

Freedom and Faith in India

NEETI NAIR

Wendy Doniger and Martha C. Nussbaum, University of Chicago professors with decades of experience studying India, have put together a collection of essays that explores the limits of pluralism and democracy in the country. Like the editors, most of the contributors—including historians, journalists, philosophers, political scientists, and activists—have studied the Hindu right for many years. Here, they highlight the importance of rival interpretations of history, curricular reform, the media, a lively civil society, strong political parties, an inclusive public culture, and the anxieties of the Indian diaspora in the United States in thinking through developments in Indian liberalism, secularism, and Hindu majoritarianism over the past few decades.

Setting the tone for the volume, the philosopher Amartya Sen is his usual eloquent and reasonable self on the contemporary relevance of India's argumentative traditions as well as the necessity of engaging with different interpretations of the past. Sen explains why "bendable history" is of critical importance to Hindutva activists; it supplies "proto-Hindutva believers" with a greater cause to believe in. Here Sen defines Hindutva as a Sanskrit word that literally means "the quality of Hinduism" or "of Hindu culture." But in practical terms, it represents a set of political priorities that sees India in primarily Hindu terms.

Historian Mushirul Hasan offers a timely reminder that the debate over the politics of history writing has been going on for quite a while. Starting in the nineteenth century, when British administrators sought to use school textbooks as

ideological tools, they have been fodder for every ideologically driven political dispensation from the Congress party to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which returned to power in 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But by ending his narrative with the attempts to "Talibanize India's history" when the BJP was last in power (1998–2004), Hasan fails to acknowledge the more recent accomplishments of India's National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), a body responsible for designing textbooks that may be licensed for adoption by various state-level school boards. In 2006, the NCERT developed a new set of textbooks

that, for the first time, moved away from a culture that views them as repositories of unimpeachable "truth"; the new series instead treats students as active participants in the production of knowledge. These textbooks, also freely available on the Internet, are a wonderful resource for pluralism and have been adopted by state boards across party lines—in states with BJP as well as Congress governments.

LIBERAL TABOOS?

On the related subject of curricula, Nussbaum seeks to trace the roots of a phenomenon she sees in progressive circles in India today, where "religion is profoundly unfashionable, almost unmentionable." She faults India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, for ignoring religion and filling India with a "silence of liberal-religious voices . . . liberal emotion-culture, liberal spirituality." Nussbaum examines Nehru's views on religion in a close reading of two sections of his book, *The Discovery of India*, first published in 1946. She believes that it was Nehru's discomfort with religion that led to its being sidelined in curricula, leaving behind a yawning "culture gap" that was subsequently filled by the propaganda of the Hindu right. But even as Nussbaum recommends

Pluralism and Democracy in India: Debating the Hindu Right

*Edited by Wendy Doniger
and Martha C. Nussbaum.
Oxford University Press, 2015.*

NEETI NAIR is an associate professor of history at the University of Virginia and the author of *Changing Homelands: Hindu Politics and the Partition of India* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

more support for the humanities, a cause she has championed for the last few years, she overlooks the many institutions that Nehru set up to patronize the arts and literature. She also does not probe the transformations wrought by Partition and Gandhi's assassination—tumultuous events that may explain the formal absence of religious studies in curricula far better than Nehru's personal preferences expressed in a text that predated both events.

To be fair, Nussbaum does mention the void that Gandhi's assassination created, but she does not pursue the point. She can hardly be blamed: It has been 67 years since the Mahatma died, yet there is no single liberal narrative that can explain the assassination in a way that is palatable enough to be introduced into school textbooks. Given the rising fascination with Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse, on display earlier this year when members of a fringe right-wing group called the Hindu Mahasabha sought to erect statues of Godse in temples across India, it is worth noting that the anniversary of the assassination, January 30, has never served the pedagogical purpose it might have. Its legacy is closely entwined with the ghosts of Partition and the still controversial question of rights for religious minorities in India.

Pratik Kanjilal portrays a deeply polarized India, describing the frosty reception he received from left-leaning friends when he translated into English a novel by the Hindi writer Nirmal Verma, who is known as a conservative: “[I]n this world, anyone from the Hindu majority who had any sympathy for faith, tradition or old-worldly concerns was clearly a right-wing extremist who endorsed the genocide in Gujarat,” the 2002 massacre of Muslims that marked Modi's tenure as chief minister of the state. “This was as absurd as accusing Graham Greene, who ventilated a few Catholic issues in his fiction, of complicity in the violence in Ireland.” Kanjilal finds himself in agreement with Verma's views on education: “There is no place for education about religion in our schools . . . the classical languages . . . have not only lost out to English but their institutions, libraries, and centers of learning are slowly disintegrating. The United States has institutions for the study of Indian faiths, but India itself has no room for such teaching. . . .”

*Inadequacies in India's
democratic structure allow
anti-minority politics to flourish.*

For the writer Gurcharan Das, too, the alarm with which liberal India views any discussion of religion leads him to fear that “liberal Indians” may “abdicate” their past to the “closed minds of fanatical Hindu nationalists.” However, Das appears oblivious of the deeply contested nature of this past—not just for Hindu nationalists, but also for some women and members of the lower castes who challenge, increasingly, the facile assumptions embedded in conversational understandings of what it means to be a Hindu, or, taking one of Das's recommendations, what it might mean to study Sanskrit classics in school. (One obvious line of rebuttal might be: What about Tamil or Persian classics?)

