

The Embrace of Contradiction

Wendy Doniger reminds us that Hinduism is a many-splendoured thing but who is she really writing for?

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The *Chandogya Upanishad* recounts the creation of the world: it all began with a cosmic egg, the text claims, that cracked in two. One half of this broken eggshell formed the sky and the other part the earth. From the egg-white came clouds and from the yolk, mist. The veins in the egg turned into rivers and the fluid of the egg became the ocean. In the *Satapatha Brahmana*, the creator, Prajapati, hatches from a golden egg. Eggs abound in creation myths across cultures – from the Greek Orphic myths to the Finnish *Kalevala*. Perhaps it is fitting that the story of how *The Hindus: An Alternative History* came into being also begins with an egg – an English egg thrown at an American academic during a lecture in London in November 2003.

Wendy Doniger, the author of *The Hindus*, is possibly the most reputed academic in the field of Hindu studies today. In 2003, she was giving a lecture at the School of Oriental and African Studies, moderated by William Dalrymple, when, in response to her comments on the repressed sexuality of characters in the *Ramayana*, an audience member threw an egg at her.

An earlier essay by Doniger, 'Shadows of the Ramayana', seems to summarise the contentious points of her lecture. The essay is brilliant and incisive, more literary criticism than anything else. In her analysis, Doniger points out how characters like Surpanakaa and Sita serve as foils to each other, and how the rela-

tionship between Valin and Surgriva articulates the tensions and potential threats that underlie Ram's relationship with his brothers. She goes on to claim that "the text suggests that Rama might fear his brother Lakshmana might become another sort of double, that he could replace Rama in bed with Sita." For devout Hindus, who consider Ram a god and the *Ramayana* a sacred text only to be worshipped, such readings are, no doubt, antagonizing. After her

The Hindus: An Alternative History

by Wendy Doniger

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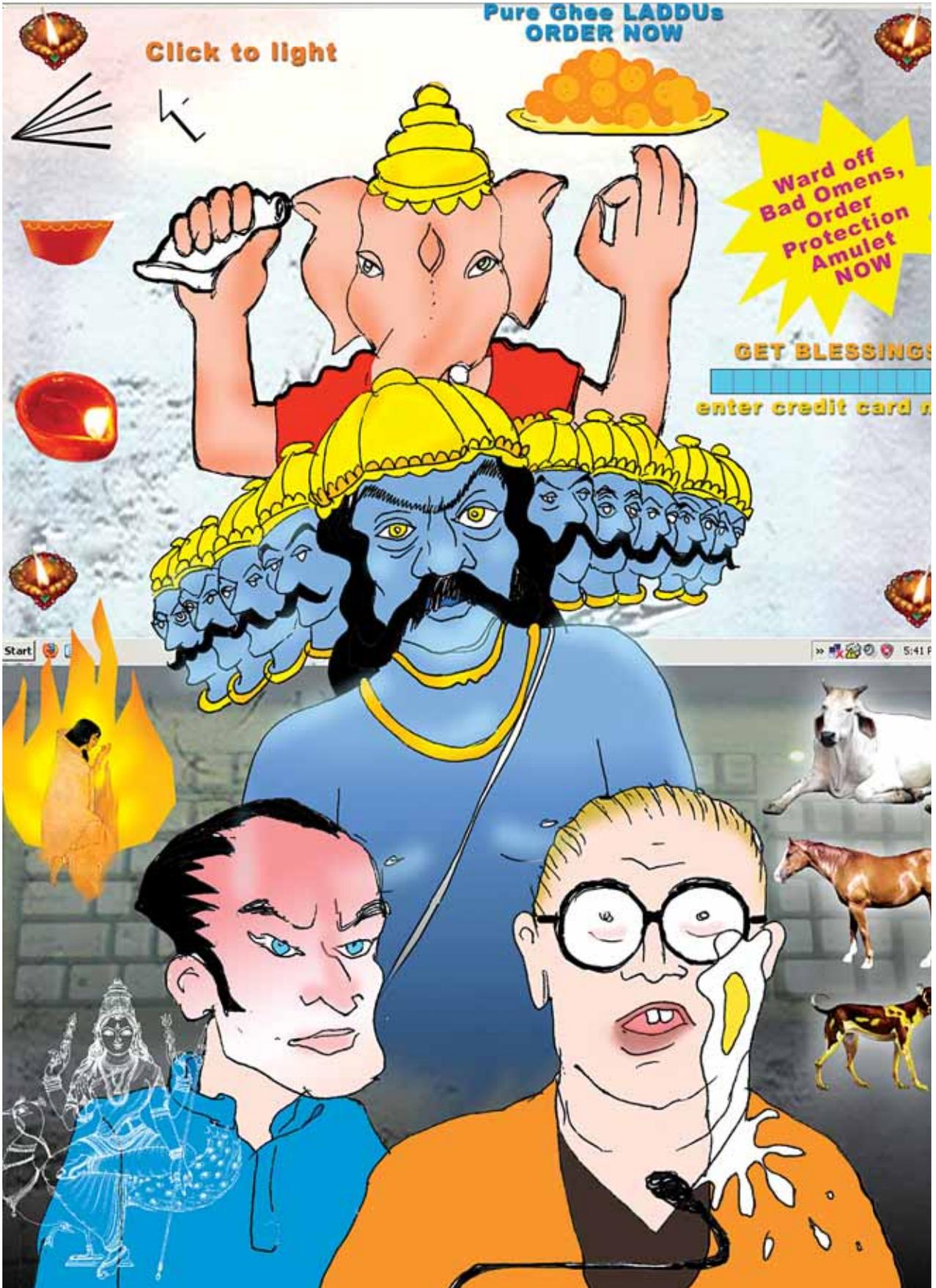
2003 lecture, Doniger was attacked in the press and on the Internet for being titillating and obsessed with sex. Dalrymple, writing later about the incident, noted that the egg-throwing faction not only criticised Doniger's work but also questioned her right, as a non-Hindu, to write about Hinduism.

