

Subject: Academic Researchers Versus Hindu Civilisation

by Dr. Gautam Sen

"The Bhagavad Gita is not as nice a book as some Americans think. Throughout the Mahabharata... Krishna goads human beings into all sorts of murderous and self-destructive behaviours such as war... The Gita is a dishonest book; it justifies war. ...I'm a pacifist. I don't believe in 'good' wars."

(Wendy Doniger, Indologist and Professor of History of Religions at the University of Chicago: Philadelphia Inquirer of 19 November 2000.)

Introduction

This discussion seeks to understand why Indian studies in the West (especially the US and the UK) are overwhelmingly hostile to their object of study. In the first place, ethnocentric and parochial perceptions will usually dominate when one culture critically evaluates another. And once the resulting interpretative canon becomes firmly established through common consent, prolonged practice and appropriate imprimaturs, it becomes painfully difficult to dislodge, even if it is motivated by an intellectually disingenuous political rationale. In the case of the contemporary Western critique of India, and increasingly Hinduism, its rationale and sheer perversity can be attributed to mundane political reasons and international power politics. In order to understand the dynamics of this phenomenon vis-?-vis India and Hinduism one first needs to explain the role of the academic and researcher, the intellectual entrepreneurs of society, and their function as agents of the political objectives of society.

The intellectual entrepreneur

The growing numbers in contemporary society engaged in intellectual endeavour and the resulting institutionalisation of their work underlines the role of the modern intellectual entrepreneur. This class of entrepreneurs operates in an intellectual marketplace that ultimately serves the needs of the prevailing order, i.e. groups and/or powerful societies and states. They are profoundly dependent for material rewards and status on established institutions. Such entrepreneurs display a superficial restlessness and rootlessness that may suggest cosmopolitan allegiances, but they are in fact firmly anchored to the prevailing structures of political, economic and social power. That has of course always been true to some degree in all societies. The hallmark of such a social class is necessarily opportunism and the few 'virtuous' dissidents that undoubtedly exist among them have a circumscribed impact. One should not therefore be unduly awe-struck by the views and postures adopted by this intellectual social class or impute excessively durable significance to its cogitation.

In this context, the production of intellectual output is much like any other modern economic activity. The isolated lone entrepreneur engaged in a small-scale cottage industry, operating at some remove from formal institutions and somewhat alienated from the prevailing order, owing to intermittent direct interaction with society, is now exceptional. The comprehensive institutionalisation of paid intellectual labour and the system of regulation, vetting by the peer review system of journal editorial boards and the editors of major publishing houses (and increasingly television) have seen off and/or constrained the upstart autodidact. These channels are the unavoidable conduits through which 'quality control' is exercised (as the famous intellectual Theodor W. Adorno himself discovered). The scale of the complicity of intellectual entrepreneurs in the sordid purposes of the State is a little hard to believe because intellectual life is wrongly associated with probity and openness. There is also a tendency to accept the conventional account of past events offered in standard textbooks and journals. The best test for evaluating the extent of deception and lies is to judge the veracity of accounts about contemporary issues, since one is more likely to be aware of the truth. Such an exercise makes clear that dishonesty is the name of the game and the scale of the lies, by acts of commission and omission, are simply huge. How many people, for example, realise that the British and French governments were assiduous supporters of the Milosevic regime in Yugoslavia while it was engaged in genocide? Such historical facts simply disappear from view because intellectual entrepreneurs comply with the injunctions of State policy.

The specific forces that govern the individual intellectual entrepreneur's output of analyses and ideas are a combination of the subjective (i.e. personal) and the dominant objective forces in society, beyond his control. The subjective motive is a curious amalgam of socialisation, transparently evident in the conformist similarities of common genres, and shared ideas, underpinned by an inter-subjective 'language'. But any subjective freedom that apparently exists is embedded within the imperatives of the political power and purposes of society. The subjectivity of the intellectual entrepreneur is subordinated and unceremoniously impaled on the logic of society's power political structures, by the mundane imperatives of access to funding and rules for achieving status. It scripts creativity and imposes conformity. Such subjective and objective stimuli also create strong competitive pressures to succeed that intensify conformist behaviour.

