



Where are the learned desi voices?



Wendy Doniger

In the recent spate of articles and responses to the controversy over Wendy Doniger's book *Hindus in India Abroad* reveals that primarily desi community and political leaders were the ones interviewed or writing articles. It is rather telling that one important, perhaps crucial, set of voices, which has not been included, is the voice of credentialed — PhD holding — desi scholars of Hinduism in the United States and across the globe.

Why have these voices been ignored? Why have no desi Hindu professors of Hinduism been approached? Why has the media, including *India Abroad*, spoken about an academic issue with community and political leaders instead of academics who may address the issue better, having studied it for decades?

And what does the ironic and hypocritical disregard of their valuable voices say about the dispute itself?

And why, moreover, are there so few credentialed desi Hindu voices — voices for and voices about — Hinduism in the academic world?

I believe many Indian Americans would never consider permitting and paying for their children to take a class on Hinduism in college: 'I raised my children to be Hindu, they've read Amar Chitra Katha comic books, attended Hindu Sunday School — they know everything the need to know already about Hinduism!' is the typical mantra.

And, of course, there is the more pressing worry that, the class may not be an Easy 'A' GPA-boosting one. And, then there is the terribly ironic 'What if s/he enjoys studying Hinduism so much that s/he leaves pre-med/ engineering/ computer science/ finance?'

As a result, there are not many desi Hindu students of Hinduism in colleges and universities in the US and there are even fewer who go on to obtain a PhD in Hindu or Hindu-related studies, and become credentialed spokespeople for or about Hinduism in Academe.

There are very few of us, we desi Hindu students of Hinduism.

Given the state of affairs, it is not surprising that I am the first US-born Indian American to get a BA in religious studies and PhD in Indian philosophy under non-desi non-Hindu teachers, including Doniger.

Of course, my teachers at the Purnaprajna Vidyapitham in Bengaluru, where I did a significant portion of my dissertation and subsequent research, were Indian and Hindu. Paradoxically there is an embarrassing dearth of academics from the same culture that is being studied.

Though the 'ethnic' and religious backgrounds of my teachers in America does not reflect anything about the extent, accuracy, or depth of their knowledge about Hinduism, it does suggest something about the degree to which Hindu desis pursued, and are pursuing, doctorates in Hinduism in the US.

This scenario has not changed much since I graduated 16 years ago. The major research centers for studying Hinduism in the US, namely the University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, University of California at Berkeley, University of Texas, Austin, and Columbia University, all maintain the anachronistic oligarchy and none have any desi faculty teaching Hinduism.

Many, but definitely not all, members of this Orientalist oligarchy are excellent scholars, good people, and friends of Hinduism (and some are even my friends). Still, with over

1.5 million desi Hindus in America one would think that there would be more than a mere handful of Hindus like myself, who pursue Hindu studies as undergraduate and graduate students.

Why was Distinguished Professor Vasudha Narayanan, University of Florida, Gainesville, whose vast expertise spans from Hinduism and Tamil cultures to Hindu temples and traditions in Cambodia, not interviewed?

How about Dr Archana Venkatesan, associate professor of comparative literature and religious studies, University of California, Davis, whose focus is on Tamil *bhakti*?

Why not interview Dr Leela Prasad, associate professor of religious studies, Duke University, whose work focuses on

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lived Hinduism?

Though there are not many more desi faculty teaching Hinduism than the ones named here, these scholars have real knowledge of the academic study of Hinduism and Doniger's work. They are the real experts.

What about scholars in India, readers may wonder. The discipline of religious studies and 'Hinduism' has yet to take hold in India.

While there are phenomenal Sanskrit scholars, experts in *sastra*, and so on, very few are trained in the academic discipline of religious studies. Besides, for many of these outstanding traditional scholars, contemporary historical scholarship may be irrelevant.

My gurus at Purnaprajna Vidyapitham, for example, were interested in knowledge that would facilitate their progress towards *moksa*, not evidence or arguments concerning the origins or historical development of texts that they believed to be *apauruseya* (not humanly made).

Of course, quality scholarship produced in India is not often taken seriously by many academics in the West. I

have observed in India and in the US, at conferences and in classrooms, on e-lists and in e-mails, non-desi scholars disparage, dismiss, and disrespect desi scholars on more than one occasion. There are thus several parallel universes that would benefit from conversations rather than competitions with one another.

The elite, wealthy, and educated Hindu community in the Diaspora and in India are partly to blame for the deficiency in desi scholars of Hinduism. Studying Hinduism as a scholarly activity has been, and continues to be, largely ignored and denigrated by many desi Hindus.

Most imagine that such study is no more than *purohit*-training. And, by pushing their children to the so-called STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) first-generation Hindu immigrants have allowed the academic study of Hinduism to remain a largely 'Western' discipline, which remains within its Orientalist and colonial history and confines.

Hindu studies will not change unless or until there are more credentialed post-colonial Indian, and desi Hindu voices in the conversation.

So, when desi Hindus in America and Hindus in India complain about Hindu scholarship and scholars in academe, they are to blame for not encouraging their children to pursue higher education in Hindu studies. From this perspective, their self-righteous indignation seems rather hypocritical.

I am not suggesting that post-colonial desis, and Hindus in the academic world ought to be given a louder — or the only — voice. Rather that the academic study of

Hinduism would be significantly different if there were more voices, both from within and from outside.

The academic study of Hinduism would be very different indeed if it received support from the global Hindu community, as, for example, the academic study of Judaism has received from the Jewish community, and Catholic studies from the Catholic community.

I wonder what sorts of topics would become central to Hindu studies if there were a greater diversity of voices. How would the categories used to study Hinduism change? What sorts of expertise would be encouraged, fostered, and what sorts of dissertations and research would eventually be published?

And, how would Doniger's book fare when it is merely one among many?

My guess is that no one would care about her scholarship anymore, other than a few brown-nosed sycophants.

What would it be like to embrace and support an alternative future, rather than perpetuate the unfortunate history, of Hindu studies?

Perhaps Dinanath Batra, head of the Shiksha Bachao Andolan whose case against Doniger in India was the impetus for this recent row, misdirected his anger. Perhaps he should have expressed his anger towards the Hindu Diaspora for not encouraging their children to study Hinduism, to penetrate the current oligarchy, and to offer new voices, new paradigms, and new approaches to Hindu studies in the US.

It seems that this moment is *muhurtham* (auspicious time), of sorts. This is an opportunity to change some outdated and colonial laws in India concerning the political regulation of scholarship and limiting freedom of speech. It is also an opportunity for the elite, wealthy and educated Hindu community in the Diaspora to consider supporting the study of Hinduism by their children and in academic institutions across the world.

Perhaps the academic study of Hinduism ought to have an alternative future that differs and diverges from its unfortunate past and that includes many more voices of desi Hindu professors of Hinduism.

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