The Triumph of the Hindu Right

Ananya Vajpeyi
The Triumph of the Hindu Right

Freedom of Speech and Religious Repression in Modi’s India

Ananya Vajpeyi

On Hinduism

The Hindus: An Alternative History
BY WENDY DONIGER. Penguin Press, 2009, 800 pp. $25.00.

In February, Penguin Books India pledged to cease publishing The Hindus: An Alternative History, a 2009 book by Wendy Doniger, a prominent American scholar of India and Hinduism. The publisher also promised to recall and pulp all copies of the book available for sale in India. Penguin’s decision was prompted by a complaint filed by Dina Nath Batra, a retired schoolteacher who heads a right-wing Hindu nationalist group, the Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti (Campaign Committee to Save Education, or SBAS). The group claimed that Doniger’s work denigrated Hinduism and Hindus and thus violated Indian laws prohibiting “deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs.” Batra’s organization is affiliated with the hard-line Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Patriotic Organization, or RSS), which is driven by an ideology of Hindutva (Hinduness) and envisions India as a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation)—a state defined by and restricted to Hindus.

The SBAS alleged that Doniger’s work was riddled with factual inaccuracies and deliberate misrepresentations of Hindu deities and Scriptures that amounted to “heresies.” The group’s most vehement objections concerned Doniger’s interpretations of sex and sexuality in Hindu traditions. In her five decades of scholarship, Doniger has sought to highlight and reclaim the earthy and even erotic elements of Hinduism that were suppressed during the colonial era by British authorities and missionaries—and by some Indians who sought to “modernize” their country’s religious practices.

For instance, Doniger argues that the lingam, a symbol of the Hindu deity Shiva that is found in temples, should be understood “unequivocally as an iconic representation of the male sexual organ in erection, in particular as the erect phallus” of Shiva. Similarly, Doniger notes that the Mahabharata, one of the two Sanskrit epics, portrays the deity Krishna as “a prince with many wives, sixteen thousand by some counts,” and points out that other Hindu texts depict Krishna as a handsome young man who dances with the many Gopis, the wives of the cowherd men. In the great circle dance in the moonlight . . . he doubles himself again and again so that each Gopi
The Triumph of the Hindu Right

The Triumph of the Hindu Right

The Satanic Verses was banned in India, and the New York Times editor Joseph Lelyveld, whose biography of Mahatma Gandhi was banned in the Indian state of Gujarat. For decades, the fight over freedom of expression has divided Indian intellectual opinion, with little middle ground between the two most vocal camps: secular liberals on one end of the spectrum and religious conservatives on the other. The Doniger affair represented a clear victory for the conservatives, who are riding higher now than at any moment in India’s postindependence history.

Indian liberals were dismayed by Penguin’s decision and by the possibility that Aleph might have followed suit. But what most worried them was the way in which the Doniger affair seemed to fit into a broader trend of right-wing ascendance in Indian politics and society. After an intense campaign, national elections took place over five weeks in April and May. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a clear majority, and Narendra Modi, the chief minister of Gujarat, became India’s new prime minister. Modi now heads the most right-wing government ever to lead India. He started his political career as a young cadre in the hard-line Hindu nationalist ideological development and political activism—and is a direct threat to Indian liberalism. The convergence was hard to miss: just as the RSS and its allies gained the upper hand in their crusade against Doniger’s supposed heresies, their champion, Modi, was marching toward victory at the ballot box.
The Hindu religion is a palace with many rooms—and also some gardens, terraces, outhouses, and a basement. Unlike other world religions, Hinduism is not built on one God, one book, one prophet, or one holy place. Very crudely put, adherents of Hinduism for the most part believe in rebirth and the transmigration of the soul; in gods and goddesses who occupy a divine world that is distinct from the human world; in the centrality of karma, deeds that drive the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth; in the possibility of moksha, a final release from karma and its entailments, when the individual soul merges with the cosmic soul; in the validity of the caste system as a form of social organization; and in the interrelationship between human life and the world of nature.

