

**“THE HINDUS, AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY”**

**by  
Wendy Doniger**

**A Review of CHAPTER 10 titled  
“VIOLENCE IN THE MAHABHARATA”**

**by  
Chitra Raman**

**SUMMARY**

The goal of this chapter is to examine the Hindu understanding of *ahimsa* or non-violence by comparing the personalities of Yudishthira in the Mahabharata and the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka. Doniger’s arguments present both personalities as being much more ambiguous in their convictions than is widely held: she cites more than one instance to support her claim that they were “hedging,” implying that they allowed themselves strategic loopholes in their interpretation of morality. The author’s central purpose in this chapter is to highlight the violence towards animals in the Mahabharata, as well as violence among them, and derive metaphors for human relationships from these conflicts. Also novel is Doniger’s contention, with no credible basis other than personal bias, that certain narratives about animals are really coded guidelines for the treatment of Pariahs.

Item	Page	Para	Questionable Excerpt	Critique
1	252	Intro	Chronology of Mahabharata and Ramayana:  c. 300 BCE to 300 CE - The <i>Mahabharata</i> is composed  c. 200 BCE to 200 CE – The <i>Ramayana</i> is composed	Doniger begins her chapter on <i>Violence</i> by attacking conventional wisdom on the chronology and antiquity of these epics. The dates presented for their composition are apparently meant to be accepted as valid—because she says so.  These dates have become dogma, but they defy common sense. Nowhere in any version of either epic, is there mention of the major dynasties – such as the Nanda, Maurya, Shunga, Kanya -- of the period in which it was supposedly composed, nor for that matter a single monarch from that time. If we are to believe that these epics were composed 300 years after

				<p>the lifetimes of Siddhartha Gautama and Mahavira, how does one explain the complete absence of any reference<sup>1</sup> either to these great individuals or the faiths they founded? Also consider the evidence from the Spitzer document, which indicates that the Buddha had studied the Mahabharata.<sup>2</sup> Some Hindu texts even allege that Buddha stole some of his doctrines from the Mahabharata.<sup>3</sup> The latter allegation is recorded in a Buddhist text (Madhyamaka Hridaya) from around 550 AD without refutation.</p> <p>There are no corresponding Buddhist ripostes claiming that the Mahabharata was written after the time of Buddha, or that it was the Mahabharata or the Ramayana that stole their teachings from the Buddha. In fact, some scholars see the influence of the Ramayana on the Buddhacharita of Ashvaghosha who lived around 100 AD.<sup>4</sup></p> <p>In a later section of the chapter ( pg 261) subtitled <i>The Eras of the Two Great Poems</i>, Doniger concedes that “the dates are much disputed” but offers no details as to why. Scholars like Koenraad Elst base the antiquity of the core Mahabharata, on precisely accurate details of astronomical phenomena in the text. He points out that given the available technology of that period, those observations could <i>only have been recorded first hand at the time of occurrence</i>, not back-calculated at a later date.<sup>5</sup></p>
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<sup>1</sup> Buddha is referred to as a ‘future’ avatara in one interpolated verse found only in the grossly conflated Dakshinatya (Southern) version of the Mahabharata and is not mentioned in other versions (Northern and Kashmiri). The mention of Buddha in future tense clearly indicates that the interpolator (whenever he lived, say around 500 AD) considered the Buddha later than the Mahabharata. In the Ramayana, the situation is not different. Buddha is mentioned (and even that verse has an unclear meaning) again in a solitary verse found only in Southern manuscripts, and is not mentioned in Northwestern or Northern manuscripts.

<sup>2</sup> The Spitzer manuscript dated on paleographic grounds to around 250 AD even lists the Parvans of the Mahabharata that the Buddha had studied. See Eli Franco, “The Oldest Philosophical Manuscript in Sanskrit”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 31: 21–31, 2003. **The same work also gives a summary of Ramayana. Note that the manuscript is obviously later than the author who wrote it! The point is that even as early as 250 AD, the Mahabharata was considered older to Buddha.**

<sup>3</sup> E.g., the Mattavilasa of King Mahendravarman (c. 600 AD) quotes a Kapalika as saying that the Buddha of stealing his doctrinal ideas from the Mahabharata and the Vedanta while the ‘Brahmins blinked’. See p. 82 in Michael Lockwood & A. Vishnu Bhat; *King Mahendravarman’s Plays*; Tambaram Research Associates; Madras; 1991

<sup>4</sup> C W Gurner, “Asvaghosa and the Ramayana”, in *Journal of the Asiatic Society* (Bengal), NS XXIII (1927), pp. 347-367

