



## Books / Opinion

### RESPONSE

## Oh, But You Do Get It Wrong!

Wendy Doniger (1) falsely and unfairly brands *all* of her critics as right-wing Hindutva fundamentalists, and (2) grossly mischaracterizes (and misquotes) the text of the Valmiki Ramayana

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Wendy Doniger (Mircea Eliade Distinguished Professor of the History of Religions in the Divinity School and in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago) was *recently interviewed in Outlook* with reference to her new book, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. In the interview, she (1) falsely and unfairly brands *all* of her critics as right-wing Hindutva fundamentalists, and (2) grossly mischaracterizes (and misquotes) the text of the *Valmiki Ramayana*, calling into question her “alternative” version not just of the *Ramayana*, but also of Hinduism and Hindu history as a whole.

Doniger’s prominence and clout as a “definitive” authority in the discourse on Indian traditions and history give her views considerable significance. For, it is Doniger’s (and her colleagues’) versions of Hinduism and Hindu history (which are often at serious variance with traditional Hinduism as practised and understood by Hindus themselves) that form the curriculum of university courses, line the bookshelves of the “Hinduism” sections of bookstores (physical and virtual), and are given play in the Western and Indian mainstream press.

Accordingly, this latest “alternative” history could easily become known as the “canonical” history of Hinduism, because of the imbalance of power between the Western academy and the traditional institutions for learning about Hinduism (which have been marginalized and largely rendered inaccessible under British colonialism.)

### Defamation of Critics

**T**he introduction to the interview begins with a misleading quote:

“[Doniger] has continued to infuriate the Hindutva brigade with her unorthodox views on Hinduism and its sacred texts, earning for herself the epithet: “crude, lewd and very rude in the hallowed portals of Sanskrit academics.””

The quote attributed to the “Hindutva brigade” is actually from the BBC web site:

Professor Wendy Doniger is known for being rude, crude and very lewd in the hallowed portals of Sanskrit Academics. All her special works have revolved around the subject of sex in Sanskrit texts ranging from *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic* to *Tales of Sex and Violence*...Never one to shy away from sex, she threw herself into the job of translating the [Kama Sutra] ... She was particularly interested by the parts that justify adultery and the list of ways to get rid of a man ... When she was translating it (over a period of a few years and numerous Sanskrit classes), she frequently found herself having to take cold showers. [1]

The false attribution of this quote to the “Hindutva brigade” sets the tone for the rest of the interview—heaping blame on a nebulous, undefined, straw man “Hindutva Internet Brigade” for the whole continuum of criticism of Doniger’s work—criticism that has come mostly from moderate and liberal Hindus, secularists, non-Hindu scholars and even one prominent Harvard Indologist who is not known for being friendly towards Hindus. Rather than confront the actual criticisms, Doniger pretends that her only critics are Hindu extremists, and by rebuking this “enemy” she tries to deflect any criticism of her work.

Just as some politicians resort to picking on their weakest critic to discredit all of their critics, Doniger picks one stray comment on the Amazon web site to characterize all of her critics—when asked to describe the Hindu-American response to her book, Doniger exclaims, “My favourite one on Amazon accuses me of being a Christian fundamentalist and my book a defence of Christianity against Hinduism. And of course, I’m not a Christian, I’m a Jew!”

Doniger ignores the prolific response to her work by the American Hindu community, including dozens of published articles, countless public conferences, repeated calls for debate and dialogue between the academy and the Hindu-American community, and a recently published book analysing the representation of Hinduism in American universities. It is totally irresponsible for such a prominent professor, whose career is built on writing about Hinduism, to stereotype and vilify the entire Hindu-American community on the basis of the actions of a few.

Doniger's refusal to address her critics only worsens as the interview proceeds. When asked why Hindus object to her writings, she flippantly replies:

You'll have to ask them why. It doesn't seem to me to have much to do with the book. They don't say, "Look here, you said this on page 200, and that's a terrible thing to say." Instead, they say things not related to the book: you hate Hindus, you are sex-obsessed, you don't know anything about the Hindus, you got it all wrong.

