

iPhone app (<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/the-huffington-post/id306621789?mt=8>) iPad app (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/the-huffington-post/id306621789>) Account

Android phone app (<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.huffingtonpost.android&hl=en>)

Android tablet app (<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.huffingtonpost.android&hl=en>)

More (/big-news/#)

Stand up for children.
Donate today to provide critical childhood immunizations.

onegreece.org
A campaign by The Hellenic Initiative

Edition: U.S. ▾

Like 94k

Follow

Newsletters

Search HuffPost

FRONT PAGE

HEALTHY LIVING

POLITICS

WORLDPOST

([HTTP://WWW.HUFFINGTONPOST.COM](http://www.huffingtonpost.com)) ([HTTP://WWW.HUFFINGTONPOST.COM](http://www.huffingtonpost.com)) ([HTTP://WWW.HUFFINGTONPOST.COM](http://www.huffingtonpost.com)) ([HTTP://WWW.HUFFINGTONPOST.COM](http://www.huffingtonpost.com)) ([HTTP://WWW.HUFFINGTONPOST.COM](http://www.huffingtonpost.com))

- Religion (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/religion/>) • Buddhism (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/buddhism/>) • Christianity (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/christianity/>)
- Hinduism (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/hinduism/>) • Islam (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/islam/>) • Judaism (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/judaism/>)
- Sikhism (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/sikhism/>) • Religion and Science (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/religion-science/>)
- Interfaith (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/interfaith/>) • Scripture Commentary (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/scripture-commentary/>)
- Prayer and Meditation (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/prayer/>) • Death (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/death/>)



(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/25/maha-shivaratri-2014_n_4855958.html)
PHOTOS: The Great Night Of Shiva, The Lord Of Destruction
(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/25/maha-shivaratri-2014_n_4855958.html)



(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/26/millennials-gay-unaffiliated-church-religion_n_4856094.html)
Anti-Gay Policies Are Driving Huge Numbers Of Millennials From Church
(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/26/millennials-gay-unaffiliated-church-religion_n_4856094.html)



(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/27/dalai-lama-lessons-n_4858859.html)
7 Things You Can Learn From Being In The Same Room As The Dalai Lama
(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/27/dalai-lama-lessons-n_4858859.html)

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/27/dalai-lama-lessons-n_4858859.html)

Featuring fresh takes and real-time analysis from HuffPost's signature lineup of contributors

HOT ON THE BLOG

Dylan Ratigan

(<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dylan-ratigan/inspiration-from-iberia>)

Valerie Jarrett

(<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/valerie-jarrett/my-brothers-keeper>)

Gordon Brown

(<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gordon-brown/a-senseless-massacre>)

Sandra Fluke

(<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sandra-fluke/five-things-you-should-know>)



Laurie L. Patton (/laurie-l-patton) Become a fan
(/users/becomeFan.php?of=hp_blogger_Laurie_L_Patton)
Durden professor of Indian religions, Duke University; Author

(/user#aut Like 17)
(/login/index.php?author=laurie-l-patton)

The Biggest Loser in the Doniger Controversy? Indian Traditions of Debate

Posted: 02/26/2014 2:55 pm EST | Updated: 02/26/2014 2:59 pm EST

MOST POPULAR



6

Like

Penguin India's decision to withdraw Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, has sparked a worldwide protest, both over the agreement to stop production and pulp of the book, and more importantly, over the law that inspired it -- Section 153A and 295A of the Indian Penal Code. The laws make it a criminal act to offend the sensibilities of any religion. Many people hope that there will be a positive outcome both in the short term -- where the book will be once again openly available in India, and in the long term--where the Indian Penal Code will be changed so that authors can publish works without fear of intimidation, censure and worse. Whatever the outcome, there are nonetheless many things at risk in this global conversation: the possibilities of free speech, of intimidation-free publishing, and of public engagement on questions of religion.

One of the biggest possible losers, however, is the Indian tradition of rigorous debate itself, particularly the millennia-old habit of arguing about ultimate things. In his *The Argumentative Indian*, Amartya Sen has made a compelling case for a deliberative, and at times contentious, temperament in Indian intellectual life. Yet in this most recent global rivalry of representation, this tradition has been eclipsed.

The region of South Asia always consisted of a multiplicity of peoples and cultures in communication with each other. Performed and written dialogues have been indelible features within the religions of South Asia -- Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Islam are all multi-vocal religions. Their doctrines, practices and institutions have never had only one voice of authority, and dialogue has been a shared tactic for negotiating contesting interpretations within each tradition. Has censorship and the suppression of dissent also been part of Indian history? Of course. There are numerous examples -- including violent ones -- throughout the centuries, as there are in any culture. But Indian religions also have, at their core, active discussion, debate, argument, conversation, communication, confrontation and negotiation.

We can be even more specific here: Rigorous debate actually defines much of what we call Hindu identity today. It is present in Vedic, classical and contemporary Hindu traditions, and in ritual, philosophical and even domestic contexts. In almost every region of India, dialogue has been embedded in Hinduism through texts, doctrines, histories, rituals, ceremonies and in architecture and art. For thousands of years, Indians have been debating over gods and deities, how best to represent them, whether their followers, or even the deities themselves, can be insulted, and what their true nature is. In fact, dialogue and debate might well be a defining feature of Indian traditional texts, rituals and practices.

