

Comments on Chapter 13, “Bhakti in South India”

General Comments: ‘Bhakti is Violence’

Throughout the chapter, Doniger tries to prove the following four things -

1. Bhakti equates to violence and adherents of Bhakti indulged in frequent persecutions of the Jains and the Buddhists,
2. Bhakti did not really liberate women and low-castes,
3. The better aspects of Bhakti are due to influences from Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity and Islam.

Doniger does not know any of the four major South Indian languages, and has relied completely on partial translations of Tamil sources by a handful of Western Scholars like A K Ramanujan (her colleague), John Carman and McGlasham. She has completely ignored even complete translations of the works of Nayanars and Alwars by Indian scholars. Her chapter is largely a cut and paste from second-hand generalist works of Romila Thapar, John Keay, Gavin Flood, Herman Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund and Partha Mitter. She has largely ignored the works of Alwars, because they do not easily fit her paradigm of Bhakti as sex and violence. These omissions result in a very slanted, desiccated and a negative treatment of south Indian Bhakti. Let us discuss some of the agendas in her chapter on South India Bhakti below.

Bhakti was Violent, and Hindus persecuted Buddhists and Jains:

At the very beginning of the chapter, Doniger says that though Bhakti empowered women and lower castes with its inclusive ideology, “*yet the violence of passions that it generated also led to inter-religious hostility* (p. 338).” She ends the chapter with the words, “*The violent power of bhakti, which overcame even the god, transfigured the heart of religion in India ever after* (p. 369).” It appears that for Doniger, Hinduism is a very violent religion, because in her book she makes statements like, “*...the Vedic reverence for violence flowered in the slaughters that followed Partition,*” (p. 627); and has described the Gita as a “*dishonest book*” in a newspaper interview because in her opinion, the scripture promotes war. She also concludes her book with the words, “*...we must curb our optimism by recalling the violence embedded in many forms of bhakti, and by noting that it was in the name of bhakti to Ram that the militant Hindu nationalists tore down the Babri Mosque* (p. 690).” Of course Doniger has nothing to say on the violence of Islamic ‘bhakti’ when in the aftermath of the destruction of single abandoned mosque, more than 450 temples were demolished or vandalized by Muslims in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, England and even in Canada, or on more than 50 temples demolished in Kashmir *before* the demolition of Babri Mosque. It is only the Hindus whose traditions and philosophies are violent, pornographic and oppressive. What a pity that Doniger has wasted five decades of her life hating her objects of study – the Hindus.

To advance her thesis of violent Bhakti in this chapter, she focusses solely on Tamil Shaiva saints, and even therein, she focusses only on their biographies in the Periyapuram (e.g. p. 361–362), referring to other works only tangentially. This narrow focus is methodologically flawed for several reasons. First, although the Nayanmars lived from 500 – 900 CE according to her (p. 338), the Periyapuram was composed at least 250 years later according to internal testimony of the text.¹ Scholars have pointed out that Cekkilar, the author of Periyapuram, has greatly exaggerated the violence mentioned in the earlier sources that he had used. And finally, the violence in the lives of Nayanmars is unique in the entire history of Hindu Bhakti with very few parallels in other Bhakti traditions within Tamil Nadu, and even those outside of Tamil Nadu.² Yet, Doniger uses these few instances to paint a pervasive picture of South Indian Bhakti as a violent ideology.