This is a bald lie. The first Part of the book, *Invading the Sacred*, documents and refutes dozens of statements by Doniger, as illustrated by the following:

- "Holi, the spring carnival, when members of all castes mingle and let down their hair, sprinkling one another with cascades of red powder and liquid, symbolic of the blood that was probably used in past centuries." (from Doniger's article about Hinduism in the Microsoft Encarta Encyclopaedia—Microsoft Encarta subsequently removed her entry in 2004; while we do not know this for a fact, one can reasonably conclude that Microsoft Encarta came to an internal conclusion about Doniger's lack of scholarship and objectivity).
- From a newspaper article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, dated November 19, 2000, entitled "Big-screen caddy is Hindu hero in disguise" written by David O'Reilly, Inquirer Staff Writer:

"Myth scholar Wendy Doniger of the University of Chicago was on hand earlier this month to lecture on the Gita. "The *Bhagavad Gita* is not as nice a book as some Americans think," she said, in a lecture titled "The Complicity of God in the Destruction of the Human Race." "Throughout the Mahabharata, the enormous Hindu epic of which the Gita is a small part, *Krishna goads human beings into all sorts of murderous and self-destructive behaviors* such as war in order to relieve "mother Earth" of its burdensome human population and the many demons disguised as humans ... *The Gita is a dishonest book; it justifies war,*" Doniger told the audience of about 150" (emphasis added).

Doniger may now claim that she was misquoted, but she has failed to obtain a retraction from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

- Prof. Michael Witzel, Wales Professor of Sanskrit in the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies at Harvard University posted the following remarks about Doniger's translations to a mailing list and called her translations "UNRELIABLE" [sic] and "idiosyncratic:"
  - Doniger's "rendering of even the first two paadas [of the Rg Veda] is more of a paraphrase than a translation;"
  - "In this hymn (of 18 stanzas) alone I have counted 43 instances which are wrong or where others would easily disagree."
  - "Note that all 3 translations are Re-translations. Mistakes of the type mentioned above could easily have been avoided if the work of our 19th century predecessors (and contemporaries!) had been consulted more carefully ... Last point: Looking at the various new translations that have appeared in the past decade or so: Why always to Re-translate something done 'several' times over already --- and why not to take up one of the zillion Un-translated Skt. texts?" [2]

Is that specific enough?

Nor can Doniger claim ignorance of these examples, having been made aware of them through emails, various conferences, journals and mailing lists by many people, including university professors, fellow scholars, and students.

**A**s a scapegoat tactic to discredit her critics, Doniger plays both the sex card and the race card, without offering any evidence for being discriminated against on the grounds of her gender or her race:

I think I have a double disadvantage among the Hindutva types. *One is that I'm not a Hindu and the other is that I am not a male. I suppose the third is that I'm not a Brahmin, but I don't even get there because I'm not a Hindu! I think it's considered unseemly in the conservative Hindu view for a woman to talk about sex—that's something men talk about among themselves* (emphasis added).

But her critics have been concerned not with her gender or race but only with the content of her scholarship. Race and sex bias are the “cards” Doniger uses to distract readers who are unfamiliar with the details of the substance of the critiques against her.

Hindu society acknowledges and celebrates *any* genuine scholars of Hinduism, irrespective of their gender, race or caste. For example, the late Sir John Woodroffe / Arthur Avalon is regarded by even the most traditional and orthodox of Hindu *acharyas*, including the late Shankaracharya of Sringeri, as one of the great Tantric scholars of modern times—despite his being neither Hindu nor Brahmin-born. In addition, Dr. Klaus Klostermaier, University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Religion at the University of Manitoba (Canada), is highly respected in Hindu circles. Linda Johnsen, neither male, Hindu, nor Brahmin-born, author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Hinduism* (2002) among several other books, is also highly regarded for her knowledge about Hinduism.

This respect is not just academic—non-Indian spiritual gurus have been revered by Hindus as well. Daya Mata (Faye Wright), another female, non-Hindu, non-Brahmin (by birth) of the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) was highly regarded by the most traditional and orthodox of Hindu leaders, including (I have been told) the late Shankaracharya of Sringeri, a great scholar and authority on Hinduism. Similarly, Sister Nivedita (Margaret Elizabeth Noble), female, non-Hindu, non-Brahmin-born, perhaps the most prominent of Swami Vivekananda's disciples, has been revered as a true Hindu saint by many orthodox Hindus, including Brahmins; so also has Mother (Mira Alfassa), the Frenchwoman closely associated with (and successor to) Sri Aurobindo. I could go on with a list of lesser known women of foreign birth who are equally acknowledged as true representatives of Hinduism. I have not even touched upon the scores of Indian women who have been revered by Hindus from the Vedic times to the modern day—e.g., Gargi, whose open debate with the great sage Yajnavalkya is prominently featured in the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanisad*.

