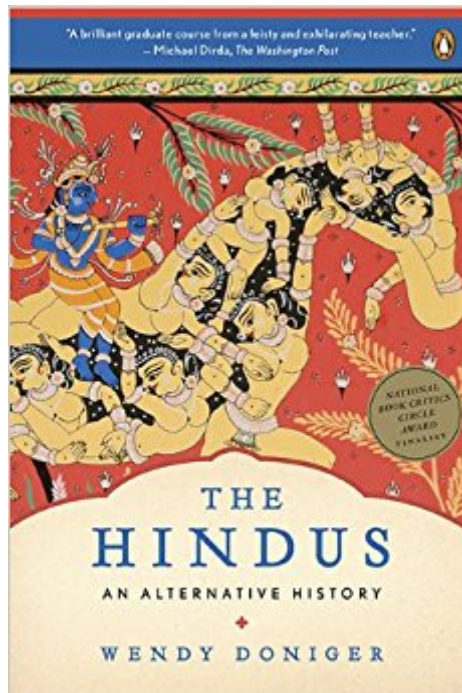




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The Hindus: An Alternative History



Synopsis

"Don't miss this equivalent of a brilliant graduate course from a feisty and exhilarating teacher." -The Washington Post

An engrossing and definitive narrative account of history and myth, *The Hindus* offers a new way of understanding one of the world's oldest major religions. Hinduism does not lend itself easily to a strictly chronological account. Many of its central texts cannot be reliably dated within a century; its central tenets arise at particular moments in Indian history and often differ according to gender or caste; and the differences between groups of Hindus far outnumber the commonalities. Yet the greatness of Hinduism lies precisely in many of these idiosyncratic qualities that continues to inspire debate today. This groundbreaking work elucidates the relationship between recorded history and imaginary worlds, the inner life and the social history of Hindus.

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Customer Reviews

Note that Doniger is the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of Religions at the University of Chicago and the author of many books. Note that alternative neatly defines her. Learned, fluent, and entertaining in spite of the complexity of this ambitious undertaking, Doniger is also controversial, a role she embraces, confident that fresh viewpoints are essential to understanding the worlds that shaped the Hindu tradition, and the ways Hindus shaped society. While Doniger delves deeply into the Vedas and the *“two great poems,”* Ramayana and Mahabharata, she searches other spheres for clues to the lives of women and the lower castes. She also analyzes depictions of animals, which are central to Hindu tales and the *“cultural ideal”* of nonviolence. As she energetically parses the relationships between gods and

humans, karma and renunciation, asceticism and sensuality, priests and kings, men and women, she is also seeking glimpses into everyday Hindu life during each of India's empires. Lavishly detailed, dynamic, and encompassing, Doniger's multidimensional history celebrates Hindu wisdom, diversity, and pluralism with knowledge, insight, and passion. --Donna Seaman --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"This is history as great entertainment! Unlike the usual, arid accounts of dynasties, Wendy Doniger's double vision of Hinduism is about women, merchants, lower castes, animals, spirits and, of course, Dead Male Brahmins. This lively, earthy account explains why ancient India is the world's richest storytelling culture." --Gurcharan Das, author *India Unbound* "Wendy Doniger's enthralling and encyclopaedic book reveals her vision of a Hindu culture that is plural, varied, generous, and inclusive. Hinduism, in her view, is an intricate weave of the diverse localities and communities of Indian culture. This is a rich text that will encourage dialogue and conversation among a wide range of scholars." --Homi K. Bhabha, Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities, Harvard University "With her vast erudition, insight, and graceful writing laced with gentle wit, there is no one better than Wendy Doniger to convey the richness, depth, and diversity of Hindu texts and traditions to international audiences. *The Hindus* is destined to become a classic that will be discussed and debated for many years to come." --Sudhir Kakar, author of *Indian Identity*

Banned in Bangalore, the New York Times op-ed said. Why ban a book, no matter how offensive, the literati fumed. No one can truly ban a book in the Internet age, friends pointed out. Naturally, I bought a copy and more to the point, read the book. Before we proceed, let me say that I do not support banning any book (or even legally requiring a book to be withdrawn from circulation, as was the case with this book in India). But I do hold that every banned book isn't necessarily a well-written, scholarly work. Indeed, a ban of any kind instantly confers an aura of hyper-legitimacy on the banned work, regardless of its intrinsic merit, and I believe that's what happened with Ms. Doniger's book. I contend that her book is biased and sloppy, and that's what this review is all about. Let's start with the big picture. A well-written alternative history of anything, let alone Hinduism, generally has the effect of making the reader pause and think twice about what he may have held all along as the truth. From someone of Ms. Doniger's stature, I was hoping to hear a serious insight or two that would make me go, "Gosh, I've known that story all my life, but why didn't I look at things that way before?" So,

