically engendered by the British Raj. Bob Scott, here at the University of Toronto in his work, also, you know, supports this kind of substantiates this argument and claim that Hinduism is a modern invention of the mind of Orientalists, missionaries, British administrators, as well as Hindu intellectuals,

Yasamin [00:23:46] Ah, OK.

Kalpesh [00:23:47] Hindu common people. So, it's not one construction. They say it's a, it's a process, it's an ongoing process that happens even today.

Yasamin [00:23:56] Mm-Hmm

Kalpesh [00:23:57] It's happening today, and it began hundreds and thousands of years ago. It's a continuous process.

Yasamin [00:24:04] The other um word um of Hinduism is actually called Sanatana Dharma that I didn't know that. And I found that, I mean, I found that fascinating, like a lot of, not until recently and by recently, I mean, like 19th century, that's recent for me, just because the history of India, it's so like long, like 200 years ago seems like not a lot of time because these things go for thousands of years, but until until, like recently, not a lot of like Hindus, like they called themselves Hinduism, they mostly knew at as Sanatana Dharma or like it means like the eternal religion or eternal order, um which is another you know fascinating notion that I didn't know that. Um, and so, yeah, I mean, you were earlier you were talking about how um, you know, a lot of these British mission, well, the British colonial organizers, colonial administrators, but also a lot of like, English missionaries um they had they had an interest in making Hinduism make it like constructing the notion of Hinduism as unified, partly because they wanted to create an other uh in contrast to their to their Christian religion, um to their because like they were dealing with people with all these diverse traditions and they couldn't like come, they couldn't like address these people properly. They didn't know what to call them. They didn't know how to like resonate with them and like their conversions or anything like that. So, they created that term Hinduism just to make it easier for themselves and create the other against Protestant Christianity. So, you know, I found that extremely fascinating and how like a lot of Indian uh intellectuals who started like also using that term to reclaim it and, um yeah, reclaim it for themselves and a making it like a almost like nationalistic, yeah, anti-colonial, nationalistic, if you could say that term in order to refer um in order to refer to themselves and take that power away from, you know, the colonial authorities. Um, so that goes into my next question. Um, that is, what do these discourses, what do all these discourses that we've been talking about um mean for the Indian slash, you know, Hindu identity today? Um, and why are these issues continue to be controversial?

Kalpesh [00:26:42] Yes. So, as you mentioned this term, very interestingly, uh Sanatana Dharma. So, there are so many Hindus they still prefer to call their religion, religion with this contested category, but uh call their beliefs, Sanatana Dharma and not Hinduism because they see this term or the concept Dharma is not compatible with the category of religion. And many scholars like Richard Richard King and S.N. Balagangadhara and Timothy Fitzgerald, all of them have argued based on this that what Hindu Sanatana Dharma is, they don't use this term. But the concept is not compatible with the western category of religion. And hence, there are many Hindus who want to separate or kind of disassociate their beliefs and practices from category religion. Or, then there is another category that who want that connection, who want themselves to be called religion or religion Hinduism, world religion Hinduism and then suggest that oh, it has always existed or it has, it's a very old construction. So that's why at a time when the scholars started to point out that descriptions of Hinduism were problematic and did not correspond to any existing religion in India,

Kalpesh [00:28:26] Indians themselves began to claim that the same descriptions were true because it gave them some strong identity.

Yasamin [00:28:35] So you're talking about um the intellectuals who supported the term like Hinduism. Those are the ones who like, you're talking about that, right?

Kalpesh [00:28:45] There were no there were two, I would say, broadly speaking,

Yasamin [00:28:48] Mm-Hmm

Kalpesh [00:28:49] two groups those who supported the term Hinduism and category religion because it placed Hinduism on level with other world religions.

Yasamin [00:29:01] Right

Kalpesh [00:29:02] And those who preferred not to be called religion or Hinduism but called themselves Sanatana Dharma, saying that Dharma is not equal to religion. It is a completely different concept. So, there is a mismatch between the concepts. So, there was like and of course, this is very broadly speaking, just these two types of people. There are many more. And it's it's kind of influx. It's a whole spectrum.

Yasamin [00:29:29] Right

Kalpesh [00:29:30] But uh so, but it was Indians in one way or other themselves began to claim that the same descriptions of, you know, Hinduism is not a colonial construction it's true.

Yasamin [00:29:46] Right

Kalpesh [00:29:47] The problem became prominent due to a series of events that followed in India before and after independence because that saw a rise of both Hindu nationalism and Muslim aggression uh before independence because of the British policy of divide and rule.

Yasamin [00:30:07] Yes

Kalpesh [00:30:08] And, perhaps the the birth of Pakistan is because is a result of that policy. But that is before independence, which continued after independence. And this tension and violent tensions between Hindus and Muslims were seen in primarily in the 20th century and also to some extent to this century. Uh, so, this became problematic because Indian themselves begin now to claim that a religion called Hinduism with all those characteristics existed in India, after all. So not only did Indians say this, this claim also united Hindus of different traditions, internationalist movements. So, they came to prove that this religion was a reality for at least some sections of Indian society. And this posed a challenge for those scholars who claim that the use of the concept Hinduism distorted Indian reality, so it's kind ah, ah, it's working against the scholars themselves.