It's this incident, Doniger claims in the preface to *The Hindus*, that spurred her to write this book, which offers the reader an alternative to the conventional and most widely-read narratives of Hinduism.

The Hindus is significant in the light of the ongoing debate about the various versions of Indian 'history' available and the 'right' to write

about India and Hinduism. Dalrymple, in an article titled 'The War Over History', has examined how history has been politicised by the right and how anything that represents a deviation from that perspective is attacked. He notes that academics in India and abroad have been subjected to "hate campaigns from Hindu extremists and the 'cyber-nationalists' of the Indian diaspora" and ends his article with a call for "accessible, well-written and balanced histories of India". The existing histories, in his opinion, are scholarly works that do not appeal to the general Indian reading public. The vacuum is filled with the sort of 'unhistorical myths' (seen, most notably, in the textbooks brought out a few years back during the BJP regime) that present an artificial, constructed, airbrushed version of Indian history at odds with historical evidence. In *The Hindus*, Doniger has attempted to answer Dalrymple's call and provide a readable history of India and Hinduism that presents not just a narrative alternative but also deconstructs many of the popular, unhistorical myths that have been circulated in the last fifty years.

In contrast to the dogmatic Hinduism of the Hindutva brigade, Doniger's Hinduism is protean and eludes definition. She traces the origin of the word 'Hinduism' to its geographical roots. As she explains, Hindus, in the first instance, are a geographically-defined people. Thus 'Hinduism' is an ill-fitting term, harbouring a multiplicity of faiths and



ideological stances, and coming to mean a religion only in colonial times. Doniger's scope is immense: she traces the development of key themes – the treatment of animals and women, the concept of violence and dharma – through the entire period of habitation on the Indian subcontinent – from the time that Gondwanaland crashed into Asia and created the Himalayas to the present day.

Hinduism, Doniger claims, is not just about Brahmins, Vedas and Sanskrit – it's also about women, lower castes, pariahs, Buddhists, Jains, Muslims and vernacular languages. Hinduism is presented as a constant conversation between Brahmins and pariahs, Sanskrit and vernacular languages, the rulers and the marginalised. Texts, languages and thought systems respond to each other and, in many cases, eventually incorporate the 'alternative', oppositional viewpoint. For example, the excesses of Brahmins are ridiculed in stories and texts in vernacular languages. Doniger demonstrates how this derisive treatment of the Brahmin enters the domain of the Brahmins, Sanskrit, in texts such as the Puranas.

