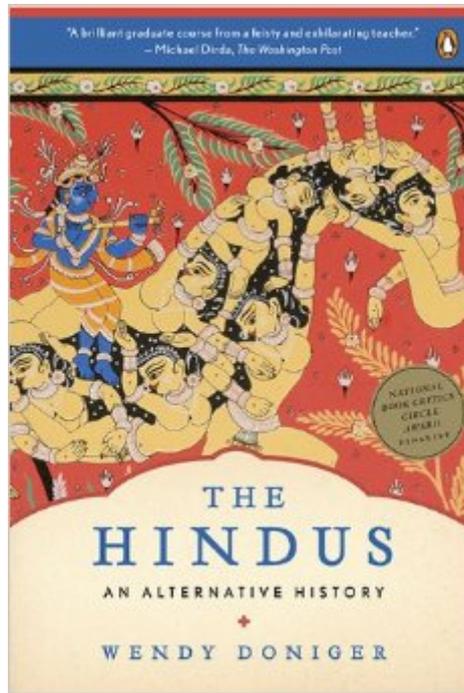


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The Hindus: An Alternative History



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

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 Before we proceed, let me say that I do not support banning any book (or even legally requiring a book to be withdrawn from circulation, as was the case with this book in India).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?

As someone who has grown up in an academic environment, I would like to think of myself as catholic in my outlook; but this book by Wendy Doniger was just off. To start with I maintain two gold standards of writers from the west writing on India. The first is Heinrich Zimmer who wrote 'Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization' which I have gone back to repeatedly over the past 20 years. The other is the works of William Dalrymple and the work of his that I cherish the most is one titled 'White Mughals'. The former is a scholar who has sought to deeply understand Indian culture and the myths it has evolved and the latter is a fine writer first and foremost with a keen eye and love for all things Indian. But what really makes their writings classic that wants me to go back to them repeatedly is their generosity of spirit and largeness of heart. They do not shy away from the warts, but you know what is driving them to research and write their material is a genuine desire to understand and the joy of discovery. That brings me to Ms Doniger. When I came upon the book after reading a review of it in the NY Times, I rubbed my hands in glee. Ah, here is a book I thought to myself, that is going to present new and important insights, from a seasoned philologist, that is going to enhance one's knowledge of Indian culture in new and important ways (good or bad - no matter). What Wendy Doniger does do is that she applies all the tools and techniques and filters of 20th and 21st century social and cultural analysis to bear upon circa 500 BC India and then proceeds to sit in judgment. But it turns out that no wart is unworthy of examination and it is warts that are examined!

If you are drawn to read Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus* - as I was - because you see in Hinduism an example of a cultural-spiritual tradition that has managed to keep alive - right into modern times - a view of a sacred universe (sacred time, sacred geography, sacred cosmology, sacred social customs and social roles, sacred geometry and architecture, rites, rituals, and celebrations, etc.)

and a robust set of experiential spiritual practices (puja, kirtan, yoga, meditation, etc.) then you are likely to be disappointed by this book. It is written, as far as I can tell, entirely from within the same western, modern, secular-academic point of view that has largely rejected a sacred vision of the cosmos and that has largely dismissed whatever tried-and-tested systems of spiritual practice we may once have had. Doniger conveys almost none of the spiritual vitality and seems not to recognize any of the practical spiritual knowledge that other writers and teachers show to be embedded in Hindu scriptures. If anything, she belittles these aspects of Hinduism in just that sort of way that modernized people as a group tend, unfortunately, to do, believing themselves to "know better" and to be more "sophisticated" than people who maintain their ancient traditions. So if you are looking for a view of Hinduism that will lead you beyond the limitations of the modern materialistic-mechanistic worldview, this is not the book for you. Here is just one example: On page 176, Doniger quotes, from the Kaushitaki Upanishad, a description of the sort of experience one might encounter after bodily death that determines the trajectory of one's soul.

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