While she dwells constantly on Hindu polemics against the Jains and the Buddhists (p. 362-363), she barely gives any example of how the latter depicted the Hindu Deities. Many Jain scriptures send Rama and Krishna to hell for instance. Is it Doniger's case that these Jain narratives incited them to commit violence towards the Hindus? Hundreds of Hindu kings ruled different parts of India over thousands of years and it is almost a certainty that a handful of them would have persecuted people of religious persuasions different from theirs. This is in contrast to the Islamic rule, where guided by their religious teachings, most Muslim rulers discriminated against or persecuted the non-believers. Doniger offers the following 'proof' of Hindu persecution of the Buddhists, "*In other parts of India, from time to time, Hindus, especially Shaivas, took aggressive action against Buddhism. At least two Shaiva kings* are reported to have destroyed monasteries and killed monks. *Mikirakula (early sixth century) and Sasanka (early 7th century).*" Now, it is questionable if these two examples should be sufficient to warrant a blanket conclusion as Doniger does. Secondly, are even these two examples appropriate? Mihirakula is remembered as a tyrant by no less than Kalhana, and he was a Huna invader. Shashanka has not been glorified in traditional Hindu records before he became a hero for some recent Bengali nationalists.³ This stands in stark contrast to Ghori, Ghaznavi and Aurangzeb who are glorified in the Islamic tradition.

Doniger of course does not even consider the possibility that the Shaivas were reacting to the preceding Kalabhra period when the Jains had persecuted Shaivites.⁴ Nor is she aware of the opinion of some historians that the same Kalabhra Jains were perhaps responsible for the persecution of Buddhists in the Pandiyan territory.⁵ Other than a passing reference, she does not mention Jaina epics like Nilakesi that reserve their worst invectives for Buddhist monks. All said and done however, even these polemics in the works of the three faiths, or their acts of religious persecution were miniscule in quantity or in their nature when compared to how the Abrahamics treated the 'non-believers'. There is simply no Dharmic parallel to the widespread Jihads, Crusades or the European civil wars between Protestants and

¹ Anne Mous, "Love, Violence, and the Aesthetics of Disgust: Saivas and Jains in Medieval South India," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 32, pp. 113-172 (2004)

² Ibid, p. 123

³ Mayurika Chakravorty, "Skeletons of History: Fact and Fiction in Rakhaldas Bandhopadhyaya's Sasanka," *South Asia Research*, vol. 24, No. 2, November 2004, pp. 171 - 183

⁴ M Arunachalam (1979), *The Kalbhra in the Pandiya Country and their Impact on Life and Letters There*, University of Madras: Madras, pp. 94 sqq.

⁵ Ibid, p. 95

Catholics. The average American reader, for whom Doniger presumably wrote the book, will get the impression from her statements that the Hindus were as violent as the Abrahamic religions towards other religions. This is what she says repeatedly in her book to overturn the conventional and the correct view that Hindus are very tolerant as a religious community. Perhaps, in writing her book, she wanted to overcome her own white guilt, if I may be permitted to psychoanalyze her, just as she keeps doing to us Hindus.

Then, she claims that, *“Only in Bihar and Bengal, because of the patronage of the Pala dynasty and some lesser kings and chiefs, did Buddhist monasteries continue to flourish. Buddhism in eastern India was well on the way to be reabsorbed into Hinduism, the dominant religion, when Arabs invaded the Ganga Valley in the twelfth century (p. 364).”* Her implication is that the Islamic invaders had no role in the destruction of Buddhism in India as is generally believed, and the disappearance of Buddhism in India was due to persecutions by the Hindus. This is a revisionist viewpoint, and ignores how Buddhism was extinguished by Islamic invaders in Central Asia, Sindh, Gilgit-Baltistan, Chitral, Swat and many other parts of the world. Buddhism continues to be a major force in Nepal, a predominantly Hindu country. Within India, it lasted the longest in Orissa and parts of Tamil Nadu, which were relatively free of Islamic rule. It was the Muslim invaders like Bakhtiyar Khilji who destroyed Buddhist universities like Vikramshila and Nalanda in Bihar and gave Buddhism a final death blow. Later, Doniger claims, *“From time to time too, Shaivas tore down Shaiva temples, or Vaishnava temples, looting the temples and hauling the images home. In other words, as was the case later with the Turkish invasions, warfare had political and economic motives more than religious ones (p. 366).”* So once again, she tries to absolve Islam of widespread iconoclasm in India during the Islamic rule or at least blunt it by equating it to a few random acts of Hindu iconoclasm. Islam has an avowed theology of Iconoclasm which Hinduism lacks, and we have covered this point in more detail in our review of chapter 16 of her book.