Moreover, the idea that “it's considered unseemly in the conservative Hindu view for a woman to talk about sex--that's something men talk about among themselves” is another blatantly false stereotype by Doniger.

Doniger's contention that traditional Hindu women are not allowed to talk about sex is directly refuted by the celebrated account of the debate between Ubhaya-Bharati and Adi Shankara, one of the great intellects of the world, sage from the 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE, and father of *Advaita Vedanta* as known today. Adi Shankara was challenged to a debate by Mandana Misra, a learned and well-known *Purva Mimamsa* scholar. *They agreed that Mandana's wife, Ubhaya-Bharati, a renowned scholar in her own right, would be the referee* and that the loser of the debate would become the disciple of the winner. After debating for many days, Mandana Misra lost and was about to become the disciple of Adi Shankara. However, Ubhaya-Bharati then challenged Adi Shankara to debate her, on the grounds that since she and her husband were one person upon being married, he would have to defeat both of them in order to win the debate.

Adi Shankara accepted her challenge. The debate went well for Adi Shankara until Ubhaya-Bharati began posing intricate questions on the science of erotics (well-accepted, in the appropriate context, as a topic of sacred discourse and knowledge in Hinduism). If it was “considered unseemly” per traditional Hinduism for women to talk about sex, the official version of the *Shankara Digvijaya* (accepted as authentic by the Sringeri Shankaracharya Matha) would never have mentioned Ubhaya-Bharati's questioning of Adi Shankara. (Adi Shankara ended up satisfactorily answering the questions on eroticism, and Ubhaya-Bharati accepted her defeat.)

There is also the celebrated account given in the *Yoga Vasistha* of Queen Chudalai, an advanced *yogini*, who initiates her husband, King Sikhidvaja, as her disciple; she tests his renunciation repeatedly and instructs him on the proper attitude towards sexual union and sensual pleasure. Similarly, the famous *Tripura Rahasya* narrates Princess Hemalata's initiation of her husband, Prince Hemachuda, into the secrets of *samadhi* and *moksha*. Finally, the *Mahabharata* recounts the famous interaction between Arjuna and Urvashi—when Arjuna rejected Urvashi's frank invitation for sexual union, she pronounced the following curse: “Since thou disregarded a woman come to thy mansion ... of her own motion—a woman, besides, who is pierced by the shafts of Kama, therefore, O Partha, thou shalt have to pass thy time among females ... destitute of manhood and scorned as a eunuch.”

As these examples show, not only were women *allowed* to discuss sex, they had the authority and scriptural and social standing to challenge and teach the greatest of sages and the most royal of men with respect to all subject matters, including sex and eroticism.

Of course, it is unfortunate that the puritanical mores of Victorian British rule have corrupted modern Hindu society, restricting the open acceptance of sex and sexuality. However, the holistic acceptance of sex and sexuality (without gender or orientation bias) inherent to Hinduism is still vibrant and alive in traditional Hinduism.

In a personal context, I can say unequivocally that despite my birth and upbringing as an American and my liberal schooling in Boston and at Yale Law School, my most honest and open discussions of sex have been with the most orthodox and “traditional” of Hindu swamis and *acharyas*. They helped me unlearn the associative guilt and sexual repression of Western mores. They also taught me that sexual desire is, in the appropriate context, an integral part of life and that there is nothing sinful or shameful about it, and that heightened sexual energies are not antithetical to, but can be an integral part of, spiritual development for people qualified (*adhikaris*) for those types of *sadhana* or spiritual practice.

In short, playing this race and sex card may be an attempt by Doniger to elicit sympathy—but this cannot substitute for sound scholarship. In the traditions of true academic scholarship, Doniger should let her work stand or fall on its own merits and not hide behind false victimhood.

### Misrepresentations of Valmiki Ramayana

**A**part from unfairly stereotyping and insulting her critics, most of the rest of the interview concerns Doniger’s take on the *Valmiki Ramayana*.

#### The “Interpolation” of Ravana’s Curse

According to Doniger:

Things were added on in Ramayana’s first and seventh book later on. For instance, in the seventh book we have a story long before the story of Rama and Sita about how Ravana raped one of the great apsaras, Rambha ... [Her husband] curses Ravana that if he ever touches a woman against her will, his head will shatter into a thousand pieces. So that story is then told in the Ramayana to explain why Ravana didn’t force himself on Sita despite keeping her in his house all those years. In the earlier Ramayana, there’s nothing about this ... This is a later idea that creeps in.”