Yasamin [00:31:20] You're right. Yeah, it's like politics, like political realities,

Kalpesh [00:31:25] Exactly

Yasamin [00:31:26] um kind of hinder, like the critical academic study, of

Kalpesh [00:31:32] Exactly

Yasamin [00:31:33] these concepts of religion and what that means and what that entails and philosophy. But I wanted to focus more on like India today, like um with the rise of Indian nationalism. Uh, sorry, Hindu nationalism. And as far as I know, the current Indian government is a Hindu nationalist government. Um, I'm wondering like, what is? What does it mean today, like how how are Indians and Hindus, um you know, dealing with these um discourses and how are they framing it and how is that changing? If you could go a little into that.

Kalpesh [00:32:15] Yes, of course. So, with this current government, uh which supports uh this Hindu ism concept as a world religion and portraying India as land of Hindus, primarily of Hindus. Uh, so, it engenders this tension between Hindus and other religions, other religious practitioners with Christianity, with Islam, Buddhism and others. So, there is this tension that's going on right now. And actually, I would say that it has been going on for more than a century. Uh, even before independence, after independence, in the last 70 years of independence, this tension between Hindus and Muslims, Hindus and Christians. Uh, this tensions have been going on. It's kind of like Hinduism as a process. Its tensions are going on as like continuing process. Uh, but as this, this thing goes on because of this government support, uh Hinduism being an ancient religion and the nature of religion of India is now solidifying even more than it was, it used to be earlier. So, while these tensions are been, I mean it's like a long history and there are so many different factors I would say. Uh not just religious factors, uh not just it's like if you see the history of this Hindu and Muslim tensions or Hindu and Christian tensions have been primarily used by politicians.

Yasamin [00:34:05] Yes. Yes.

Kalpesh [00:34:07] Beginning with the British and then after independence with all those governments, uh whether in the central government or the local state governments. They have been using this, so, to safeguards the political voting cards, religious cards or even caste system cards or other systems of division to their political mileage. So, uh yes, the the front face is religious, cultural, caste based social divide, that's the front face. Like, ok, there are religious tensions here, there are social tensions here between this caste and that caste. In the back, the players are primarily political power grabbing players.

Yasamin [00:35:03] Yup, yup.

Kalpesh [00:35:05] So, whether it's the nationalist government or secular government or communist government, all of them resort to this tools and mobilizing, uh whether in the name of secularism or in the name of religion, it's kind of mobilizing and appearing different groups for their political advantage.

Yasamin [00:35:31] Yes, I mean, it's typical. It's unfortunately typical. I mean, that's how politics works. All these like historical issues, religious issues, spiritual philosophical issues just get like, condensed and used as like little tag lines and like political debates and campaigns. And just to rally people up, um which unfortunately hinders, like deep academic study. But I mean, hey, it's the world we live in, um and I think it just becomes much more complex. I mean, we do have these kind of like people co-opting culture and ethnic identities, um politicians co-opting it in the west and stuff. But I feel like in places like India where like the history is so much like it goes way back and as much older place, it just gets much more complex. Um, but anyway, um this was a wonderful,

Kalpesh [00:36:23] Such a complex history actually offers many avenues that you can you know piggyback on and then use it to your advantage.

Yasamin [00:36:32] Yeah, yeah. It gives you much more like flexibility, I guess. But anyway, this is such a fascinating conversation. Unfortunately, we are short of time and this is, I mean, this topic is so expansive and we could talk on it about it for hours. And people like such as yourself, dedicate years and years of academic study to this. But unfortunately, this is all we can offer for today. Um, hope the listeners, you find something out of this, and you can you know read more into the sources that Kalpesh referenced here today and do your own research. And maybe you'll discover so many other new things you didn't know before um in your own personal research. I hope this was like a getaway to your own personal research, guys. Anyway, thanks for joining me, Kalpesh. And thanks to the listeners for joining us on our first episode of Season Two of Subaltern Speaks. Head to Spotify, Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to podcasts to tune into our latest episodes. Next month, please join my co-host Christina Shivtahal to unpack what it means to be Muslim Indo-Caribbean in Canada and how intersectionality of race, nationality, gender and identity plays a role in Muslim Indo-Caribbean identification. So please stay tuned for that as well and give some love to my new co-host Christina. She's wonderful. So, we hope you'll tune in and thank you so much, Kalpesh.

Kalpesh [00:38:10] No thank you. Thank you Yasamin. It was really great talking to you. Wonderful conversation, discussion. And also thank you to all of our listeners. I hope this not even one-on-one on this topic was bit helpful to them and will hopefully inspire them to get further into other material. Thank you very much.