But this hardly captures the extreme variety within the practice of the faith. Doniger addresses this definitional problem in the opening essay of On Hinduism:

What we need instead of a definite list of shared factors, therefore, is something rather more like a Venn diagram, a set of intersecting circles of concepts and beliefs and practices. . . . But since there is no single central quality that all Hindus must have, the emptiness in the center suggests that the figure might better be named a Zen diagram, a Venn diagram that has no central ring.

Doniger, faced with the challenge posed by this amorphous topic, has produced a work of admirable breadth. Some of the most interesting essays in On Hinduism examine yoga and ayurveda, two systems that combine mental concentration, physical exercise,
breathing, diet, medicine, and healing, and that originated in ancient India but have gone on to lead complex afterlives elsewhere, especially in the United States. Through yoga and ayurveda, Hindu and Buddhist theories of consciousness, thought and action, life and death, sickness and health have become detached from esoteric texts and have emerged as globalized secular disciplines available to people of all cultures and religions. Doniger reveals how contemporary, westernized, and physically oriented aspects of yoga now define the practice just as much as Indian philosophical approaches that are concerned primarily with the mind (or with consciousness) and only later with the body.

HINDU NATION
Yet Doniger does not do quite enough to straighten out the tangled relationship within Hinduism between ancient and modern, Eastern and Western. Admittedly, it’s a tall order to offer a comprehensive, exhaustive portrait of Hinduism in all its forms. But conspicuously missing
from her otherwise wide-ranging book is a clear account of Hinduism’s reinvention over the past 200 years.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, when India’s encounter with colonialism produced periods of internal reflection, revision, criticism, and revival among Indian intellectuals and religious leaders, new schools and strands of “reform Hinduism” have led to important changes in traditional beliefs and practices. Driving much of this ferment was the aspiration of many Hindu thinkers and leaders to “Semitize” Hinduism and render it similar to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam by endowing it with a more clearly identifiable set of canonical texts, doctrines, institutions, and sources of authority.

Chief among these revisionist figures was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a poet and political activist who pushed for Indian independence from the United Kingdom and who, during the 1920s, developed the concept of Hindutva. In order to possess Hindutva, Savarkar claimed, a person—a man, really, because Savarkar and his Hindu nationalist acolytes tended to use rigidly patriarchal terms—must think of India as both his “fatherland” and his “holy land.” He must be attached to India not simply through the fact of his birth there but through a love for “Hindu civilization,” which Savarkar defined as representing “a common history, common heroes, a common literature, common art, a common law and a common jurisprudence, common fairs and festivals, rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments.” Savarkar tried to fill in the empty circle at the center of Doniger’s Venn diagram with definitions and identities drawn from modern nationalism, which had almost nothing to do with the religious lives of millions of Hindus. Hindutva revolves around history, culture, and civilization, rather than belief, worship, and tradition. It is a political credo, not a religious faith.

Savarkar and his followers lionized Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler and sought to adapt elements of fascist politics to India. But the early Hindu nationalists had little success in the face of Gandhi’s enormous popularity and his leadership of an anticolonial movement that eventually brought down the British Raj. Gandhi’s philosophy, with its emphasis on nonviolence and tolerance, stood in stark contrast to the divisive vision of Hindutva leaders, and the two movements were often in conflict. Indeed, Nathuram Godse, the man who assassinated Gandhi in 1948, was a follower of Savarkar.

In the aftermath of the murder, mobs attacked Savarkar’s house in Mumbai. Authorities later arrested and tried him for conspiring in the assassination plot. He was acquitted and released, but he was rearrested soon after for making inflammatory speeches. The authorities set him free only once he agreed to give up his political activities, and he mostly retreated from public view for the remainder of his life (he died in 1966).

But Savarkar’s dream of a Hindu Rashtra never died. It was kept alive over the decades by groups such as the RSS and, later, by the BJP, which leavened Savarkar’s extreme vision of Hindu supremacy with a more palatable pro-business, technocratic approach to politics, all the while stoking Hindu nationalist sentiment by exploiting tensions between Hindus and Muslims. Modi has perfected this synthesis—so skillfully, in fact, that even some Indian
liberals appear willing to believe that despite his decades of involvement in Hindu nationalist causes, Modi embraced Hindutva mostly as an electoral strategy and the “real” Modi is not a divisive ideologue but a pragmatic, growth-oriented manager.

