

## ACADEMICS COMPOUNDING HINDUTVA

M. Sivaramkrishna♦

‘Hindutva’ exists in two major contexts: the first consists of academic studies, in and from the ‘West’, regarding virtually every aspect of Hinduism. To this category belong also, collateral studies in India deriving, by and large, from the frames used by the western scholars. The second context is the perennial philosophical tradition of Hinduism consisting of both the *sruti* and the validation of its truths (or Truths) by the nearly unbroken chain of sages and saints right from the Vedic seers down to Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi, and more recently Nisargadatta and others. The paradox is that the first category has little to do with the second. For many reasons, the main one constituted by the experiences of these seers is regarded, in the eyes of the academics, teleological and highly subjective.

The politics of ‘Hindutva’ vis-à-vis Hinduism arises from the tension between these two. That is, whether you call it the secular-democratic or the populist, often militant forces, ‘Hindutva’ and the hardening of its stance(s) arises from the nearly irreconcilable nature of these two categories. To be more specific: behind the populist trends, there is also the support, tacit or explicit, of many intellectuals, etc. As Jyotirmaya Sharma puts it, “What further complicates the picture is the complicity and collaboration of refined intellectuals, artists and scientists with extremism of the Hindutva variety.”<sup>1</sup>

I don’t think this is complicity. For, the studies of various aspects of Hinduism, for instance, coming from noted university presses like Chicago, Oxford, California, New York, even Harvard and Princeton, are intellectually impeccable but seem to be highly insensitive to a religion

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♦**Prof. M. Sivaramkrishna**, the former Head of the Department of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad, is a creative critic of religious literature and a prolific writer in the arena of world religions.

<sup>1</sup>Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*. New Delhi: Penguin/Viking, 2003, 3.

and culture which continued to be something woven into the intricate threads of life itself. Faith in tradition is entrenched either consciously or unconsciously. If the facets of this tradition are brushed aside as not worthy of consideration in academic discussions, what results is the situation which we have now, the emergence of which is imperceptible.

Though it is naïve to generalize and simplify, one can safely say that western writers regard India as a good copy that sells well and fast, especially if its alleged Hindu aberrations are highlighted. India, at one extreme, is portrayed as an area of darkness, a wounded civilization full of heat and dust, ugly, corrupt, inefficient; in fact, this is the impression that most travel writers and the modern electronic media give. They make fun, for instance, of the cow citing the diseased specimens on the road as exemplars of the sacred! If a creative writer parodies the concept of the Divine Mother in the caricature of a story like “How I became the Holy Mother” how is one to respond? Can any one lap it up as creative freedom of the artist?

## II

Of late, a more explosive academic assault is on ‘*Tantra*’, one of the most important schools of Hindu spirituality. Disregard the popular aberrations, resulting from New Age practitioners cluttering the websites in which the basic tenets of Hindu faith are subjected to grotesque caricature. What about the scholarly tomes that come from ‘responsible’ university presses?

Studies by Jeffrey J. Kripal, Wendy Doniger and, of late, Hugh B. Urban, on *tantra*, in general, and of Bengal, in particular, seem to start with the unquestionable assumption that *tantra* is refined sex or that at least it offers a way out of the intolerable conflict between sexual repression and the traditional religious views. One can hardly question their scholarship – at least, as defined by the West. Analytical, empirical, textual exactness marks these studies. Yet, what does one make of statements such as the one made by Hugh B. Urban? Pointing out the support for his study, Urban observes:

Borrowing some insights from Michel Foucault and his work on sexuality in the Victorian era, I will argue that *Tantra* has by no means been repressed or marginalized; on the contrary, like sex itself, *Tantra* has become the subject of an endless proliferation of

discourses and exploited as “the secret.” Indeed, one might say even that *Tantra* represents the ideal religion for contemporary western society.<sup>2</sup>

He continues stating his reason: “A religion that seems to combine spirituality with sensuality, and mystical experience with wine, women and wealth, *Tantra* could be the ideal path for spiritual consumers in the strange world of ‘late capitalism.’” See the genealogy of the study: Foucault, Victorian era, “the secret,” combining sexuality/sensuality, etc., for, specifically late American (globalizing) capitalism. Wine, wealth and women, perhaps, are transfigured *panchamakaras* of the Tantric ritual. This is the framework that fixes figures like Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo. (Of course, it is not necessary to cite Osho.) In terms of these criteria, an authority on *Tantra* like John Woodroffe and even Swami Vivekananda constitute “deodorized *tantra*” with its implicit “Sex, scandal, secrecy.”<sup>3</sup>