According to her, the construction of temples itself was an act of violence (p. 348-349) and focusses excessively and tendentiously on the argument that there is ‘no free temple’. She gives the example of Brihadeeshvara temple and complains that the king used war booty for this purpose, and taxed villages (p. 347).⁶ By this perverse logic, all toll-roads and bridges in the United States are an act of violence because people using them have to pay a toll. Citing the works of apologist scholars like Richard Davis, Doniger argues that the Cholas looted and desecrated other temples to build their own but acknowledges that this has little to do with religious persecution (p. 349). Given the prolific interfaith narratives in her book, she does not contrast how Hindu iconoclasm (similar burning down a library after retrieving all the books and then housing them in a new library) differs from Islamic and Christian versions (burning down a library together with the books). In Hinduism, the temple is merely a house for the Deity, and therefore even marauding kings, if they did desecrate temples, first took the images out of the site to install them elsewhere. Eight times in her book, Doniger equates these two iconoclasm despite their different natures, and despite the fact that the Hindu version was very restricted in space and time (compared to the Islamic variety), to paint Hinduism as violent (if not more) a religion as Islam and Christianity.

⁶ Ironically, Doniger ignores the beautiful story of Alagi, the woman, who was apparently asked by the Chola king to play an important role in the inauguration of this temple.

Well, someone did destroy the Hindu temples. So Doniger makes a sinister attempt to shift the blame from Muslims to the Jains! Referring to the verses, "*I [Bhakti] was born in Dravida [South India] and grew up in Karnataka. I lived here and there in Maharashtra; and became weak and old in Gujarat. There, during the terrible Kali Age, I was shattered by heretics. But after reaching Vrindavana I became young and beautiful again* (pp. 367-368)," Doniger rightly points out that this passage is traditionally taken to describe the destruction of Hindu temples by Islamic invaders. But she counters this by saying that Gujarat was a "*Jaina stronghold*" (p. 368), that these 'heretics' "*...may very well be Jains* (p. 368)." She supports her argument by saying that the Bhagavata Mahatmya, in which these verses are found, is a north Indian text because it mentions Vrindavana. Her logic is unclear, and questionable because Mathura and other places associated with the childhood of Krishna are mentioned in the writings of Alvars who are from South India. And the Bhagavata Purana itself is associated with South India.⁷ It appears that Doniger will clutch at any straws to absolve Islam of iconoclasm, even if it means a 'displacement' of guilt to the non-violent Jains. Therefore, I submit that Doniger's writings are in fact verbal violence against the Hindus and Jains, or hatemonger with scholarly pretensions.

Bhakti did not liberate Women:

The focus of Doniger remains on the imaginary violent aspects of Bhakti, and she gives quite a perfunctory treatment to women Bhaktas. Just about a page and a half are devoted to women Nayanmars and Alvar Andal.

Doniger laments that only one Alvar out of twelve, namely Andal, was a women (p. 353). How does this compare to the record of other religions? Doniger is a Jew, and her scripture, the Old Testament, has only 2 out of 39 books named after women. In the 27 books of the New Testament, not even one is named after a woman. In Islam, the entire Koran of 114 chapters was revealed to a male prophet. All the 10 Gurus of Sikhs were men. In Jainism, all the 24 Jain tirthankars were men. And what she does not note is that of the twelve Alvars, two are considered the most important and they are none other than Andal (a woman) and Nammalvar (a Shudra). Also, Doniger is perhaps unaware that to this day, Tamils sing the verses of Andal during the month of Margazhi every year in the memory of Andal. But after dismissing Andal in a few lines (p. 353), she does not give the reader any idea of her religious compositions that are an important part of Shri Vaishnava liturgy even today.

