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## The Repression of Religious Studies



Andrea Levy for The Chronicle Review

By Wendy Doniger | APRIL 20, 2016

In 2015, Harvard University Press began to publish the Murty Classical Library of India, a series of editions and translations of texts in a wide range of Indian languages, under the direction of Sheldon Pollock, professor of South Asian studies at Columbia University.

In February, 2016, 132 academics in India petitioned to have Pollock removed as general editor. They were raising their voices not as subject experts — many were scientists or doctors lacking competence to judge humanistic scholarship — but as Hindus. Why did Hindus in India care what a publisher in Massachusetts was doing? Because Hindus in America cared, and they had sent word to India to raise the alarm there, too.

This attempt by faith-based groups to control what scholars say is symptomatic of a broader clash between pious and academic ways of talking about religion, which has also troubled scholars who write and teach about religions other than Hinduism, and threatens freedom of speech in America, India, and elsewhere.

The petitioners objected that Pollock is not Indian and does not respect Indian traditions. They argued that Rohan Narayana Murty, the Indian donor who had endowed the Murty Library, should give his money to an Indian publisher and replace Pollock with an Indian scholar — by which they meant, a Hindu. Behind the inane and often abusive attacks on Pollock was a covert objection to the fact that he insists on the value of Indian texts as works of literature and history; that he does not study the works solely, or mainly, as sources of religious insight. Happily, Rohan Murty responded

immediately to the petition, backing Pollock all the way.

I recognized the agenda of the petition against Pollock. In 2010, a small group of Hindus led by a then-81-year-old retired headmaster named Dinanath Batra brought the first of a series of civil and criminal actions against me, Penguin Group (USA), and Penguin India, objecting to my depiction of Hinduism in a book titled *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Batra adheres to a narrowly selective, highly conservative, sanitized, and idealized version of Hinduism called Hindutva, "Hinduness," effectively equating being Indian with being Hindu. The Hindutvavadis (as they call themselves) deny the legitimacy of any form of Hinduism other than their own — particularly the less philosophical, earthier sorts of Hinduism that I write about — and demand citizens' loyalty to what they represent as India's Hindu nation-state.

Penguin India defended the suit, but after four years, in February 2014, it abandoned the case, agreeing to cease publishing the book. This has led to two widespread misunderstandings. First, *The Hindus* was never banned, for the case never reached the courts; there was just a lawsuit, and then an out-of-court agreement between two private parties, the Batra brigade and the publisher.

And, second, Penguin did agree to pulp all remaining copies, but — as it turned out — not a single book was destroyed; all extant copies were quickly bought up from bookstores. Indeed, the book sold like hotcakes throughout India — literally under the counter, often wrapped in brown paper. (I've thought of sending Batra a thank-you note for all the free publicity he gave me, and the royalties that resulted from it.)

Eventually Ravi Singh, who, as head of Penguin India in 2010, had originally published *The Hindus* there, left Penguin in protest and helped found a new publishing company, Speaking Tiger, which (after Penguin gave me back the rights to publish the book in India) republished *The Hindus*, legally, in October 2015. All of this renders Batra's victory hollow. But the words "banned" and "pulped" continue to fan the flames of indignation.

he attacks on Pollock, me, and others constitute a double threat, a fight about both who gets to represent Indian traditions and which aspects of the religion are to be

**T** represented. Let's consider the two points separately, beginning with the argument about a scholar's right to speak about a religion.

Academe began in the shadow of religion, as theology was queen of the sciences and academic institutions were religious institutions. In America, even after the First Amendment separated church and state, and even after the Supreme Court ruled against prayer in schools, many secondary schools and colleges remained Christocentric. Wheaton College, for instance, an evangelical Protestant college in Illinois, in January tried to fire a tenured professor who said, on Facebook, that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. (After a protest, Wheaton officials apologized to her, but she left.)

There is, however, an important distinction between, on the one hand, independent colleges like Wheaton with overt faith commitments and, on the other, public and private institutions that approach the study of religion through the Enlightenment assumptions of history, literature, sociology, and anthropology.

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We are still trying to clean up our act in this respect; at most colleges, though it is no longer the case that Christianity is taught *only* by Christians, Judaism *only* by Jews, old habits die hard, and the ancient patterns still prevail.

Sometimes important efforts to increase the diversity of the faculty tip the scales in favor of scholars of diverse religions as well as ethnicities, who are expected to speak for their own traditions. Yet in the European and American academic world, the faith-based approach to the study of religion has generally been superseded, or at least supplemented, by the academic approach. This delicate balance is threatened by the pressure coming from Hindutva activists.