Take again, the work of Wendy Doniger. One of her books is called *Bed Tricks*, and it treats of the amorous exploits of Siva and Parvati, among other gods. She also wrote an article which she titled as “When a *Lingam* is Just a Cigar: Psychoanalysis and Hindu Sexual Fantasies.”<sup>4</sup> Explaining how a scholar should avoid taking into account what a symbol means for the native, she points to the “hermeneutics of suspicion”:

The hermeneutics of suspicion – the belief that a text can mean something other than what the author thinks it means, a hermeneutic derived directly from Freud – prevents us ... from simply asking members of the culture what they think the symbol means. Many Hindus, for instance, will argue that the *lingam* has nothing whatsoever to do with the male sexual organ, an assertion blatantly contradicted by much of the material ... the gloss offered from within the culture must be accepted as a truth, but only a partial truth. We must also find other, more indirect cultural contexts, such as the

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<sup>2</sup>Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003, 2-3.

<sup>3</sup>Urban, *Tantra*, 134.

<sup>4</sup>See Vaidyanthan T. G. and Jeffrey J. Kripal, ed., *Vishnu on Freud's Desk: A Reader in Psychoanalysis and Hinduism*. Delhi: OUP, 1999.

patterns formed by other myths, or the rituals associated with the myth, or other evidence of how the myth is used in society.<sup>5</sup>

So, the Hindu who reads this kind of analysis should accept that a *lingam* and a good cigar should be regarded as interchangeable! Then the Hindu text is rescued from “its partial truth” nature. Given these modalities, “Siva is the castrated father and Indra the unhappy oedipal child.”<sup>6</sup> By such violent transplanting, no offence is meant! Only an honest attempt at total interpretation is intended. If the argument is paraphrased in the regional languages and given wider circulation for its ingeniously fresh approach to the Hindu myth, how will it be received? We are not talking here of politics but the sheer insensitivity, if not crudity, of the minds that offer such readings, to the “average” Hindu consciousness who may not operate on partial or complete truths but on received traditions of the sacred.

### III

The complicity of some intellectuals for Hindutva is rooted in precisely the hermeneutics of suspicion not of the text but of the motives behind such interpretations as Doniger’s. It is perhaps indefensible to say it but needs saying. These are symptoms of the spiritual malaise that infects western intellectuals. Their postmodern pretensions seem to me just that: pretension. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain the omniscience which they claim in understanding Hindu texts, Hindu sages (for that matter, all that constitutes, for them, the Other).

It is often said that Hindus cannot take criticism in their stride. That secularists have the right to “deconstruct” every text in terms of current critiques and if the Hindus feel offended, it shows only their intolerance of dissent. Admitted, should one remain passive when even a figure like Ramakrishna is seen as grist for the academic mill? Jeffrey J. Kripal is a notable example: he never seems to be sensitive to the feelings of devotees: not just Hindus but even those in the West who found Ramakrishna to be a peer of Christ.

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<sup>5</sup>Wendy Doniger, “When a *Lingam* is Just a Cigar: Psychoanalysis and Hindu Sexual Fantasies,” in Vaidyanthan and Kripal, ed., *Vishnu on Freud’s Desk*, 119.

<sup>6</sup>Doniger, “When a *Lingam* is Just a Cigar: Psychoanalysis and Hindu Sexual Fantasies,” 296.

Piecing together passages which he says were wantonly suppressed by Nikhilananda, the translator (of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*), he arrives at, according to him, the suppressed “secret” of the exalted figure’s alleged homosexuality. In short, Kripal wants to convince the reader of his book that the great figure was troubled by his incapacity to consummate his practice of *Tantra* by the fifth ‘M’! Throughout the book, translations are produced which with a little text torturing can be made to look like titillating erotica. Indeed, every psychological aspect is seen through the lens of childhood fantasies so that even Ramakrishna “turning” to Kali is interpreted as the inevitable response to the death of his father! Even when a Swami like Tyagananda exposed the text torturing that Kripal is obviously good at, Kripal does not care to concede it, except superficially.

Article after article, if not book after book, continues to echo Kripal without even an iota of sensitivity about what the Hindus feel. Hugh B. Urban, for instance, commends Kripal’s daring: “Going still further ... Kripal makes the more daring argument that much of the root of the saint’s intense ambivalence about Tantric sexuality was his conflicting feeling about his own sexual orientation – specially the homoerotic impulses and desires which, Kripal suggests, recurred throughout the saint’s life and manifested themselves vividly in his intense mystical experiences.” So far, perhaps, one can think of this as an argument. But then Urban is much more daring and goes a step further, in asserting that “Tantric practice requires that the *sadhaka* become a masculine hero and engage in ritual sexual intercourse.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, no one can ask which Tantric practice, who is a *sadhaka* and, moreover, is Ramakrishna a person to be analyzed in the frames of an ordinary *sadhaka*. Even if we concede the argument, didn’t Ramakrishna declare such practices as “the latrine door entry”? If, therefore, he refuses to enter through that, if it makes him less of a hero, many would feel amen to that!