One has encountered some of these ideas before, particularly those that deal with the interaction between Sanskrit and vernacular languages. AK Ramanujan (who was Doniger's colleague at the University of Chicago) described this dialogue in his essay (written twenty years ago) 'Where Mirrors are Windows':

"...Cultural traditions in India are indissolubly plural and often conflicting but are organised through at least two principles, (a) context-sensitivity and (b) reflexivity of various sorts, both of which constantly generate new forms out of the old ones. What we call Brahmanism, bhakti traditions, Buddhism, Jainism, tantra, tribal traditions and folklore, and lastly, modernity itself, are the

most prominent of these systems. They are responses to previous and surrounding traditions, they invert, subvert and convert their neighbours."

As Ramanujan himself says, this is suggesting 'the obvious'. Towards the end of this essay, Ramanujan alludes to Doniger's early work, *Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities* (1984), just after noting that "Doubles, shadows, upside-down reflections are common in Indian myth and story."

Doubles, shadows and animals continue to haunt Doniger and are in the foreground of her analysis in *The Hindus*. In fact, double vision emerges as the metaphor Doniger uses for understanding the multiple meanings, interpretations and perspectives that proliferate in Hinduism. The double takes various forms in Doniger's book. In her preface, she alludes to the shapes of lunar craters – to some these shadowy shapes on the surface of the moon look like men, to others rabbits. The double metaphor resurfaces in the 'paradox of mutual creation' – the myth of Brahma and Vishnu mutually creating each other. The ritual of sacrifice, which opens up "homologies between the human world and corresponding parts of the universe", is an instance of double vision.

Doniger's metaphor of the double also owes something to AK Ramanujan. She alludes, repeatedly, to Ramanujan's description of his father, developed in his essay 'Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?' Ramanujan's father's way of embodying multiple contradictions – he was a mathematician-astronomer and an astrologer – led Ramanujan to understand how the 'Indian way of thinking', on account of its context-sensitive approach, eschews idealisation and tolerates (even nourishes) contradiction.

Many of us in India experience Hinduism's accommodation of multiple contradictions – the opposing

impulses towards orthodoxy and iconoclasm – on a daily basis. Although demure, chaste heroines like Sita and Savitri populate our mythic landscape, we also encounter fiery, non-conformist figures like Draupadi and Kunthi. Many of us have been troubled by the stories of Ekalvya, Amba-Sikhandin and Karna. Moreover, growing up in South India, one can't help encountering more recent subversive takes on traditional tales – for instance, DMK-founder EV Ramaswami's *Kemmayana* features Ravana as the hero.

Consequently, Doniger's ideas, for those of us who live in India, may not hold too many surprises. Yet she has chosen to situate her work within the debate that surrounds Hinduism and history. Perhaps Doniger's book is best seen as a sort of *apologia* – written to defend her work, her analysis and her right to write about Hinduism. But who is Doniger writing for?

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to listen to Wendy Doniger discuss the soon-to-be-released *The Hindus* at the Jaipur Literature Festival. The hall was half-filled, the audience listened to Doniger respectfully and attentively. Questions were asked – some that did challenge Doniger's interpretations – but the tone was always polite and courteous. There were no eggs thrown.

Did Doniger tone down her content? It's possible. But I also suspect that an Indian audience is, in some ways, far less hostile and defensive than the Diaspora. Ashis Nandy, commenting on the failure of the BJP in the general elections, used the term 'laptop Hinduism' to describe the ideology of the Hindutva brigade. He meant a cut-and-paste sort of Hinduism, easy to export, easy to carry – an identity in a box – that appeals to those living outside India. Doniger too notes in her book the affinity that Indian liv-

ing in America have for Hindutva and describes them as “cut-off...from the full range of Hindus and Hinduisms that they would experience in India”.

Is her book directed at those who do not experience the contradictions and chaos of India on a daily basis – foreigners wishing to learn more about Hinduism and, more importantly, the Hindu diaspora, with their narrow, constructed ideas of Hinduism?