what major insights does the book offer? According to the author, the main aspects are diversity and pluralism in Hindu thought, treatment of women and lower castes, the erotic side of Hinduism, and the many tensions and conflicts within Hinduism. That's where my disappointment started—those are not major insights, nor do they add up to an alternative history. Let's go item by item. Diversity and Pluralism? Caste system? Anyone with a passing interest in India knows about it. Treatment of women? I am not trying to minimize the importance of women, but what's new here? Were the other ancient cultures any better? Conflict and tension within? Hardly surprising for a country of a billion people. Eroticism in ancient India? Oh please, who hasn't heard of that? Yes, yes, Ms. Doniger adds a ton of detail, but my point is that things don't become groundbreaking by adding detail. It's as if someone wrote a very detailed book about the Mississippi river and Southern cuisine and called it "The Americans: An Alternative History." All the detail opens up an even bigger disappointment. It appears that Ms. Doniger frequently cherry-picked the facts to suit her views, and on occasion, even twisted them to suit her narrative. I realize these are harsh accusations and the burden of proof lies on me, so please allow me to present enough examples to make my case (within the space limitations of an opinion piece). Let's begin with the epic Ramayana, with the king Dasharatha and his three wives. The youngest, the beautiful Kaikeyi, assists the king in a hard-fought battle. In return, the king grants her two wishes, to be claimed at any time of her choosing. Many years later, when the king is about to retire and Rama, his son from the eldest wife, is about to be crowned, Kaikeyi claims her two wishes: that her son Bharata be named king, and Rama be exiled to the forest for fourteen years. The king is torn between his promise to Kaikeyi and his obligation to name the eldest son as the next king, as convention dictated. When Rama hears of the king's predicament, he abdicates his claim to the throne and leaves the city. This is a defining moment for Rama—the young man respects the king's word (i.e., the law) enough to renounce his own claim to the throne and loves his father so much that he spares him the pain of having to enact the banishment. Indeed, this point in Rama's life even foretells the rest of the story—that the young man would, in the years to come, make even bigger personal sacrifices for the sake of his ideals. That's the mainstream narrative. Let's hear Ms. Doniger's alternative narrative, in her own words. "The youngest queen, Kaikeyi, uses sexual blackmail (among other things) to force Dasharatha to put her son, Bharata, on the throne instead and send Rama into exile. Now, was Kaikeyi beautiful? Yes. Was the king deeply enamored with her?

Yes. Did Kaikeyi lock herself in a room and create a scene? Absolutely. Was the king called a fool and other names by his own sons? You bet. But there is far more to Rama's exile than sexual blackmail. Ms. Doniger covers this topic in excellent detail (page 223 onwards), but it's interesting that she doesn't bring up the king's longstanding promise. Before we draw conclusions, let's move on to a different story from the same epic. Ms. Doniger retells the story of the ogre Shurpanakha, who approaches Rama and professes her love for him. Rama tells her he is a married man and mocks her. In the end, Rama's younger brother Lakshmana mutilates the ogre. To Ms. Doniger, this data point (to be fair, not the only data point) indicates Rama's cruelty toward women. Ms. Doniger then contrasts this story with one from the Mahabharata, where an ogre named Hidimbi professes her love for Bheema and is accepted as his wife – again underscoring the author's point about Rama's cruelty. All of this might sound reasonable at first glance, but let's look closer. This is how the story goes in the epic. Shurpanakha approaches Rama when he is sitting next to his wife, Sita. When Rama mocks her, the ogre gets angry and charges at Sita. Rama holds the ogre back to save Sita and then orders his younger brother to mutilate the ogre. Rama even says, “That ogre almost killed Sita.” One would think these details are pertinent to the discussion, but strangely enough, Ms. Doniger doesn't bring them up. Also, Rama was a committed monogamist, whereas Bheema was (at that point in the story) a single man. Aren't we comparing apples to oranges here? Isn't this just the kind of nuance one would expect a researcher to pick up? To be fair to Ms. Doniger, there are many versions of the Ramayana (and sadly enough, some scholars have received a lot of undeserved flak for pointing this out). So, is it possible that she and I were reading different renditions of the same epic? I checked. Turns out we both got our details from the Valmiki Ramayana (also known as the original Sanskrit version).