**DONIGER DONNYBROOK**

Doniger has little to say about these aspects of contemporary Hinduism’s story. She has criticized the efforts of groups such as the RSS to “Hinduize” India. She also rejects the essentialist quality of Hindu nationalist thought. After all, she writes, there is no Hindu canon, and “ideas about all the major issues of faith and lifestyle—vegetarianism, nonviolence, belief in rebirth, even caste—are subjects of a debate, not a dogma.”

Yet in spite of the breadth of her critical gaze and the accessibility of her prose, Doniger does not venture deeply enough into Hinduism’s complex history and turbulent present. One problem is perhaps insurmountable: her perspective remains that of an outsider—a knowledgeable, even expert, outsider, but an outsider nevertheless. She seems to feel sympathy for her subject but not empathy. She is curious but not passionate. This makes her books easy to pick up but also easy to put down.

Still, while it’s easy to imagine readers being left cold by Doniger’s views on Hinduism, it’s much harder to understand why anyone would be insulted, offended, or agitated by them. Her critics have accused her of Christian missionary zeal (despite the fact that she’s Jewish) and of practicing a kind of intellectual imperialism. In reality, Doniger, who has taught at the
University of Chicago since 1978, is part of a group of scholars who during the past three decades have dismantled the colonial and Orientalist assumptions of Western Indology.

That fact is lost on many of Doniger’s detractors, not all of whom reside on the Indian subcontinent. Indeed, the most vocal of Doniger’s critics include Indian Americans deeply sensitive to the ways in which their religion, culture, and traditions are represented in the United States. The Hindu American Foundation, a Washington-based advocacy group that models itself on Jewish organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League, has blasted Doniger’s work as “pornographic . . . skewed and superficial” and urged academic organizations not to honor Doniger or promote her scholarship.

MODI’S MOMENT
The controversy over Doniger’s work yielded a brief boost in attention to and sales of her books. And despite Penguin’s decision to withdraw The Hindus, it continues to be available in India, thanks to versions circulating on the Internet, foreign editions that Indians can order from Amazon and other online booksellers, and e-book editions that remain legal to sell and buy. But the existence of well-organized anti-Doniger campaigns on two continents surely limits Doniger’s ability to reach the Hindu audiences that might benefit most from her insights. It hardly helps matters that sexist attitudes—in the United States as well as in India—make it harder for female scholars, even very accomplished and established ones such as Doniger, to write freely, provocatively, and creatively about subjects that touch the raw nerves of cultural pride, historical memory, and group identity. Doniger’s work is particularly galling to patriarchal conservatives in India, focusing as it does on feminist undercurrents within Hinduism that undermine the authority of elite, upper-caste, male, and orthodox sections of Hindu society. That’s one reason why, for all its flaws, Doniger’s work is valuable at the moment, as the Modi era begins to cast a shadow over liberal and secular traditions in India.

Modi’s election was the first occasion since the late 1940s that Hindu beliefs seem to have appealed to Indians across regional, class, and caste divides. Of course, it isn’t completely clear that Hindu nationalism truly drove the BJP’s electoral victory. Nor is anyone certain of how much influence Hindutva ideology will have on Modi’s government. Modi might sacrifice the support of hard-liners in order to seek a broad consensus on economic policy, foreign policy, or other issues that don’t directly touch the intersection of religion and politics. On the other hand, if his political standing remains strong, he might well jettison the preferences of the vocal but tiny liberal intelligentsia and reveal himself as the champion of Hindutva that he has always been at heart.

Indian liberals would prefer the first scenario. But they are understandably alarmed that either way, the future of Indian liberalism and secularism now depends so much on the political calculations of a man who has made clear his antipathy toward such values. The fight over Doniger, which both terrified and energized many Indian liberals, might soon seem a mere prelude to a larger, much uglier struggle.