It is incorrect for Doniger to say that the curse upon Ravana was a “later idea that [crept in]” to explain Ravana’s unwillingness to rape Sita. The relevant incident is found in Book 6 (*Yuddha Kanda*), almost universally recognized as part of the original *Valmiki Ramayana*. (It is the first part of Book 1 (*Bala Kanda*) and all of Book 7 (*Uttara Kanda*) that are, debatably, later interpolations.)

The account is given by Ravana in *Sarga* (Canto) 13 of Book 6 (*Yuddha Kanda*):

Once I beheld (a celestial nymph) Punjikasthala (by name) ... She was stripped of her garment and ravished by me. She then reached the abode of Brahma ... Highly enraged, the creator forthwith addressed the following words to me: “If you (happen to) violate any other woman hence forward, your head will be forthwith split into a hundred pieces; there is no doubt about it.” Hence, afraid (as I am) of his curse, I do not violently put Sita, a princess of the Videha territory, on my charming bed by force. [3]

There is an account of Ravana’s rape of Rambha in Book 7 (*Uttara Kanda*)—but it is the incident recounted in Book 6 (accepted as part of the original *Valmiki Ramayana*) that is explicitly offered as the reason why Ravana did not rape Sita. The effect of the rape of Rambha is more generic: “[Ravana] felt inclined no more to copulate with women who were unwilling to approach him.” [4]

This is not mere nitpicking—the citation of the rape of Punjikasthala in Book 6 **discredits Doniger’s contention** that the curse on Ravana was a later interpolation interjected to conveniently explain why Ravana never raped Sita.

#### Rama as a “Sex-Addict”

According to Doniger, the concept of a “sex-addict” is introduced into the *Valmiki Ramayana* by Lakshmana calling Dasaratha *kama-sakta*, which she defines as “hopelessly attached to lust.”

It is not clear where Doniger picks up the term ‘*kama-sakta*’—the term does not appear upon a search of the text of the *Valmiki Ramayana* as given in the Titus online database, which is based on the following version of the text: G.H. Bhatt e.a., *The Valmiki Ramayana*, (Baroda 1960-1975), prepared by Muneo Tokunaga, March 12, 1993 (adaptations by John D. Smith, Cambridge, 1995.)

Further, neither the term nor its variants appear in the most logical place where Lakshmana would have used the words to describe Dasaratha, the passage in Book 2 (*Ayodhya Kanda*) when Lakshmana disparages the character of Dasaratha for banishing Rama. The relevant phrases that Lakshmana uses here are the following: *nripah vipariitashcha* (king with perverted mind), *pradharshhitaH vishhayaH* (who is outraged by sensual enjoyments) and *samanimadhaH* (who is possessed of passion). [5] None of these terms translates even remotely as “sex addict / addiction”. Addiction is something more than just being overcome by lust: addiction is a “compulsive need for and use of a habit-forming substance... characterized by tolerance and by well-defined physiological symptoms upon withdrawal.” [6]

However, for the sake of argument, I will give the benefit of the doubt to Doniger and assume that the term *kama-sakta* has been used by Lakshmana to describe Dasaratha in the *Valmiki-Ramayana*. That in and of itself does not imply that Dasaratha was “hopelessly addicted to lust.” *Kama-sakta* simply means an attachment (*sakta*) to desire (*kama*). **Kama** does not itself necessarily refer to sexual desire, or even erotic or romantic desire. Dasaratha’s reluctance to allow Rama to serve as guard over Vishwamitra’s *yajna*, for example, or Lakshmana’s unwillingness to be parted from Rama, could equally be characterized as *kama-sakta*. To assume it to mean “attachment to lust” is another in a pattern of Doniger’s ex-cathedra translations in variance with traditional Sanskrit *nirukta* (etymology) for which she has been repudiated before.

It has been brought to my attention that, subsequent to the original interview, as published in print and on this website, Doniger’s statements were corrected to carry the following version of Doniger’s quote on October 20: “Lakshman is the one who actually says it. He says the king is hopelessly attached to sensual objects. But Rama himself says (at 2.47.8) that the king is *kama-atma*, entirely consumed by *kama*.” The deletion of the term *kama-sakta* and the addition of the new reference is not explained, other than as a “typo”.