Whatever the argument, Kripal got his award from the American Academy of Religion. In short, academies do not make any concession to the deep hurt that the alleged brilliance of a book occasions to people of other faiths. Perhaps, since the American scholars have debunked and discredited Christ himself in many books and the American filmmakers are at pains to show the passion of Christ and a group of scholars (behind the

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<sup>7</sup>Urban, *Tantra*, 151-52.

Mel Gibson film “The Passion of Christ”) raise questions about the sheer naiveté of Christ’s suffering (“I can’t see why Jesus Christ had to suffer the way he did. But Christ has to die,” says David Grey, one of the brainstomers),<sup>8</sup> it is too much to expect them to care for the name of Ramakrishna and the deep wound books like Kripal’s inflict on a predominantly faith-based Hindu believer.

In the same vein, we have renderings from Telugu composer Kshetrappa’s songs, and the title of the book is *When God is a Customer*. Even here there are interesting twists and turns of logic and argument: “One might even argue that the god’s persistent betrayals, his constant affairs with other women, are felt to be an integral and necessary part of the love bond...” Thus, when God becomes a customer (looking for a courtesan or, in our idiom today, “a call-girl”) “we have a cycle completed, initial love sexually realized, leads to the lover’s loss of interest or temporary disappearance, and to his affairs with other women.”<sup>9</sup> The language is contemporary: affairs, betrayed love ... and slightly more sophisticated than an average pornographic magazine.

All this appears as if I have distorted and disfigured the great sophistication and scholarship behind such writings. I may also be accused of lifting citations that suit me. All this I can take. What I cannot take is: Hindu texts being subjected to western textual traditions of a post-modern variety as the sole evaluative tools. Don’t these books (I mean, the religious writings) exist in their own indigenous traditions of hermeneutics, texts, exegetical apparatus, language and narrative nuances? Is there no need to give some credibility to those traditions? When a Hindu text is put in the context of the western ethos, should the logic of the secularised societies be the sole arbiter? Should we always believe the localized western paradigms as the irrefutable universal norms, taken for granted as inviolate?

To my mind, the populist Hindutva, more than a political manoeuvre of saffronisation, is the deep archetypal, most unconscious, response to the wounds inflicted by the emerging western intellectual/religious engagement with India. There is also another reason: for instance, if they

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<sup>8</sup>See *The Hindu* (Friday Review), April 16, 2004, I.

<sup>9</sup>Ramanujan A. K., trans., *When God is a Customer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, 16-17.

go on a rampage when a painter paints a Hindu goddess in the nude, or some on Shivaji denigrates him, the reason is that there is no other way to articulate the feelings. For, as in the USA there are no academic religious studies departments affiliated to universities which look into the matter. That is, there is not a single forum other than the one of violent protest. Our scholars do not have access, by and large, to the vast network of production, distribution and dissemination of their ideas. Moreover, as Swami Tyagananda in an interesting article on “Hindu Studies vis-à-vis Hindu Practice” has noted the following:

If interpretation is to be based on historical data, it is vital that the data is not manipulated. It is vital that texts are translated honestly and accurately. It is vital that loaded language with its own subtext is not used to bolster a thesis, particularly when it distorts textual evidence.<sup>10</sup>

This raises further questions: what, in fact, is “historical”? The Hindu believes that Rama is no less an incarnation since his story does not confirm to western historical procedures. Similarly, whatever learned scholars both here and there say, Ayodhya, Somanatha and other places are integral aspects of their psychic consciousness. If they are subjected to critiques which pay scant respect to these sensibilities, the stance hardens. As Tyagananda himself puts it:

It may be argued that academics have the right to freely express their views without being under any obligation to respect the sensibilities of a community. In that case, it must be recognized that neither is the community under any obligation to respect the sensibilities of the academic world.<sup>11</sup>

The strange thing (which is generative of hardening Hindutva) is the scant respect quite a few Indian academics themselves have, by and large, for Hindu sentiments. The assumption is that conceding Hindu sentiments would lead to the tyranny of the majority and the consequent suppression of the pluralistic, secular base. The question whether the reality of a secular state led to the end of colonialism and other imbalances, is, however, not squarely addressed by these intellectuals. If it is Hindu-

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<sup>10</sup>Swami Tyagananda, “Reflections on Hindu Studies vis-à-vis Hindu Practice,” in *The Vedanta Kesari*, 91 (January 2004), 23.