Private, sentimental attachments have but a precarious place in such endeavours. It often entails the sacrifice of family life and friendships, which highlight some advantages for the unencumbered single entrepreneur, with a tenuous stake in the future. He may therefore turn out to be the most reliable archetype for achieving institutional political objectives. As a result, such intellectual endeavours exhibit, in sublimated form, the profile of successful criminality: keen awareness of and responsiveness to external stimuli and the capacity for instrumental ruthlessness because the type of work involved nurtures foresight and manipulative skills.

This is the key to understanding the relationship between the individual intellectual entrepreneur and their object of investigation. Any display of sentimental attachment to the object of enquiry is highly conditional, though some mutability in loyalties presumably exists, qualified by the imperatives of political necessity that cannot be disregarded by the entrepreneur. The study of language, literature and the humanities enjoys a measure of immunity from explicit political sanction that subjects like international relations and anthropology are unable to escape. The origin of international relations as a subject was functional to great power politics after WWII and anthropology began as a colonial and imperial venture to investigate and thereby control subject peoples.

India as an object of entrepreneurial enquiry

It may be innocently imagined that an intellectual entrepreneur engaged in sustained study of a particular society or country must have empathy for it. On the contrary, such enquiry can take the shape of reconnoitring an enemy and indeed compound the distaste for the culture in question, which I imagine is the case with a majority of Western scholars of India. Critiques of the foundational ideas of a society and culture indicate, ipso facto, distaste for it. A society will always be vulnerable to the scurrilous deconstruction of its primordial beliefs because they are historical in character. Arbitrary first principles, usually mythical, are the basis for all human existence. Thus, pitiless scrutiny, without respect or empathy, of the deeply held sacred beliefs of others, which defines their very humanity, is a sure sign of utter disregard.

'Scorched earth' techniques of 'academic' investigation are typified by the disgraceful and (as it also happens) dubious scholarly methods employed by an American academic, who engaged in gross abuse of the Indian saint Ramakrishna. This arrogance originates in the mindset of a slave-owning culture, which devoted its ingenuity to digging holes in the ground to bury an unborn child in her pregnant black mother's swelling stomach, before whipping her bare buttocks. Some morally bankrupt Hindu psychoanalyst (the closest modern social science gets to witchcraft) supported this author deviously, though without the courage to do so explicitly. He took out political insurance for himself by confessing that he had portrayed a fictional character inspired by Ramakrishna sympathetically, in a novel. Such scholarly discourse is equivalent to stripping someone's mother naked in public because it merely violates the taboo of shame and causes no actual bodily injury.

British colonial roots of Cold War hostility towards India

The long-standing Anglo-Saxon critique of Hindu society and independent India has roots in the visceral British hatred of the educated Hindu elites of late nineteenth century Bengal that they themselves had originally sponsored. The resulting confluence of British imperial interests and subsequent Muslim politics in India is too well known to require detailed recounting. The British inaugurated twentieth century sectarian Islamic politics in India as a counterweight to the pan-Indian and secular Congress, which was seeking basic political rights for all Indians. They also partitioned Bengal in 1905 to vent their anger against 'native' protest at their oppressive and racist rule over all religious communities (cf. The Imbert Bill). An unbroken straight line can be drawn, from this burgeoning British hostility towards Hindus over a hundred years ago to the constant fabrications of British journalists and editors in the print media and television about India today. These contemporary lies will one day transmute into 'unassailable' archival material, cited in journals by academics to assert the superiority of their research methodology and dismiss the amateur investigator.

The late nineteenth century British critique of Indians and their struggle for emancipation was to become fatefully embroiled in the anti-Communist politics of the Cold War, led by the US. As an outstanding study by C. Dasgupta (Sage, New Delhi 2002) has demonstrated, Pakistan's importance to the Cold War effort against the Soviets was recognised in the late 1940s by the British. This conviction was subsequently accepted by the US and successive administrations have subscribed to this belief ever since. So sacrosanct is the relationship with Pakistan that the crime considered to be the most heinous in modern international

relations, the proliferation of nuclear weapons to unstable regimes, is being accepted by resort to the most blatant lies, which will, no doubt, eventually become archived evidence transmuted into historical fact. Significantly, Dasgupta's unpolemical and measured, scholarly book has been sunk, almost without trace by the academic establishment, despite its impeccable professional pedigree, i.e. written by a Cambridge-educated diplomat.