The words for "dialogue" in the classical language of Sanskrit (and relatedly, in many other vernacular languages) are as ancient as Indian religions themselves. Words such as *samvada* can mean a variety of different things: "face to face," "favorable," "adaptable," as well as, "confronting" or "in opposition." One of the earliest occurrences of the idea of dialogue is in the *Rig Veda*, where the poet asks the gods Mitra and Varuna to defend him from the one "who has no pleasure in questioning, or

in repeated calling, or in dialogue." Clearly, argument was a sought-after pastime even in the Vedic period, and many hymns are called *samvada* or "dialogue hymns" by later interpreters.

And words like *samvada* had many other rich meanings. The ritual texts of the *Brahmanas* use the term to mean "bargain." The ancient Indian law texts, the *Dharma Sutras* used it to mean "conversation," "discussion," or "dialogue," which are the word's more common meanings. In the *Ramayana*, *samvada* means an "account," "incident" or "story." The *Mahabharata* continues in this semantic range, only with the added connotation of "dispute." *Samvada* is used frequently in reference to the *Bhagavad Gita*, where it describes the famous (and at times heated) conversation between Arjuna and Krishna about the nature of ultimate reality. The *Mahabharata* also uses the term to name certain dialogues, such as that harmonious exchange between Draupadi and Krishna's wife, Satyabhama, or the more contentious one between Draupadi and Yudhishtira before they enter the forest.

In addition to the rich meaning of the vocabulary for debate, dialogue and argumentation, there are many dramatic scenes of debate, and even insult, within Indic traditions from their very inception. One early Indian thinker, Kautsa, asserts the meaningless of the Vedas, and is taken to task for it. But his thinking, as well as the opinions of many others who disagree with each other, are represented and discussed in the ancient Indian dictionary, *The Nirukta*. In the Upanishads, students and pupils, kings and brahmins, regularly debate the ultimate nature of Brahman, the force that inspires the entire universe. And they do so publicly, with an audience, and with challenge and counter-challenge. One need only refer to the famous debates where Gargi challenges the sage Yajnavalkya on the nature of the self, or atman. In the colonial period, the nature of god, scripture and religious authority was debated by the great Swami Dayanand Sarasvati and the pandits of Varanasi.

What is more, as I have written (http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/culture/7614/publisher_withdraws_history_of_hinduism_amid_protest/) elsewhere, even the satire of religious actions and beliefs right is also a long tradition in India. The 11th century Kashmiri Sanskrit poet Kshemendra, in works such as *Samaya Matrika*, *Kalavilasa* and *Narmamala*, satirizes brahminical and Buddhist norms with rapier wit. (Kshemendra, by the way, also wrote serious devotional and poetic works.) My colleagues in South Asian history remind me of many other instances: The 11th century Jaina poet Brahmsiva satirized Shaivism. The 16th century writer Birbal, who lived and worked in Akbar's court, regularly made fun of conventional religious beliefs. Kaliprassana Sinha wrote satirical sketches of colonial Calcutta, many of which involved religion. In a more contemporary vein, the now classic novel *Samskara* by U.R. Anantha Murthy satirizes brahminical orthodoxy in the context of a funeral rite. None of these authors are banned in India, nor should they be.

So the long tradition of asserting Indian, and relatedly, Hindu identity often meant debating that identity, being playful about it, and challenging it, not silencing those who represented it differently than one would wish. Those who defend their idea of Hindu tradition through censorship are actually ignoring a centuries-old tradition of arguing about the gods. The current century is an impoverished one indeed if the vibrant traditions of disputation and dialogue in Hindu practices are passed over for the relatively new, and deeply colonial, option of legal censure. Debate often involves the use of pointed, carefully thought out questions, and living with uncertainty. What if we reminded ourselves that Hindu texts were filled with questions as well as answers? What if we moved from censorship to re-engaging the ancient Indian practice of public, rigorous debate, and encouraged writers to publish more books that contributed to such discussions?

utm_source=thehuffingtonpost&utm_medium=bytaboola&utm_content=autosized-1r-organic:autosized-1r-organic;

(//www.taboola.com/popup?template=colorbox&taboola_utm_source=thehuffingtonpost&taboola_utm_medium=bytaboola&taboola_utm_content=autosized-1r-sc:autosized-1r-sc:)

There are no comments on this entry yet. Be the first!



Start a conversation...

Share



250
words

Preview

Submit

[Highlighted](#) [Most Recent](#) [Oldest](#) [Most Faved](#) [My Conversations](#)

There are no comments on this entry yet.

Be the first!

Follow HuffPost

Enter your email

Sign me up!

HuffPost Daily Brief Religion

Get top stories and blogs posts emailed to you each day.

Search The Huffington Post

[Advertise \(Http://advertising.aol.com/brands/huffington-post\)](http://advertising.aol.com/brands/huffington-post) | [Log In \(/Users/login/\)](/Users/login/) |

[Make HuffPost Your Home Page \(/Makehome/\)](/Makehome/) | [RSS \(/Syndication\)](/Syndication/) |

[Careers \(/Jobs/\)](/Jobs/) | [FAQ \(/Faq/\)](/Faq/)

[User Agreement \(/Terms.html\)](/Terms.html) | [Privacy \(/Privacy\)](/Privacy) | [Comment Policy \(/Comment/policy/\)](/Comment/policy/) |

[About Us \(/P/huffington-post.html\)](/P/huffington-post.html) | [About Our Ads \(Http://adinfo.aol.com/about-our-ads/\)](http://adinfo.aol.com/about-our-ads/) |

[Contact Us \(/Contact/\)](/Contact/)

Copyright © 2014 TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc. | "The Huffington Post" is a registered trademark of TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc. All rights reserved.

Part of AOL Family