Both my Indian lawsuit and the petition against Pollock had American roots. In 2010, a group of Hindu activists in Atlanta had first suggested to Batra that he try to stop publication of *The Hindus* and had then helped to finance that legal action in India.

Rajiv Malhotra, a wealthy Hindu businessman who is of the Hindutva persuasion and lives in retirement in New Jersey, bankrolls the hubristically named Infinity Foundation. In 2007, Malhotra had masterminded a book — *Invading the Sacred: An Analysis of Hinduism Studies in America* (Rupa & Co.) — targeting my work in particular; and in February he published a book, *The Battle for Sanskrit* (HarperCollins India), attacking Pollock.

Words and money often flow from the Hindu American diaspora to India. Diasporas often nurture reactionary elements. The bulk of the Hindu diaspora in the United States is from the upper middle class, the sort of people (mostly Brahmins) who have done well in the caste system and under the British, who have the money and education to get to America. Many are Hindutvavadis. Moreover, when they come to America they are largely isolated from direct, everyday contact with the rest of India, from the many other sorts of Hinduism that are problematic for them. And this isolation reinforces their narrow sectarianism.

But the diaspora is complex. There are different Hinduisms in America. When I came under fire in 2010, many Hindus in India and America came to my defense. The same international Hindu expression of support has risen in response to the petition against Pollock. To a great extent, the issues contested on these occasions are part of a fight between different sorts of Hindus, and American scholars have been caught in the crossfire.

**T**he argument that only Hindus have the right to write or teach about Hinduism — or, for that matter, that only Muslims should teach about Islam, or Jews about Judaism — threatens to move the academic study of religion backwards.

In particular, it blurs the important distinction between interreligious dialogue (in which each faith is represented by the testimony of a member of that faith) and religious studies (in which the faith stance of a scholar of any religion — or no religion at all — is, in principle, irrelevant). Both are valuable; each has its place. But we must take care not to confuse or conflate them.

The problem in the case of Hinduism is exacerbated by the fact that there is no tradition of religious studies in Indian schools or universities. Like Europe when theology

queened over the sciences, India had Sanskrit schools (called *tolas*) where Hindus studied both academic subjects and Hinduism, and Muslim schools (*madrasas*) that did this for Muslims, and, eventually, Catholic schools (where upper-class Hindus, as well as Christians, were educated). But public schools and universities in India never developed a tradition of teaching religion as an academic subject. Moreover, though there are Hindu schools in America, where Hindu children learn about Hinduism, that doesn't affect non-Hindus' views of Hinduism; for that, one would need to control school textbooks and university curricula.

Of course, many Hindus do teach Hinduism in universities, just as they teach math and linguistics and everything else. And someone who combines a firsthand experience of Hinduism with rigorous academic training might indeed be a better teacher of certain aspects of the religion (contemporary, devotional, intimate) than someone who has only an academic understanding of the subject. But which sort of Hinduism would such a person testify to? No single person can possibly represent all facets of any tradition, let alone a tradition with the linguistic, regional, and social diversity that characterizes Hinduism. A personal religious commitment gives a scholar no inside track on the history or broader geographical range of a religion, and may inappropriately work against the ideal of scholarly neutrality. In any case, without that rigorous training, it's no go. And the requirement that a teacher of Hinduism be a Hindu would reduce all of the teaching of Hinduism to interreligious (or, in this case, even intra-religious) dialogue.

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The trouble is compounded by the fact that some Hindus not only want to tell their own story in universities (interreligious dialogue) but do not want anyone else to tell it. Often in the Q&A after I have given a public lecture, an Indian in the audience will

ask me, "Do you meditate?" and when I confess that I do not, he (it is always a he) will reply, "Then you cannot understand the Upanishads."

In 2003, some Hindus objected that, while the Microsoft Encarta articles on Christianity

and Judaism were written by a Christian and a Jew, respectively, the article on Hinduism was written by a non-Hindu (me), and written from a more critical standpoint than the others. The appropriate solution, however, was not to throw out the article by the non-Hindu and substitute one by a Hindu — as Encarta did, without so much as mentioning it to me. This was a political solution, but it is not the way to write an encyclopedia. The scholarly solution would be to have the articles on Judaism and Christianity and everything else written from an equally critical standpoint, an academic standpoint, such that the reader would not be able to guess the religion of the author. Otherwise it's interreligious dialogue all the way down.