To offer Doniger leeway that she almost never offers her critics, I will accept the “corrected” statement—but her argument still fails. The relevant reference—found in *Sarga* 53 of the Gita Press, Gorakhpur version and in *Sarga* 47 of the Titus database version (mentioned above)—is part of a scene where Rama reminisces about his father to Lakshmana during the first night of his banishment from Ayodhya. Here is the exact reference:

*anaathaH caiva vRiddhaH ca mayaa caiva vinaakRitaH | kim kariSyati kaama aatmaa kaikeyyaa vasham aagataH ||*

*vRiddhascha* (aged); *anaathascha* ((and therefore) helpless); *mayaarinaacha* (deprived of my presence); *kim karishhyati* (what will he do); *kRitaH* (dominated as he is); *kaamaatmaa* (by his passion (for Kaikeyi)); *aagataH* (and who has fallen); *kaikeyivasham* (into clutches of Kaikeyi).

“Aged and (therefore) helpless, deprived of my presence, what will he do, dominated as he is by his passion for Kaikeyi and who has fallen into the clutches of Kaikeyi.”

As with the phrases described above (uttered by Lakshmana in anger), *Kama-atma* does not necessarily mean “entirely consumed by *kama*.” For example, the illustrious commentary on the *Ramayana* by Sivasahaya, *Raamayana Siromani*, gives the following example of using the term *kama-atma* in a non-sexual context: *kaama aathmaa: kaama - abhishEka vishayiNi ichchhaa* (desiring the matter of crowning) *aathmaa - aathmani manasyEva yasya sah* (one who had this in mind)—i.e., “the king who desired in his mind the crowning [of Rama].” [7]

Falling prey to love (Rama’s description) or being overcome by lust (Lakshmana’s description) does not make one a sex addict; if it did, then any of us could be accused of the same! Sex was explicitly discussed and celebrated in ancient Indian / Hindu texts, as an accepted integral part of life—discussions of being overcome by desire, therefore, do not automatically translate into one being characterized or condemned as a sex-addict. These epithets were uttered in anger and anguish by Dasaratha’s sons at the time of their separation from their family and kingdom—the epithets are indicative of their pain and anger and are not meant to be psychoanalytical judgements of Dasaratha’s character, particularly in a socio-cultural context where intense sexual enjoyment was not viewed as a vice—c.f., the accounts of Karadama *rishi* and Devahuti in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, Yayati and Sarmishta in the *Mahabharata*, and Kacha and Devyani in the *Mahabharata*, where long periods of intense sexual union were described without any condemnation or sense of shame.

In any case, it is not necessary to get entangled into the technicality of semantics to challenge Doniger’s central thesis, which

is summarized in the following excerpt from the interview:

**You also suggest that because Rama is afraid of turning into a sex addict like his father, he throws Sita out after enjoying sex with her?**

You have a chapter in Valmiki's Ramayana where Rama was so happy with Sita, they drank wine together, they were alone, enjoying themselves in every way, indulging in various ways, not just the sexual act. And in the very next chapter he says I've got to throw you out. So I'm suggesting: what is the connection between those two things? And what does it mean that Rama knows that Dasaratha, his father, disgraced himself because of his attachment to his young and beautiful wife. So I'm taking pieces of the Ramayana and putting them together and saying these are not disconnected.

**So you are saying his fear of following in his father's footsteps is making him betray his own sexuality?**

Yes, I am. Or even of being perceived that way.

Note the internal contradiction in Doniger's position—her characterization of Rama hinges on a passage found in Book 7 (*Uttara Kanda*), and she has elsewhere in the interview dismissed that same Book 7 as a later interpolation!

In any event, the passage describing Rama and Sita's "indulgence" is from *Sarga* 42 of Book 7 (*Uttara Kanda*), where Rama and Sita are enjoying their reunion after Sita's abduction. As described therein, during this period of two winters (*i.e.*, two years, although in some versions, an additional half-*shloka* is included providing that this interlude lasted 10,000 years), Rama and Sita would spend the second half of every day together in Rama's Ashoka-grove, enjoying heavenly music and dance and partaking of gourmet food and intoxicating drinks. Rama and Sita are compared to other divine couples:

Taking in his hand the pure nectar of flowers as intoxicating as the Mairayaka wine, Sri Rama ... made Sri Sita drink it, just as Indra does Sachi ... Seated in the company of the celebrated Sita, [Rama] shone with splendour like Vasishta seated along with Arundhati. Sri Rama, steeped in joy like gods, afforded delight thus day after day to ... Sita, who resembled a divine damsel. [8]

Doniger conveniently leaves out the fact that it is in this chapter that Rama discovers that Sita is pregnant. Delighted at this revelation, Rama asks her to tell him which desire of hers he should fulfil. This is Sita's response: "O Raghava! I wish to visit the holy penance-groves and to stay, O Lord!, at the feet of sages ... living on the banks of the Ganga ... This is my greatest wish that I should stay even for one night in the penance-grove of those who live only on fruits and (edible) roots." [9] Rama readily acquiesces to this wish, promising that she will be taken for a visit there the very next day.