<sup>5</sup> “To the extent that there are astronomical indications in the Vedas, these form a consistent set of data detailing an absolute chronology for Vedic literature in full agreement with the known relative chronology of the different texts of this literature. This way, they completely contradict the hypothesis that the Vedas were composed after an invasion in about 1500 BC. Not one of the dozens of astronomical data in Vedic literature confirms the AIT chronology” –Koenraad Elst in his essay *Astronomical data and the Aryan question* <http://koenraadelst.bharatvani.org/articles/aid/astronomy.html>

				<p>It is widely acknowledged that interpolations and changes continued to be made to the texts over time. But if Doniger's dates are meant to reflect the evolutionary timelines of the epic, why stop at 300 CE for the Mahabharata? Retellings and reinterpretations of the epic continue into the present day. Doniger could as well have included B.R. Chopra's televised serial <i>Mahabharat</i> (1988-90) in her reckoning. It transfixed an entire nation. People from all walks of life paused in whatever they were doing to watch the weekly broadcast. It was a far more significant event from an anthropological standpoint than Santosh Sivan's 2001 movie <i>Asoka</i>, which Doniger brings up (pg 258) to illustrate a point about "mythmaking."<sup>6</sup></p> <p>The belief that the Ramayana predates the Mahabharata is not just a matter of accepted tradition. Scholars point to cultural elements present in the Mahabharata but not in the Ramayana that suggest the latter originated in an earlier, non-contemporaneous age. Doniger's date of origin for the Ramayana places it well after the date of Alexander's invasion of India, which seems patently absurd.<sup>7</sup></p>
2	253	3	"... the ... arguments, which deeply color the narratives of the <i>Mahabharata</i> on all levels, were simultaneously about the treatment of animals, about the treatment of Pariahs symbolized by animals, and about human violence as an inevitable result of the fact that humans are animals and animals are violent."	<p>There is no basis for Doniger's outrageous deductive leap that animals were meant to symbolize Pariahs in the epic.</p> <p>It is also the height of oversimplification to reduce the <i>Mahabharata's</i> nuanced treatment of human conflict to a simple-minded syllogism equating humans and animals.</p>
3	253	4	"But in the eighth year of his (Ashoka's) reign, he marched on Kalinga (the present Orissa) in a cruel campaign that makes Sherman's march look like a children's parade."	<p>It is absurd to compare Ashoka's invasion of Kalinga, an event that happened approximately 2,300 years ago, with General Sherman's march from one end of Georgia to the other.</p> <p>Furthermore, if the idea was to convey a sense of scale, why not compare the Kalinga campaign with any one of the marauding Islamic incursions</p>

<sup>6</sup> Ironically, the Marxist historian Romila Thapar (whom Doniger quotes umpteen times in her book as an authority) is named in the movie's credits as a consultant by the movie maker!

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 1, observations of a commentator with knowledge of the original Sanskrit texts

				<p>that inflicted waves upon waves of horror and remorseless cruelty? Doniger is strangely silent about the carnage inflicted upon Delhi by Nadir Shah, omitting it entirely from this book. She whitewashes the Islamic record in India in chapters 16, 19 and 20 and pre-empts her critics by labeling them Hindu nationalists!</p> <p>Judging from her analogy, she doesn't seem to know much about children's parades either.</p>
4	254	3	<p>"That Ashoka renounced war at this point is perhaps less impressive than it might seem, given that he now already had most of India under his control (or at least more than anyone else had ever had and apparently all that he wanted ) he was locking the stable door after the horse was safely tethered in its stall. "</p>	<p>Doniger's comments mislead the reader into believing Ashoka was the Mauryan ruler who subjugated most of India and brought it under his rule. Actually, the Indian subcontinent north of the Vindhya had already been conquered by his grandfather Chandragupta Maurya, while the region south of the Vindhya (except Tamil Nadu, Kerala and southern parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh) was absorbed into the kingdom by his father Bindusara. Ashoka merely invaded Kalinga.</p> <p>One would think Ashoka's renunciation of war would impress any native of a country that refuses to renounce enhancements to its nuclear arsenal despite having enough to blow the world up many times over!</p> <p>The key observation here is that Ashoka had "apparently all that he wanted." And unlike other empire builders of his ilk, he called a halt to endless warfare on moral grounds rather than for strategic or logistical reasons. If this is not "impressive," then that word must mean something other than what the dictionary says it does. Having "more than anyone else had" has not, historically, prevented people from acquiring even more by any means necessary.</p> <p>The sarcastic reference to "locking the stable door after the horse was safely tethered" presumes Ashoka deemed territories under his dominion "safe" from potential challengers. There was no way he could have known that.</p>
5	254	3	<p>"But his repentance did not mean that he had sworn off violence forever...he may have hung up his gun belt, but he still had it."</p>	<p>Well of course not, any more than any head of state, no matter how peace loving, can "swear off" violence entirely. Even President Obama, while accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, emphasized in his speech that he would escalate the U.S. military's offensive against Al Qaeda.</p>