Now consider another problem: The Hindutva faction objects to having certain aspects of Hinduism discussed in the academy at all, no matter by non-Hindus or by (other sorts of) Hindus. Exponents of Hindutva have attacked Hindu as well as non-Hindu scholars, both in India and in America, for writing about aspects of Hinduism that they regard as inaccurate or insulting. In 2008, and despite loud protests from prominent Indian historians, a group led by Dinanath Batra forced Delhi University to remove from the history syllabus a famous article by A.K. Ramanujan (who, in 1976, won one of India's highest cultural medals, the Padma Shri, later also awarded to Pollock). The article, titled "Three Hundred Ramayanas," included several folk versions of the story of Rama that contradicted the single, highly edited version of the story favored by Hindutvavadis. Other Indian scholars who have not toed the Hindutva line, including Romila Thapar, Amartya Sen, and D.N. Jha (whose book sets out the abundant evidence that ancient Indians ate beef), have been harassed in various ways.

Many Hindus who have no use for Hindutva nevertheless have quite justifiable objections to the debasement of Hindu traditions by Americans who have adopted distorted versions of yoga, Tantra, Krishna Consciousness, meditation, Om, karma, and much more. Who owns yoga? Hindu organizations have accused Americans of stealing yoga (now big business) from them. Who owns Hinduism? Some American Hindus, infuriated by bedspreads imprinted with images of the god Ganesha and sexy underwear imprinted with images of the goddess Kali, have lobbied (often successfully) to halt the commercialization of their religion. Of course, Catholics are also outraged when contemporary artists use images of Jesus or the Virgin Mary in similarly disrespectful

ways. Anger over cultural appropriation is not restricted to people scarred by centuries of colonial scorn and Orientalist usurpation, though the colonial legacy does often make such people feel, and resent, a covert racism.

**T**he argument that American academics should not write and teach their unwelcome ideas about Hinduism has been bolstered by a rising concern for the "hurt feelings" of religious groups (among many other groups). In general, this problem applies equally to the treatment of all religions in the academy. In the case of Hinduism, however, this line of reasoning presents scholars as part of a legacy of colonial-era vilification and misrepresentation of Indian religions.

Hindutvavadis also ride on the back of the generalized cry for greater representation of minorities that took off during the late 1980s and 90s on American campuses. But, though Hindutvavadis are indeed a minority (in India as well as America), they are a dominant elite cloaking themselves in the language of a beleaguered minority. Hindutva is powerful in India today, more than ever now that the current prime minister, Narendra Modi, is a staunch advocate.

The "hurt feelings" argument was the basis of the lawsuit against my book, *The Hindus*, which was said to have violated Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code. That law, which was passed under British rule in 1927, at a time of intense conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, states:

Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of [citizens of India], ... insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment ... or with fine, or with both.

The law was designed to contain what the British viewed as the unruly religious passions of Indians in a context of uncertain sovereignty. But after Indian Independence, in 1947, Hindus began to invoke Section 295A to censor works dealing with the Hindu gods, and it is widely used in that way today. To prove that one had, or did not have, "deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings" of a Hindu is as slippery in

America as it is in India.

The rise of a transnationally interlinked agenda to repress scholarship is being aided by ever greater financial support. Hindu donors have recently attempted, often with success, to influence academic appointments. The Infinity Foundation, the Hinduja Foundation, and wealthy individuals have succeeded in financing Hindu programs at leading American universities, including Columbia and Harvard. At a time when the humanities are fighting for their lives, the temptation to accept such money — any money — is great. There is therefore a serious danger that the academy will be less than energetic in its protection of religious studies from those who would subordinate it to pious concerns. Yet some institutions have had the integrity to say no. When last year the Dharma Civilization Foundation (which has published scurrilous condemnations of many scholars, including me) made two large donations to the University of California at Irvine that would have influenced how Hinduism is taught there, the university ultimately gave the money back — but only when pushed by Hindu and non-Hindu students and faculty.

There is hope; there are heroes: Rohan Murty stood up for Pollock, and Ravi Singh republished my book. But other publishers may be scared off by the increasing likelihood that they will face expensive — and even possibly violent — opposition if they publish books likely to offend the defenders of Hindutva. And the possibility that I might still be in contempt of court from the 2010 criminal case has kept me from returning to India, probably ever again. More important, the threat that students and untenured faculty will be unable to obtain visas, or jobs, if they offend Hindutva factions discourages them from undertaking sensitive research.

Scholars of religion must find the courage to defend the field and preserve its independence in the face of these threats. All over the world, freedom of speech is being compromised.

Time and again these days I am reminded of the lines that Yeats wrote in "The Second Coming": "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity." We must muster both the conviction and the passionate intensity to defend academic freedom while we still have it.



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