The sustained and multifarious assault on independent India, Hinduism and all its works by the Anglo-Saxon Indian studies academic establishment must be viewed in the context of the profound US contest against Soviet communism. As a corollary, the end of this struggle may also presage a change in the largely unsympathetic representation of India. When the life-and-death struggle against communism was going on, and it was exactly that, with the palpable fear of nuclear annihilation and the possibility of total defeat in the process, issues of truth and fairness became secondary. The world of Islam and Pakistan were political and military allies, possessing oil resources and run by anti-Communist Islamic dictatorships, installed in power by US intervention. By contrast, India was considered the enemy, described by the US State Department in the late 1940s as a potential imperialist threat to its interests, akin to Japan during the 1930s (a canard repeated as late as 1992). It was also viewed as an unscrupulous Soviet camp follower.

This urgent power political calculus and the attendant purposes of the US State imbued Indian studies in the US. Its purpose was to undermine India politically by de-legitimizing its cultural and religious values. The neutering of Indian culture and its civilisation became an unthinking adjunct to the vindication of the Cold War imperative of projecting Pakistani verisimilitude. It fitted seamlessly into a deep-rooted and uncomprehending Semitic political and religious aversion towards the pagan and polytheistic. By portraying India as a vicious civilisation, riven by the racism of caste, which routinely burnt widows (Sati, described recently as if it was widespread) and brides in the bargain is a victory by default for Pakistani claims to a place in the world. Interestingly, a search of all the journals listed below* turned up one solitary scholarly article on 'Islam in India' and over two hundred directly or indirectly related to the term 'Hindu', overwhelmingly critical of either the politics of India or vehemently imputing a sectarian character to all Hindu socio-political activity. There was virtually not a single discussion of slavery in a global search of journals, presumably because it might reveal unpleasant truths about the fate of Hindus under Muslim rule. Mass enslavement has of course been the norm for Islamic conquests everywhere.

Attempts by academics to injure Hindu civilisation

The 'expose' of Indian Hindu 'mumbo jumbo', the irrationality of its licentious and sensual religion also serves to defuse India's significance in the public imagination. The exotic may be fascinating, but it is not a legitimate way of life recommended for imitation in the sane real world. Such a hostile portrayal cannot be accomplished by half measures that allow serious alternative sympathetic versions. Of course, a paid bureaucrat does not orchestrate such a venture from some central control centre. What is needed to ensure negative perceptions, that form the backdrop to antagonistic outcomes consistent with State policy, is influence over key academics and university departments, manned by professional scholars. But control over the principal sources of funding for academic work and research, which also influences disbursement by lesser sources, remains crucial. And the official nature of major charitable US academic funding agencies is not a matter of serious dispute. Much of the rest follows

through peer pressure, from the potent impact of validation by prestigious institutions and the celebrity academic stars that occupy senior positions within them.

Professional scholarship in the humanities is like a chameleon that can change colour radically (i.e. depiction, interpretations and associated political implications) and still remains a chameleon, i.e. legitimate scholarship in the view of peers. The same Ramakrishna portrayed by suspect scholarship and sleight-of-hand as a pederast could be recast, if the scholar chooses, as a sensual individual who sublimated desire in the way recommended by the Vedanta. The linguist and interpreter of myths have wide latitude and may display immense skill in imaginative reconstruction, but reconstructed myths do not become historical facts or provide a basis for reliable scientific inferences about contemporary societal mores and processes. Myths, ultimately, remain myths. But they can be made to appear distasteful and the civilisation that produced them odd at best. Serious comment on the subject matter of comparative mythology requires scholarship and is outside the scope of the present analysis, but it may be argued that the faithful themselves are unduly sensitive to the suggestion that religious mythology is not equivalent to historical fact. The fusing of truth with fantasy or myth is an entirely legitimate universal basis of socio-cultural identity and self-perception that should not distress the faithful.

But when a supreme interpreter (Wendy Doniger) of myth, with vast evident knowledge of Hinduism and Hindu society, casually espouses the oxymoron of Hindu fundamentalism as a conceptual category one's confidence in her wider scholarly competence begins to waver. Hindus may be bad people, their politics may be reprehensible, they may be extremists, violent, but the notion of religious fundamentalism, which has a very specific meaning about the relationship between literal textual interpretation and behavioural norms, does not advance the understanding of Indian society and politics.