6	255	1	"This [Ashoka's] idealistic empire was reflected in the perfect world of Rama's Reign (Ram-raj) in the Ramayana."	There is no historical basis to suggest that Ashokan concepts of Dharma influenced the notion of Ram-rajya.
7	255	2	"Thus the [Ashokan] pillar....was the first representation of the horse..."	The horse is represented in terracotta figurines in Harappan culture <sup>8</sup> as well as in post-Harappan and pre-Mauryan art. Several places in northern India reveal terracotta figurines of horses and bulls in the layers of the PGW phase. <sup>9</sup> It is therefore ridiculous to suggest that the horse was first depicted in the 3 <sup>rd</sup> century BCE in India.
8	256 257	2,3 1	"Ashoka cared deeply about animals and included them as a matter of course, long with humans, as the beneficiaries of his shade trees and watering places."  "But he never did discontinue capital punishment or torture or legislate against either the killing or the eating of all animals."  "What there is the expression of a man who finds himself between a rock edict and a hard place, a man who has concern for animals' feelings (give them shade, don't castrate them -- sometimes) but recognizes that people do eat animals. It is a very limited sort of non-violence, not unlike the Brahmana text that pointed out that eating animals is bad but then let you eat them in certain ways, instead of outlawing it entirely, as one might	Doniger dwells on the minutiae of Ashoka's directives regarding animals, providing a lengthy transcript of what animals could or could not be killed, which ones were to be protected from slaughter, the prohibition against feeding one animal to the other and on and on. By itself, such selective treatment trivializes the full scope and intent of Ashoka's edicts <sup>10</sup> -- but Doniger doesn't stop there. The reader realizes eventually that the point of all this is to portray Ashoka's moral transformation as inherently shallow and ambiguous, if not outright hypocritical.  Finally, in case the reader missed the point of Ashoka's "fake renunciation" in her first reference, Doniger drives it home this time with another jeering remark about the timing of Ashoka's transformation.  For an anthropologist with her mileage, Doniger displays a stunning degree of opacity to cultures far removed in time and space from her own. And like all people of impaired understanding, she resorts to blind judgment.  The Native American culture is an example of how one may kill to eat, but yet show more respect and care for living creatures and nature than is shown by many contemporary vegetarians who remain indifferent to all considerations outside their sphere of creature comforts.

<sup>8</sup> Vishal Agarwal (2005), "What is the Aryan Migration Theory," pp. 1-46 in *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in History and Archaeology*, Vol 2, No. 1

<sup>9</sup> A Ghosh (1989), *Encyclopedia of Indian Archaeology*, vol I., Munshiram Manoharlal (New Delhi), p. 337

<sup>10</sup> See the Edicts of King Ashoka translated by Ven. S. Dhammika <http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html>

			<p>have expected. Ashoka is the man, after all, who gave up war only after he had conquered all North India.”</p>	<p>Native Americans never killed more than they needed. They had ceremonies for the creature they killed to thank its spirit for feeding and clothing them. They would address the dead animal as their “brother.” This was not hypocrisy. It was their expression of humility and gratitude for nature’s bounty, an awareness of humanity’s responsibility to coexist with Nature in mutual sustenance.</p> <p>In the same way, Ashoka’s meticulous directives concerning the treatment of animals in his time appear to reflect his desire to strike a balance between consumption and preservation. Not moral vacillation as portrayed by Doniger.</p> <p>To reiterate the comment posted against Item 4, Doniger is wrong about history as well. It was not Ashoka who conquered all of North India. His father and grandfather had already done that.</p>
9	258	3	<p>From about 500 BCE, kings still performed Vedic sacrifices to legitimize their kingship, but the sectarian worship of particular deities began partially to replace Vedic sacrifice... Throughout the <i>Ramayana</i> and the <i>Mahabharata</i>, we encounter people who say they worship a particular god, which is the start of sects and therefore of sectarianism.</p>	<p>This quote is from a section subtitled <i>The Rise of Sectarian Hinduism</i>.</p> <p>The dictionary defines “sectarian” as “narrow-minded and ready to quarrel over petty differences of opinion.” Or “a narrow-minded and bigoted member of a sect.”</p> <p>Within the Hindu context, it is misleading and simplistic to conclude “sects: therefore, sectarianism.” The branching out of different forms of worship within Hinduism testifies to its tolerance of diversity and individualism. The worship of a particular god does not automatically predispose a Hindu to be hostile and intolerant towards a worshipper of a different god. Were that the case, such a profusion of sects could not have arisen in the first place.</p> <p>Sectarianism, as and when it arises, is a separate phenomenon driven by realities more complex than just the mere existence of different sects.</p>
10	259	2	<p>“...in 150 BCE, Patanjali, the author of the highly influential Yoga Sutras, foundational for the Yoga school of philosophy, mentions a worshipper of Shiva who wore animal skins and carried</p>	<p>The reference to the worshipper of Shiva is not in the Yoga Sutra, but in the Mahabhashya of Patanjali. Modern scholarship also holds that the Patanjali, the author of the Yoga Sutra, is different from Patanjali who wrote the Mahabhashya (a work on Sanskrit grammar).</p>