Bhakti did not liberate lower castes:

Doniger does mention that Nammalvar was of a low caste, but quickly adds that a later Brahmin hagiographer claimed that Nammalvar shunned his own low-caste family (p.360-361). However, she conveniently forgets to mention that he is regarded as the greatest of all the twelve Alvars, and that his Tiruvayamoli is considered as the Tamil Veda by the Shri Vaishnava community.⁸ The Tiruvayamoli attracted a commentary by no less than the saintly Pillan, to fulfill one of the three life goals of Shri Ramanujacharya. Even today, in their temples, the priest places a crown with a pair of feet embossed on

⁷ K A Nilakantha Shastri (1966), *History of South India*, Oxford University Press (Madras), p. 342

⁸ Vasudha Narayanan and John Braisted Carman (1989), *The Tamil Veda*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago)

them on the head of a visiting devotee. The crown represents Nammalvar, who was the crown or the highest of Alvars, with the feet being the feet of Bhagavan Vishnu.

While devoting considerable text to Kannappar and Nandanar (pages 357-360), she fails to mention that more than a quarter of the Nayanmars are Shudras or untouchables, and many of the remaining are Vaishyas.⁹

Bhakti was inspired by other Religions:

Although it is admirable to demonstrate how various traditions have intermingled with each other and have done mutual borrowings in India, Doniger's examples all practically show how it is Hinduism that has borrowed from others and not the reverse. The reader is left with the impression that Hinduism is a cul-de-sac that passively absorbs foreign influences, without teaching much goodness to others. Coming to Bhakti, Doniger clearly exaggerates the influence of other religions. She makes very strained attempts to derive the non-violent elements of Bhakti from teachings or influences of other religions. In order to do so, she presents a very inadequate picture of Bhakti in the Vedic texts, and then pre-dates Abrahamic holy books by several centuries.¹⁰ Several scholars have argued that elements of the nine-fold Bhakti can be traced in Rigvedic hymn themselves.¹¹

Doniger makes an ahistorical claim that St Thomas, one of the apostles, had visited India. This claim has political¹² and Christian fundamentalist¹³ overtones and has no credible historical evidence to back it.¹⁴ It is perhaps not surprising that Doniger should support this claim. What is surprising however is her statement that the Acts of Thomas may date from the first century C.E., when all credible Biblical scholars argue that it was written in Syriac in Edessa in the early 3rd century C.E.¹⁵ In fact, even the canonical four gospels are often dated after the first century C.E. In recent times, a section of Indian Christians have been propagating this myth to claim India for Christ (because 'one of the 12 Apostles himself visited India') even though historical evidence suggests that these Christian communities are perhaps descendants of refugees from Syria who landed in the mid-fourth century C.E.¹⁶ In the modern revisionist version (being propagated by Indian Marxist historians), St Thomas lies buried in the Mylapore Church close to Chennai, which is improbable given the myriad accounts of his place of death and numerous graves associated with him all over the old world.¹⁷ For Doniger however, it serves the agenda for implying that Bhakti had something to do with Christian influences.

⁹ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nayanars> <checked on 10 March 2014>

¹⁰ E.g. on page 339, she dates the Hebrew Old Testament containing the account of Solomon (not the king himself) to 1000 BCE when most Biblical scholars post-date the Old Testament books to several centuries later.

¹¹ Jeanine Miller (1996), *Does Bhakti Appear in the Rgveda*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan (Mumbai)

¹² Which is why Romila Thapar gives credence to the historical untenable theory in her *Early India*.

¹³ See Rajiv Malhotra (2011), *Breaking India*, Amaryllis (New Delhi), p. 129 sqq.

¹⁴ See Ishwar Sharan (2010), *The Myth of Saint Thomas and the Mylapore Shiva Temple* (3rd Edition), Voice of India (New Delhi). The book is available online at <http://ishwarsharan.wordpress.com/> <checked on 25 March 2014>

¹⁵ Willis Barnstone ((1984), *The Other Bible*, Harper Collins Publishers (San Francisco)

¹⁶ Sita Ram Goel (1996), *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters*, Voice of India (New Delhi)

¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_the_Apostle <checked on 10 March 2014 >

Doniger argues that Hinduism added elements of Islam into its Bhakti ideology (p. 344). She says, “*At the same time, there were many opportunities for positive interactions between Islam and bhakti in South India. For instance, the idea of “surrender” (prapatti), so important to the Shri Vaishnava tradition of South India, may have been influenced by Islam (the very name of which means “surrender”). More generally, the presence of people of another faith, raising awareness of previously unimagined religious possibilities, may have inspired the spread of these new, more ecstatic forms of Hinduism and predisposed conventional Hindus to accept the more radical teachings of the bhakti poets* (p. 368).”