The collaborationist Indian left and the West

Allied to the designs of US Cold War politics and its academics an overwhelming majority of India's English speaking scholars has been mobilised in a veritable campaign against the alleged dangers of a Hindu awakening in India. These native scholars and their assorted domestic allies wield influence disproportionate to their numbers, a counterpart of the Anglicised consumer, who, despite numerical paucity, generates vast advertising revenues for India's English newspapers, though this too is changing as the pockets of the 'untutored' bulge with cash. What are their motives? The uncharitable view is that the current political dispensation is a source of deep anxiety for the English-speaking cosmopolitans because the untutored (and unwashed?) traditional denizens of India's provincial towns have wrested political control of mainstream politics from them. All sorts of political alliances are therefore afoot, not least with sectarian Islam, the only reliable bloc vote in India unequivocally against the growing voice of the Hindu majority in Indian politics as well. The disadvantaged marginal Hindu groups are proving unreliable because they are insufficiently exercised by the equity of religious stake holders in Indian politics to wish to disrupt India Inc itself; their leaders merely want to supplant others to usurp a larger share of the spoils for themselves.

A more charitable interpretation is that if you believe in the class struggle and seek revolutionary change to liberate the masses, horizontal societal, as opposed to vertical class, divisions among toiling Indians of different religious communities have to be opposed, by

whatever means necessary. The Chinese Communists have been undermining this already improbable reverie of late by unleashing the full force of the coercive apparatus of their State on unpaid workers who dare to strike and even commit suicide, in public displays of despair. That apparently embarrasses the workers' government, which begins to look increasingly familiar as a classic example of fascism, ruthlessly directing a corporate society and all the apparatuses of State power through a political party, without any apology or hint of public accountability.

Be that as it may, a few lies, subterfuges and resort to the help of international sympathisers for such a noble cause, which is permitted by revolutionary theory anyway, is hardly criminal. The idea that some of these international academic sympathisers might enjoy cordial ties with governmental agencies hostile to Indian national interests, as many clearly do, is deemed an invention of the despicable Indian State, which represents the oppressor classes. Never mind who the infinitely more powerful US State and its imperial collaborators represent. Once these certainties are established, the burden of accepting financial rewards and prestigious appointments from abroad is a cross that has to be borne courageously, for the sake of the eventual liberation of the masses from fascist oppression. The struggle stretches way back, beyond the Sangh Parivar to Indira Gandhi, nay her father. Indeed, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru faced a more hostile international press than his daughter or the redoubtable Atal Behari Vajpayee. India's English speaking 'leftist' elites had a more ambiguous relationship vis-?-vis the Indian State under Jawaharlal Nehru, since the Indian social order was more consonant with their own conception of their place within it and dissent was choreographed accordingly. Atal Behari Vajpayee's really serious infraction in the eyes of the 'world community', the highest court of appeal in the admiring perception of the Indian left, was the nuclear tests of May 1998 that ensured India a position of virtual impregnability in a potential conventional military engagement on two fronts.

Conclusion

The social and political churning that has been unfolding in contemporary India is, first and foremost, a nationalist phenomenon. It has occurred in the backdrop of a profound awakening in the nineteenth century that was primarily religious in character. The former exhibits many of the defects of intolerance and exclusivism intrinsic to nationalism, but such shortcomings are neither unique nor necessarily fatal. Indeed nationalism remains an unfortunate necessity in a jealous world of predatory nation states, ever ready to extinguish the weak. The progressive sapping of the earlier religious renaissance, in the last remaining repository of a uniquely open-ended spiritual and philosophical quest, must nevertheless be a source of regret, although that need not be permanent.

- Journal of the American Oriental Society, Asian Survey, Journal of Asian Studies, Modern Asian Studies, Monumenta Nipponica, Pacific Affairs, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, Journal of Japanese Studies, Modern China, Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs, China Quarterly, Far Eastern Survey, Far Eastern Quarterly, China Journal, Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, News Bulletin (Institute of Pacific Relations), and Memorandum (Institute of Pacific Relations, American Council) .

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