Doniger claims that "in the very next chapter [Rama] says [to Sita] I've got to throw you out." This is another totally false statement by Doniger. It is in *Sarga* 45 (after two intervening *sargas* / chapters, wherein Rama learns of the negative gossip surrounding Sita and thus decides to banish her) that Rama orders Lakshmana to take Sita to the forest and leave her there. This is just one more instance of Doniger's casual disregard of the facts, unbecoming of a distinguished professor with a named chair at the University of Chicago.

Of course, it is the two *sargas* / chapters that Doniger skips over in her "alternative" narrative that provide the reason for Rama banishing Sita: Rama is informed that he is being rebuked by the people of Ayodhya as follows: "Why does not Sri Rama censure [Sita], who formerly had been forcibly carried away by Ravana? ... Such conduct of our wives shall have to be suffered by us also, since whatever a king does, the subjects follow." [10] The pernicious rumours are about Sita's chastity / purity, not about Rama's excessive lust.

When this gossip is confirmed by others, Rama summons his brothers to him, and informs them of his decision to leave Sita, providing the following explanation for his decision: "As long as the word of infamy circulates, so long one does fall in the lower regions (hell). Infamy is censured even by the gods and fame gains credence in the world." [11] It is the fear of losing his good name (as the result of the infamy surrounding Sita's chastity by the gossip-mongers of Ayodhya) that impels Rama, not fear of being chastised as a sex-addict.

Nowhere is it mentioned that Rama feared he might fall victim to the "vice" of sex and that he therefore abandoned Sita – this again appears to be an example of the kind of fanciful creation for which Doniger and many of her students, now academicians at leading American universities, have become well-known. *There is no connotation of illicit or excessive indulgence in the description of Rama and Sita's blissful interlude together in Sarga 42—to the contrary, Rama and Sita are depicted as a divine couple with the dignity and radiance of Indra and Sachi, Vasishta and Arundhati.* Rama is full of tenderness for Sita upon discovering her pregnancy. It clearly breaks his heart to send Sita away—after giving Lakshmana



the command, “[Rama] the noble one with His eyes closed, taking leave of His brothers, entered His own apartment, with his heart agitated by sorrow, deeply sighed as an elephant.” [12]

In Doniger’s own words, she is “**taking pieces of the Ramayana and putting them together**” to come up with this far-fetched explanation. But, one cannot play connect-the-dots with various scenes from a vast text such as the *Valmiki Ramayana*, stripping out the proper sequence and removing the contextual background of the critical passages, and then call it a valid textual interpretation.

Even if Doniger is reading into the text certain psychological motivations she wants to attribute to the characters, her characterization appears to be illogical--if Rama sent Sita away simply because he didn’t want to become / be characterized as a sex addict, why did he not make arrangements to claim his future heir(s), whom he knew Sita carried in her womb?

### Construction of Hindu Temples

**D**oniger suggests that Hindus did not have a prominent temple-building movement—because building temples requires “a lot of money, land, a whole system of building temples, which the Hindus did not have at first”—until the Bhakti movement gathered momentum “to organize Rama or Shiva worship.” She makes a superfluous reference to the fact that the *Kama Sutra* does not discuss temple worship—one wonders why the *Kama Sutra* would be a relevant reference for discussion of temple construction, but then one recalls the BBC quote at the beginning of this note about Doniger’s strange predilection for the *Kama Sutra*.

This is really the topic for another article, but it is worth quickly noting here that the *Sathapatha Brahmana* portion of the *Shukla Yajur Veda*, dating back to at least 1500 BCE, describes a special form of tabernacle, distinct from the *Agni-shala* of the household, for which a special fire-priest, the *Agnidhra*, was designated. Through the kindling of the fire, the tabernacle became the dwelling place of the *Vishvedevas* (all the gods). This is a prototype for later Hindu temples, where icons replaced the sacred fire as the focus of worship. In other words, if one wants to be polemical, one can definitely argue that the genesis of formal temple construction *vidhis* – rules and methods – certainly pre-dates the advent of Buddhism.