Whatever her audience may be, some of her concepts are extremely intriguing. Her concept of the “three alliances” explains in three steps the evolution of Hindu society from a sacrifice-oriented society in Vedic times (that zealously guarded the right to perform sacrifices and access texts) to one that valued ascetic and meditative power, to one, finally, where devotion (Bhakti) is supreme (and knowledge and the right to worship are open to all through temple iconography and domestic *pujas*). She also frames the epics with a historical context that illuminates the concerns that shaped each work. Thus the Ramayana, composed during a time of political instability in India, when numerous dynasties rose and fell, not only favours a monarchic system but is clearly concerned with the idea of legitimate male succession and the ‘ideal’ monarch. In the case of the Mahabharata, concerned with dharma and the terrible violence of war, she discerns the influence of Kalinga, Asoka and Buddhism. Even Doniger’s egg-hurling detractors, who are uncomfortable with the idea of a non-Hindu writing about Hinduism might, I think, be won over by her nuanced, sensitive discussion of suttee. Similarly, her argument that the treatment of animals in texts and myths reflect the concerns and attitudes of the caste system is insightful, and her elucidation of the tripartite paradigm (to support this idea), where the Cow-Horse-Dog hierarchy reflects

that of the Brahmin/Sacred-Kshatriya/Warrior-Pariah/Outsider, brilliant.

Nonetheless, the wide scope of this work sometimes intrudes on and hinders the development of Doniger’s ideas. As this book aims to be a history, she is duty-bound to provide a historical background to the events and texts that she refers to. However, in doing so, she often risks losing the reader. For example, her exploration of the Indus Valley Civilisation (Chapter 2) is vast and detailed but her conclusion is that the Indus Valley Civilisation may or may not have contributed to Hinduism. (At which point, I couldn’t help wondering – what was the point of the last twenty pages?) In another instance, the historical background provided seems insufficient – the South makes an appearance for the first time rather late in Chapter 13 (on Bhakti). What was happening in the South during the events discussed in the preceding 12 chapters?

Perhaps it is unfair to criticise Doniger for being too lengthy in one situation and brief in another, but the intensity and force of her arguments is definitely reduced when interrupted by lengthy summaries of historical background. Also, the idea of an alternative history, promised in the introduction, led me to expect that women would be the main *dramatis personae* of Doniger’s account, but I was disappointed – there were far less women than I expected. Very few female authors are mentioned – there’s a passing mention of Gargi and it’s only when we come to the section on Bhakti that Doniger mentions other women poets. Nabaneeta Dev Sen, in her essay ‘Women Retelling the Ramayana’, refers to two 16th century female poets – the Bengali Chandrabhati and the Telugu Molla. There must be others. Why are they all missing from this ‘alternative history’?

Further, many ideas and questions are tantalisingly alluded to but remain unexplored. The myths of villainous Brahmin-demons, such as Vrta and Ravana, are brought up more than once in this book. But after the discussion of the ‘Brahmin imaginary’ and the intellectual power wielded by the highest caste, one can’t help wondering why exactly these demons are depicted as Brahmins, particularly in Brahminical texts. Is this a subversive streak? Doniger doesn’t explain or explore.

Hinduism, in *The Hindus*, emerges as a space for competing ideologies and ideas. Through debate and conversation, Hinduism has evolved and developed. Doniger traces how ideas, at first subversive and alternative, challenge the dominant order of the day. But these ideas and concepts are soon co-opted into the mainstream and become part of the same dominant order. For example, the Bhakti movement was (originally) revolutionary and inclusive, involving pariahs and women – those ostracised from the dominant order. Doniger’s book shows how the Bhakti movement has nevertheless (in combination with many other factors) shaped the Ram-centric, exclusive ideology of the RSS and its Hindutva associates.

Hinduism defies definition and is open to debate because it’s constantly changing, partly in response to such debates. In the past, debates weren’t carried out in intellectual spaces and through stories but on battlefields. Maiming (in sectarian Vaishnava-Shaiva feuds), death and war were, on occasion, part of this conversation.

Although maiming (and its less violent cousin – egg-throwing) is definitely to be decried, Doniger’s books provoke the realisation that the spirit of argument is essential to Hinduism. The latest avatar of this debate features Doniger and the egg-throwers. □