This claim of Islamic influence in the shaping and acceptance of Bhakti is laughable, to put it mildly. Which aspect of Hindu Bhakti parallels Islamic ‘surrender’ – sakhya, vaatsalya, or maadhurya? Which Bhakti practice has a parallel in Islam – Paadasevanam? Kiirtanam? Archanam? Even if the depth and variety of Bhakti were to be found in Islam (which it is not), what is the evidence that Malabar Muslim traders had an influence on Shri Vaishnavas or on Shaivas? To cut the long story short, Ishvara-praanidhaana (surrender to Ishvara) is mentioned in the pre-Islamic Yogasutra as one of the three practices of Kriyaayoga (Sutra 2.1) and as one of the five Niyamas (Sutra 2.32). In Sutra 1.23, it is said to be one of the means of obtaining Samaadhi. And commenting on this Sutra, the pre-Islamic commentary of Vyasa defines the term as a ‘form of Bhakti’. The commentary on Sutra 2.1 and 2.32 defines it as surrendering one’s Karma and the fruit or result thereof to Ishvara, the Supreme Guru. Now let us examine the claim from the reverse side. Indian traders travelled to Middle East too. Will Doniger dare to suggest that their Hindu religious beliefs influenced Prophet Muhammad?

Coming to Buddhism, Doniger argues that the practice of Darshana was partly inspired by Buddhist viewing of the relics in Stupas (p. 352). No proof is offered for this speculation. Writing in the 2nd century CE, Patanjali writes in his Mahabhashya that the Mauryas used to install images to induce gullible people to make monetary offerings to them. From the context, it appears that they were not likely Buddhist images of which the people took Darshana.

Doniger also claims that the building to temples was partly a response to the Buddhist practice of constructing Stupas, and of the Buddhist and Jainas worshipping the statues of their enlightened teachers (p. 353). This is a claim repeated elsewhere by her in the book (chapter 9) too. As an example, she mentions the Jaina temple at Aihole with an inscription dated to 636 CE and refers to it as one of the earliest temples in India. One does not understand the purpose behind giving this isolated example, because older Gupta period temples are found in northern India and even in northern Pakistan, where a temple in Chakwal (at the Hindu pilgrim center of Kataraj) is dated to as early as late 5th cent. C.E.¹⁸ Moreover, what is so unique about construction of places of worship that the Hindus must necessarily borrow it from others? All religions have their shrines and temples and by Doniger’s logic, these places of worship must have been constructed in ‘response’ to competition from other religions. As to the origins of Hindu temple architecture, an earlier critique of her book points out 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

¹⁸ <http://www.arthistory.upenn.edu/meister/pakistan.html> <checked on 10 February 2014>

See also: Michael Meister (2010), *Temples on the Indus*, Brill Academic Publishers (Leiden, Netherlands)

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.”¹⁹

Doniger follows up on her thesis of foreign origins of Bhakti in other parts of the book as well. She does not describe how Ramananda and other saints carried the doctrine of Vaishnava Bhakti to northern India. And later, in chapter 20, she credits the Mughals as having supported the rise of Bhakti movements in northern India. To conclude, this chapter too, instead of appreciating the depth of the Bhakti philosophy and practices, portrays in the most negative terms. Doniger would never dare presenting other religions in such a hateful manner.

Revision A: 03 May 2014

¹⁹ Aditi Banerjee (2009), “Oh, But you do get it wrong,” online at <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?262511>