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Book Review: Pluralism And Democracy In India: Debating the Hindu Right by Wendy Doniger and Martha C. Nussbaum

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Doniger, Wendy and Martha C. Nussbaum, eds. *Pluralism And Democracy In India: Debating the Hindu Right*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xvi + 384 pages. Paperback, \$38.50.

Over the past three years, I have been deeply involved in the study of, and work in, South Asia. One of the projects I am currently involved with is the peaceful reconciliation of India and Pakistan. Some of the major challenges to the success of reconciliation are the dynamics described in *Pluralism And Democracy In India: Debating the Hindu Right*.

Wendy Doniger (a History of Religions Professor) and Nartha Nussbaum (a Law and Ethics Professor) bring together leading scholars from a wide array of disciplines to discuss how India can protect its pluralistic values. The book focuses on an emergent and disturbing trend in Indian politics, that is, the rise of a Hindu Right. The major goal of this movement is the transformation of India from a secular to a Hindu (Hindutva) state. The three primary organizational advocates of Hindutva are Rashtriya Swayamesevak Sangh (RSS, National Volunteers' Organization), the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council), and the Bharatiq Janata Party (BJP, People's Party of India), collectively known as the Sangh or Hindutvavadis. The movement also includes a women's auxiliary, the Rashtrasevika Samiti, which is organized to inculcate non-Sangh spouses into the ideology and obligations associated with Sangh membership. It does the same with children born into Sangh families.

In looking at the origins of this movement, the contributing authors suggest that the secularism of Gandhi and Nehru encouraged religiously inclined Hindus to shift into the orbit of xenophobic Hindu nationalists. During Partition in 1947—separating the Dominion of Pakistan from the Union of India—constitutional policies protected caste and ethnic minorities, but left religious minorities (primarily Muslims) open for attack. This occurred particularly in regions of the country such as Gujarat where the Sangh appropriated political parties, civil society, and government offices.

The authors explain that the rise of the Sangh, as represented by the election of the BJP's Narendra Modi as India's Prime Minister, evolved with (1) funding from Indian ex-patriots (many living in the United States), (2) the aid of a non-critical press, and (3) a systematic rewriting of Indian history that transformed myths into facts and demonized Indian Muslims. Also, pogroms against religious minorities (primarily Muslims) received tacit approval from the federal government of India which refused to intervene to stop the violence or to aid the victims.

In addition, we learn that the reach of the Hindutva movement extends into U.S. universities where it attempts to censor non-Hindu professors writing about Hinduism, and Hindu academics whose writing about Hinduism challenges Hindutva interpretations. They also

attempt to rewrite history books in the United States to eliminate discussions of the caste system and raise the prominence of India's civilization in ways not supported by historical fact.

While the violence bred by the Hindutva movement, and the pressures it has brought upon scholars, has caused alarm, the anthology also includes readings that instill hope. It includes a discussion of how Indian liberals might gain a religiously inspired voice to counter the Right's use of religious language and imagery. It includes an examination of the use of the aesthetics of poetry to create a pluralistic and proud national identity. It includes insights into efficacious women's movements that form to address violence in universalistic terms. In addition, it includes a call to scholars to study and write, in that their work may serve tolerance and peace.

This is a well-conceived and organized anthology which taps into various disciplines including social science, literature, history, politics, philosophy, and religion. Each of the American and Indian contributors writes in a clear and powerful prose, and this important text is a must-read for scholars studying Southern Asia. *Pluralism And Democracy In India: Debating the Hindu Right* is also appropriate for undergraduate and graduate classes in South Asian Studies and Social Movements, as well as anyone who loves this part of the world.

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