<sup>11</sup>Tyagananda, “Reflections on Hindu Studies vis-à-vis Hindu Practice,” 24.

Muslim divide here, it is the US-Iraq confrontation disturbingly fomenting in the West. How come democratic, secular states of world stature continue to aid and abet regimes which made short circuit of democracy long ago?

Hindutva's emergence is symptomatic of these anomalies. As Jyotirmaya Sharma says, it is easy and rhetorically impressive to assert that

The only way to confront Hindutva and its demonic agenda is to privilege the question of legitimacy and call the bluff of a set of self-appointed arbiters of faith. The answer is inherent in the question itself. *Every Hindu decides what is Hinduism. That space ought to remain inviolable. It is a space worth living for and dying for.*<sup>12</sup>

By analogy, then, why not concede that the saffronizing agenda-based individuals voted for the BJP? For, in a democracy each voter, theoretically at least, decides for whom to vote, and each one expects the elected party to carry on his/her agenda. The hypothesized "Hindu living and dying in his inviolable space," is analogically as reductive a specimen as "the demonic" Hindus living and dying for their faith, fighting, in short, for a collective space occupied by debunking academics and demoralized secularists.

The paradox is implicit in the very secular spirit implanted without checks and balances. It works only to worsen the situation. The more the media's bias from reporting to privileging particular perspectives, the more is the hardening of Hindutva. For, it is assumed beforehand, that all others who are not secularists are devils and demons. For example, Jyotirmaya Sharma lumps together Dayanand Sarasvati, Sri Aurobindo, Vivekananda, and V. D. Savarkar in his study and declares that they "fabricated a vision of Hindu India and its destiny" that is "terrible and tortured!"<sup>13</sup> In this context, perhaps, although all may not agree with T. N. Madan wholly, he is forthright and candid:

In the prevailing circumstances, secularism in South Asia, as a generally held credo of life is impossible, as a basis for state action impracticable, and as a blueprint of foreseeable future impotent...

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<sup>12</sup>Sharma, *Hindutva*, 13, emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup>Sharma, *Hindutva*, 8.



Secularism is the dream of a minority which wants to shape the majority in its own image, which wants to impose its will upon history, but lacks the power to do so under a democratically organized polity... From the point of view of the majority, 'secularism' is a vacuous word, a phantom concept, for such people do not know whether it is desirable to privatise religion, and if it is how this may be done unless they be Protestant Christians, but not if they are Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs. [In short], Indian secularism achieves the opposite of its stated intentions: it trivializes religious difference as well as the notion of unity of religions.<sup>14</sup>

#### IV

These are random reflections, perhaps emotive at places, but the conviction I have is firm. I do not consider that studies coming from the West and the ones deriving their interpretive tools from the West are wholly conducive to containing the threat (if at all) of Hindutva. They seem insensitive to the nuances of faith here. Compounded by the fact of wide diffusion, these studies have a thrust and range hard to contain. Specially, the irreverent and smug neo-historical approaches to faith(s) and its texts (highly idiosyncratic in their selection) do not relieve the scene. Along with these, artists (including filmmakers, specially those focusing on the [alleged] plight of women, or the 'Dalits') choosing to caricature Hindu Goddesses, though aesthetically edifying, are politically explosive.

The signals are distinct: unless the *wholly* condemnatory tone regarding Hindutva is neutralized, it has every chance of acquiring support even from those who earlier were sceptical about it. There are few who speak for the battered faith of the Hindus, by the Orientalists, the moderns, the post-moderns and now the 'playboys' of the western academic world.

I am not unaware of the unique contribution a few western scholars have made to the restoration and revitalizing of many aspects of Hindu faith. Sensitive studies are not rare. But, as in the media, the sensational attracts attention effortlessly. Even so, for one Kripal, there are many who enter the heart of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* through the main door, and pluck the mangoes only to eat and not to count their number, judge

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<sup>14</sup> T. N. Madan, 289-90

their colour or assess their size, etc. (Perhaps, some wantonly pluck also rotten mangoes, if any appear so). It is Andrew Harvey who declared: “If I had to choose one book to take with me to a desert island to contemplate for the rest of my life, or pick one book to give to a seeker today to help guide him or her into the joys and mysteries of the mystical life it would be ... *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*.”<sup>15</sup>

“As many faiths, so many paths,” Ramakrishna declared. One has, however, to check whether one has faith or fickle fetishes mostly academics passing off as faith. In such a case, every other religion serves as a hobbyhorse to be whipped with glee.

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<sup>15</sup>Andrew Harvey, “Foreword” *Selections from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, annotated by Kendra Crossen Borroughs. Woodstock, VT: Skylight Path Publishing, 2002, ix.