Further, details of (at least *Vaishnava*) temple construction, the consecration of images for worship, and the actual procedures and rituals for temple worship are set forth in the ancient *Vaikhanasa* and *Paancharatra Agamas*. The *Vaikhanasa Agama* dates back to at least the 3rd or 4th century CE, and its *Kriyaa Paadha* discusses temple construction and image consecration while its *Charyaa Padhaa* focuses on the associated rituals of worship.

There are many examples of temples from these ancient times. A few are quickly identified here: The early phase of Chalukyan temple building began in the last quarter of the 6th century and resulted in many cave temples, including a Vaishnava temple dating back to 578 CE. The second phase of Chalukyan temple building at Aihole, celebrated as one of the cradles of Indian temple architecture, dates back to approximately 600 CE. Similarly, the Pallavas constructed rock-cut temples dating from 610–690 AD and structural temples between 690–900 AD, including the rock-cut temples at Mahabalipuram, the Kailasanatha temple in Kanchipuram, and the Shore Temple built by Narasimhavarman II.

### Doniger’s Larger Narrative about Hinduism

**T**he story Doniger wants to tell about the *Ramayana* fits into her larger narrative about the character of Hinduism. Her overarching narrative is captured in her statement: “That’s why Hinduism is such a wonderful religion. It’s because people are allowed to have their own texts ... there was no one who said there was only one way to tell the Ramayana ... And no one would say that you got it wrong.”

Of course, there is great diversity in Hinduism—after all, over three hundred versions of the *Ramayana* co-exist peaceably within the pantheon of Hindu literature. There are no unnecessary battles about which version is the *definitive* version—Hinduism does not subscribe to the notion of One Book or One Prophet, which is the predominant characteristic of the Semitic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

It is misleading to say, in a scholarly context, that just because multiple versions of a story exist, “no one [can] say that you got it wrong.” For, there is a significant difference between creating a new version of a story—e.g., Tulsidas retelling the Ramayana in his *Sri Ramacharitamanasa*, which does not purport to be the “original” or “corrected” version of the Valmiki

Ramayana—and offering an academic explanation or interpretation of an existing story (the Valmiki Ramayana) that takes liberties with and/or misquotes the text. It is the difference between artistic interpretation and scholarly rigour. For a scholar, it is not sufficient to demonstrate that a constructed narrative or story is possible by stringing together disparate phrases and passages; rather, a scholar must show why her preferred version is more persuasive than other versions—why it is a more coherent narrative or a more insightful explanation. This is particularly important when the scholar's preferred version sharply diverges from the canonical traditions of interpretation. This is not fundamentalism—this is what it means to be a scholar!

The diversity within Hinduism and Hindu society is one of its greatest strengths, but the danger of saying that there is no *one* Hindu identity is concluding that therefore there isn't *any* Hindu identity. Diversity should not be falsely treated as a lack of unity; to the contrary, *e pluribus unum* (from many, one). Actually, in the Hindu framework, it would be from one, many—c.f., *Bhagavad Gita* (15:1): “There is a banyan tree which has its roots upward and its branches down and whose leaves are the Vedic hymns. One who knows this tree is the knower of the Vedas.” In other words, from One Truth flower many expressions of that same truth, from one root of *dharma* flower the *hymns*, traditions, philosophical doctrines and sacred lore that comprise the tree of Hinduism. Or, to give a musical analogy, within one scale or *raaga*, many variations may be improvised.

In concrete fact, unity underlies every instance of diversity in Hinduism over the eons—that is why, for example, Adi Shankara Bhagavadpada, spiritual titan and amongst the greatest intellects of the world established the four seats of his monastic order on the four corners of India—Jyotirmath / Badrinath in the North, Puri in the East, Dwaraka in the West and Sringeri in the South—he also installed Namboodris from the deep south of Kerala as officiating priests in the Himalayan temple of Badrinath (a practice that continues to this day).

In closing, there does exist an easily recognizable non-fundamentalist Hindu identity, built upon a body of history, sacred texts and philosophical and ritualistic traditions that span several thousands of years. This Hindu identity is diverse and multidimensional but also internally consistent—a consistent scale, as it were, upon which millions of Hindus improvise their own variations.