What's going on here? Normally, one would expect an alternative narrative to add nuance – as if to say, “There is more to the story than what you lay people know.” But Ms. Doniger manages to do the opposite – she takes a nuanced, compelling moment in the epic and reduces it to sexual blackmail or cruelty or sexual urges, whatever her current talking point is. Speaking of sexual urges, indeed there are no sex scenes in her book. But it can justifiably be called a veritable catalog of all the phalluses and vaginas that ever existed in ancient India, and there is no dearth of detail in

Doniger's book when it comes to private parts. She even cares to tell you whether

any given phallus is erect or flaccid. Details, people! But enough about men and women.

Let's move on to animals. In the Mahabharata, Arjuna burns up a large forest and many creatures die; the epic even describes the animals' pain at some length.

Somehow, Ms. Doniger finds this worthy of filing under the "Violence toward Animals" section. Was Arjuna supposed to first clear the forest of all the wild animals and only then set the forest on fire? Is that how other cultures cleared forests so they could grow crops and build cities? Has it occurred to Ms. Doniger the very fact that the narrator of the epic bothered to describe the animals' pain (instead of just saying

"Arjuna burned the forest") indicates some sympathy toward animals in those times? Then the professor brings up "and this is a recurring talking point under the cruelty section" the line from Mahabharata that says,

"fish eat fish." Ms. Doniger calls it

"Manu's terror of piscine anarchy." Oh, the humanity! Yet there is no mention of what Bheeshma says in the Mahabharata (Book 13), over pages and pages of discourse, on the virtues of vegetarianism and kindness toward all animal life.

Bheeshma calls "abstention from cruelty" the highest religion, highest form of self-control, highest gift, highest penance and puissance, highest friend, highest happiness and the highest form of truth. One would think this passage merits a mention when discussing cruelty towards animals in the Mahabharata, but it doesn't get one. Ms.

Doniger uses the phrase "working with available light" when describing how she had approached her subject matter, which is very true when working with a complex topic such as Hinduism. But the problem is, she then proceeds to turn off many lights in the house and use a microscope to detail the bits she cares to see. She is of course free to do what she likes, but can someone please explain to me why the end result from such an approach qualifies as an

"alternative map of my home?" Still on the topic of animals, let's discuss dogs, a subject Ms. Doniger covers in great detail. Even lay readers

of the Mahabharata remember that in the end, Yudhishtira declined his chance to go to heaven unless the stray dog that had been loyal to him was also allowed in, and many Mahabharata enthusiasts may recall a different dog at the beginning that was unjustly beaten up. Ms.

Doniger's book mentions many other dogs as well, and for good measure, she even shares a weird story from contemporary India, 150 words long, quoted verbatim from an Indian newspaper, about a man marrying a dog. What about Krishna's words in the Bhagavad Gita, where he says wise people cast the same gaze on a learned Brahmin, a cow, an

elephant, a dog and someone who might cook a dog? Ms. Doniger does mention those lines, but with an interesting twist. She prefaces those 24 words with "though" and reverts to her chosen narrative without even waiting for that thought to finish:

"though the Gita insists that wise people cast the same gaze on a learned Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog, or a dog cooker, the Mahabharata generally upholds the basic prejudice against dogs. Has it occurred to Ms. Doniger that, while men were beating up dogs, God was professing a kinder, more egalitarian approach? The whole man vs. God angle escapes her, and in the end we are left with a world where "man marries dog" gets 150 words and God's words of compassion are limited to 24, topped with a though. Ms. Doniger calls her book "a history, not the history, of the Hindus" which is, of course, fine. Further, I do not hold the mainstream narrative to be beyond reproach, nor do I expect an alternative narrative to merely confirm the status quo. Alternative histories do very frequently upset the balance, and, frankly, that's how progress is made. But my problem here is that Ms. Doniger seems to think the mainstream narrative is ipso facto a biased one, and that her alternative narrative is more compelling, never mind the facts and the counterevidence. She draws the graph first and then looks for data points.

That's a very interesting trend you've spotted there, Ms. Doniger, but what about all those big, ugly blots of truth that don't fit your graph? So much for stories from ancient India. For the benefit of any kind souls from the Western world who have been patiently reading through all this, let me throw in an example from relatively recent times that involves America. No doubt you've heard what the physicist Robert Oppenheimer said while reflecting on the first nuclear blast he had helped spawn. He quoted a passage from the Bhagavad Gita, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." Why would he quote Gita? The simplest explanation I can think of is that Oppenheimer was a well-read man, and he felt the passage was appropriate when describing the unprecedented firepower he had just witnessed.