US-based scholars of Hinduism Doniger and Paul Courtright lay out the premises that govern their scholarship as well as the scholarly study of any faith in religious studies departments in the United States. They also describe the intimidation and the death threats they have received from Hindu American activists for their works of scholarship on Hinduism. Doniger explains that the fact of a non-Hindu teaching Hinduism in a non-faith-based way is particularly upsetting to some members of the Hindu diaspora. (Doniger's own recent history of Hinduism was withdrawn from publication in India last year after a lawsuit was filed by a Hindu-right group.)

University of Denver law professor Ved Nanda, the only member of the Hindu right to contribute to this volume, acknowledges that “some proponents of Hinduism have perhaps reacted rather harshly” to Doniger's kind of scholarship and notes the establishment of human rights education as well as media and advocacy groups to remedy this. Nanda lists the efforts of Hindu Americans to change textbooks, train American teachers, and endow university chairs on Hinduism. He objects that “the Hindutva label is used pejoratively to connote Hindu nationalism that is exclusive and intolerant. This is in fact a misuse of the word, for Hindutva, an adjective, simply means ‘being Hindu,’ and there is nothing pejorative about it.” But Hindutva is more than an adjective; following the Hindu nationalist ideologue V.D. Savarkar's 1922 text *Hindutva*, the term defines a Hindu by excluding all those who do not consider India to be their fatherland and holy land.

Written from different perspectives, the essays by Nussbaum, Das, and Kanjilal appear to converge on their discomfort with liberal, secular Indians' general disdain for anything religious. This recognition is a necessary first step for a dialogue between people, both secular and religious, who otherwise appear deaf to each other's concerns.

UNCIVIL SOCIETY

Other essays in the volume describe how the media misrepresents religious and political issues, and suggest how this might be addressed. Malini Parthasarathy, very recently appointed editor-in-chief of *The Hindu*, one of India's most respected daily newspapers, analyzes the opinion-shaping techniques used by prominent right-wing columnists Arun Shourie, Swapan Dasgupta, and S. Gurumurthy in the months and years preceding the landmark elections of 2004, which the Congress party won against all expectations. She questions how so many publications and television channels overestimated the persuasive appeal of the Hindu right's political campaign.

Antara Dev Sen, an independent journalist and co-founder of the *Little Magazine*, tracks over a dozen different news stories since 2005, ranging from the jingoism and careless real-time coverage that marked the Mumbai attacks of November 2008 to stories that stereotype and deliberately sensationalize the lives of particular working women, or cast Muslims as "terrorists" and Muslim women as victims of patriarchy. Her interpretation of visual media leads her to conclude that the commercial media is indeed losing its "grip on truth and . . . perspective on news," and sacrificing "social duty" for profit. But she praises the work of independent media.

The political scientist Amrita Basu explains how, despite having a robust civil society, regular elections, and strong political parties, India has experienced extensive, routine anti-minority violence. Focusing on Article 356 of India's constitution, which allows for a democratically elected government to be replaced with "president's rule," Basu shows that the article's uneven application has helped protect state governments with anti-minority records; when it is invoked, it can help protect minority citizens whose lives might be in danger under an elected government.

Basu also details the exclusionary nature of many civil society organizations associated with the Hindu right. While encompassing the realms

of education, science, medicine, industry, and the environment, and seeking to represent every sector of society, these organizations are united by a single set of ideological principles. Their schools inculcate students with a revisionist understanding of history that "demonizes Muslims and glorifies Hindu rulers." Affiliated groups have also "attacked beauty pageants, ransacked movie theatres . . . threatened and harassed prominent artists and intellectuals . . . damaged shops selling Valentine's cards and harassed women whose attire they consider westernized." Yet Basu asserts that the very forces within civil society that produce such exclusionary organizations have also given rise to civil liberties groups and lower-caste parties.

The historian Tanika Sarkar adds further depth to this analysis with findings from her decades-long fieldwork among female members of the Hindu right. Like Basu, she is concerned with the violence of Hindu right-wing discourse. She focuses on the connections within elements of the movement—noting, for instance, how the extremely violent Bajrang Dal's links with political parties like the BJP are often deliberately overlooked by the media. She also studies the work of women's organizations, comparing their activism at the "level of the ordinary, the everyday," in kin groups, neighborhood associations, workplaces, temple complexes, and yoga centers, with the "poison squad of whispering women" that supported the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s-era US South, as the sociologist Kathleen Blewett has shown. Drawing on an interview with B.L. Sharma Prem, a prominent Hindu right-wing leader and former parliamentarian, Sarkar shows how he cites accounts of rapes of Hindu women in the right's histories of medieval India to justify raping Muslim women in the present as the "condition of the survival of Hindus and of the nation." This kind of microhistorical research can help us understand the brutal rapes and murders of Muslim women in the 2002 Gujarat violence.

Informed by several different disciplinary perspectives, and grounded in solid scholarship, the essayists in *Pluralism and Democracy in India: Debating the Hindu Right* are clear-eyed about the many inadequacies in India's democratic structure that allow anti-minority politics to flourish. The contributions on secular and religious Indians and curricular reform are a promising beginning for those who believe that a dialogue among the left, the center, and the right may still be possible. This is a timely, hopeful collection. ■