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#### Notes:

- [1] Interview with Wendy Doniger, March 27, 2002, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/asianlife/tv/network\\_east\\_late/biogs/wendy\\_doniger.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/asianlife/tv/network_east_late/biogs/wendy_doniger.shtml), available at [http://web.archive.org/web/20020911134952/http://www.bbc.co.uk/asianlife/tv/network\\_east\\_late/biogs/wendy\\_doniger.shtml](http://web.archive.org/web/20020911134952/http://www.bbc.co.uk/asianlife/tv/network_east_late/biogs/wendy_doniger.shtml).
- [2] Krishnan Ramaswamy, Antonio de Nicolas and Aditi Banerjee, eds., *Invading The Sacred: An Analysis of Hinduism Studies in America* (Rupa & Co., June 2007), p. 66. See also Ailes, Gregory D., *Religious Studies: a Global View* (Routledge 2007), p. 260.
- [3] See *Srimad Valmiki-Ramayana (With Sanskrit Text and English Translation)*, Gita Press, Gorakhpur (Sixth Edition 2001), Book Six, Canto 13, verses 4-15, (Volume 2, pp. 266-267).
- [4] *Srimad Valmiki-Ramayana (With Sanskrit Text and English Translation)*, Gita Press, Gorakhpur (Sixth Edition 2001), Book 7, Canto 26, Verse 58 (Volume 2, p. 769).
- [5] *Srimad Valmiki-Ramayana* Book 2, Canto 21, Verse 3.
- [6] See the Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/addiction>.
- [7] See Sivasahaya, *Ramayana Siromani*, Parimal Publications, New Delhi, Volume 2, p. 722.
- [8] See *Srimad Valmiki-Ramayana (With Sanskrit Text and English Translation)*, Gita Press, Gorakhpur (Sixth Edition 2001), Book 7, Canto 42, Verse 19 and 24, (Volume 2, p. 819).
- [9] *Id.*, Verses 33-34, (Volume 2, p. 820).



[10] *Id.*, Canto 43, (Volume 2, p. 821).

[11] *Id.*, Canto 45, Verse 13 (Volume 2, p. 825).

[12] *Id.* Canto 45, Verse 24-25 (Volume 2, p. 825).

*This article has been prepared with valuable inputs from:*

His Holiness Swami Sarvananda Saraswati, Vedantacharya of the Shankara Advaita sampradaya; Chancellor, Bhartishreepeetham University, New Delhi; President, All India Quami Ekta Committee, New Delhi; Board of Directors, OISCA International, Tokyo, Japan; Chairman, Bhajan Sukhsewa Mission, U.S.A., U.K., Canada, France; Devi Upasaka, Sri Vidya authority, and orator.

Swami Sanmayananda Saraswati, sannyasin in the Shankara Advaita tradition, founder of Nallepilly Narayanalayam Ashramam in Kerala, and ardent devotee of Guruvayoor Krishna.

Bhagwat Bhaskara Sri Krishna Chandra Shastri (Thakurji), renowned Vaishnavism and Sanskrit scholar from the Sri Vaishnava (Ramanuja) sampradaya, world-renowned orator on Hinduism regularly featured on Aastha TV with audiences of 10,000 – 100,000 for his public discourses on Hinduism (Bhagwat Saptah)—Sri Thakurji is saddened both at the tone and nature of the contents of Prof. Doniger's interview and will soon publish a rejoinder in the media.

Dr. Oppiliappan Koil Varadachari Sadagopan, President, Networked Multimedia Services; retired executive IBM Research; Kaimkarya Ratnam and Sri VaishNav Srinidhi, recognized exponent / authority of Sri Vaishnavism (Ramanuja sampradaya) known for his knowledge of Carnatic music, author of innumerable e-books on Sri Vaishnavism and diverse Hindu spiritual topics.

Nagendra S. Rao, spiritual advisor / counsellor (to many, including me); community resource with a syncretistic Advaita and multicultural perspective; long-time close disciple of the late Shankaracharya of Sringeri, Jagadguru Sri Abhinava Vidyatheertha Mahaswamigal; co-founder and former Director of the Hindu American Foundation (HAF); sometime executive consultant on global strategy planning with IBM.

Dr. MG Vasudevan, retired engineer; Sanskrit and Ramayana scholar; freelance writer on the Ramayana, including an e-book on "The Roles of Lakshmana,"—he has provided many of the citations in this paper.

Rajiv Malhotra, renowned intellectual on Hinduism and traditional Indian culture; prolific author of scholarly studies on academic Hinduism programs at leading US universities; founder and president of Infinity Foundation; appointee to the Asian-American Commission for the State of New Jersey, where he serves as the Chairman for the Education Committee.

Dr. Prabhu Shastri, teacher of scriptures and spiritual texts at Bharata Vidya Bhavan, London; freelance Sanskrit teacher in London.

Sri K. Balasubramanian, Devi Upasaka; renowned practitioner / exponent of Sri Vidya & Sri Chakra puja.

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