It's not much different from Carl Sagan's quoting Mahapurana in his book Cosmos, one would think. But no, there is more to it. Ms. Doniger's take: "Perhaps Oppenheimer's inability to face his own shock and guilt directly, the full realization and acknowledgment of what he had helped create, led him to distance the experience by viewing it in terms of someone else's myth of doomsday, as if to say: 'This is some weird Hindu sort of doomsday, nothing we Judeo-Christian types ever imagined.' He switched to Hinduism when he saw how awful the bomb was and that it was going to be used on the Japanese, not on the Nazis, as had

been intended. Perhaps he moved subconsciously to Orientalism when he realized that it was

“Orientals” (Japanese) who were going to suffer. There you have it. Weird Hindu doomsdays. Sex-crazed kings. Cruel gods. Men marrying dogs. Phalluses everywhere – some erect and some flaccid. Ladies and gentlemen, we finally have an alternative history of Hinduism. And yes, left uncontested, in all likelihood these are the “insights” a whole new generation of students and researchers might learn, internalize, and cite in future scholarly works. So much for an alternative history. Now, how about some mundane, regular history stuff? Let’s go back to the Mahabharata, an epic that Ms. Doniger brings up dozens of times in her book (she even calls the Mahabharata “100 times more interesting than the Iliad and the Odyssey”). Let’s ask two questions: When did the main events of Mahabharata occur? And exactly how long is the epic? Ms. Doniger mentions the years as: between 1000 BCE and 400 BCE, most likely 950 BCE, or around 3012 BCE, or maybe 1400 BCE. That narrows down the chronology quite a bit, doesn’t it? Really, there is more to writing history (particularly the alternative kind) than looking up the reference books and throwing in all the numbers one could find. But in Ms. Doniger’s defense, she is not a historian per se (and she clearly tells us so), so let’s let this one slide by. I’d even say she does deserve some credit here for at least bothering to look up things. On the next topic, she fails to do even that. Ms. Doniger says the Mahabharata is about 75,000 verses long. Then she helpfully adds, “sometimes said to be a hundred thousand, perhaps just to round it off a bit.” My goodness, 25,000 verses is some rounding error, don’t you think? Most sources put it between 75,000 and 125,000. It took me all of two hours to find a very detailed account (not on the Internet though), compiled in the 11th century, putting the total at 100,500 – and I’m not a researcher, not by a long shot. And yes, the exact number of verses is secondary to the big picture. What bothers me is the offhandedness with which Ms. Doniger brushes off 25,000 verses as a rounding issue. Why this half-baked research? Oh well, maybe we expected too much from the bestselling book on Hinduism and it’s our fault. So, let’s try again, one last time. Where is India located? Ms. Doniger states, very clearly, without any ambiguity, on page 11 (footnote): “Most of India is in the Northern Hemisphere.” I think I’ll stop here.

I purchased Ms. Doniger’s book 3 or 4 years ago. It looked like a potentially interesting read. However, I have to say if you’re looking for deep revelatory

insights into the mysteries of Hinduism you're going to be disappointed. Her writing comes off as clearly tendentious, and agenda driven. This is because she holds a Freudian / Feminist perspective, and unfortunately this interpretive lens has colored her work. But, at least she's honest. She lets you know up front what perspective she's chosen and where she wants to take the book. I think the book could have been better had she taken a more Jungian view instead of the reductionist / materialist paradigm ala Freud. The insights that this lens affords are few and not terribly significant. She has been charged with being salacious and highlighting the sexual nature of some of the characters and dramatis personae of Hindu Myth and Legend. Maybe. Many of the commentaries that have been posted of Ms. Doniger's work are overly critical. I gave it 3 stars, I think this is fair. I will say that there is humor in the book. If anything, she tries too hard to get her points across, and I can understand why religious Hindus took offense. And (I hate saying this) but there is an edge to the book; that it's design and intent was to belittle and denigrate. She could have just as easily chosen any other of the world's faiths (Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism) to promote and champion her personal value system. Instead she chose Hinduism; one because it is her chosen field of study, but more so, I believe, was that because Hinduism afforded her an easy target. The book is not so much a work of illumination and insight, as it is an obvious work of deconstruction.

Interesting history.

Bought this book only to support freedom of speech, really had zero interest in Hindu religion. But found book to be interesting, though far more detailed than expected. Not an overview. I generally find detailed theology books to be boring, this was not an exception. Personally find the Indian caste system abominable so had hard time accepting a religion that helped create and support such an execrable tradition. OTOH, several hundred years ago the Muslim African traders were selling slaves to Christian ship captains to sell to Christian plantation owners so every religion has its dark side. Recommend this book to someone who wants to support in a small way freedom of speech and also find out details of one of world's major religions. Though more details than I cared to learn.

excellent study by the Grand Old Woman of the field

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