			an iron lance."	
11	259	2	<p>"In the first century BCE, under the Shungas, artisans produced what is generally regarded as the earliest depiction of the god Shiva: a linga just under five feet high, in Gudimallam, in southeastern Andhra Pradesh ...Its anatomical detail, apart from its size, is highly naturalistic, but on the shaft is carved the figure of Shiva, two- armed and also naturalistic, holding an ax in one hand and the body of a small antelope in the other. His thin garment reveals his own sexual organ (not erect), his hair is matted, and he wears large earrings. He stands upon a dwarf."</p>	<p>Doniger is unaware that clear-cut Linga-Yoni examples are now available from Harappan sites predating the Gudimallam icon by more than 2000 years!<sup>11</sup></p> <p>A close-up photograph of the linga in question – one of the book's rare illustrations -- appears on page 22. <b>It is in fact the only representation of Shiva illustrated in the book.</b></p> <p>Doniger is however not content to refer the reader to the illustration; she describes it in meticulous detail, including the all-important observation as to the state of arousal of the figure depicted. The details are presented without any reference to the meaning of Shiva iconography; the symbolism of the linga, of Shiva as a forest-dwelling ascetic, of the <i>apasmaara purusha</i> beneath his feet as depicting Shiva's supremacy over the demon of ignorance.</p> <p>And so, it doesn't take a genius to guess how grotesquely this narrative would translate in the mind of the casual non-Hindu reader: <i>Early Hindus worshipped God in the form of a naked hunter standing on a dwarf, superimposed on a giant phallus.</i></p>
12	261	3	<p>"The geographical setting of the <i>Mahabharata</i> signals a time earlier than that of the <i>Ramayana</i>. The <i>Mahabharata</i> is set in and around the earlier capital of Hastinapur, already a great city in the age of the Brahmanas, instead of the <i>Ramayana's</i> cities of Rajagriha in Magadha and Kashi in Koshala, which were settled later."</p>	<p>Doniger is wrong on facts again. In the Mahabharata, Magadha is a kingdom ruled by King Jarasandha who is killed by Bhima. In the Ramayana, the <b>region</b> of Magadha is mentioned but no other details are given. In fact, verse 1.31.5 mentions Girivraja and not Pataliputra or Rajagriha, which were <b>later</b> capitals of Magadha. This omission is quite glaring because in this section, Sage Vishvamitra <b>lists all the prominent towns in that region with the names of Kings who founded them.</b> If Rajagriha and Pataliputra had existed, the Sage would have surely mentioned them.</p> <p>Note also that these verses are in the <i>Balakanda</i> (considered a later addition to the epic) – clearly then, the core of the epic is even earlier than</p>

<sup>11</sup> B B Lal (2002), *The Saraswati Flows On*, Aryan Books International (New Delhi), p. 118

			<p>that if even the late Balakanda does not mention Pataliputra or Rajagriha!</p> <p>Doniger is also wrong in stating that the Rajagriha referred to in the Ramayana is the capital of Magadha. The epic mentions Rajagriha, the capital of the <b>Kekeya</b> kingdom in NW India, where Bharat visited his maternal grandparents (see Ayodhya Kanda of Ramayana). <b>This Rajagriha is completely different from the Magadhan Rajagriha</b> which was the capital of Magadha till c 460 BCE, when the capital moved to Pataliputra. Note also that ceramics dating to 1000 BCE have been found in the Magadhan Rajagriha, and therefore its absence in the list of cities mentioned by Sage Vishvamitra during Lord Rama's sojourn in the region is quite telling! As for Kashi, this kingdom or region is mentioned even in Atharvaveda (Shaunaka) 6.137.1 and therefore its mention or non-mention in the Ramayana is irrelevant.</p> <p>In support of her views, Doniger cites findings from excavations at Hastinapur dating to the 12<sup>th</sup> to seventh centuries BCE, which present "a far cry from the fabulous palaces described in the Mahabharata."</p> <p>Quite apart from arguments surrounding the dates of the Mahabharata, the author's expectations of finding intact structures to corroborate events of such antiquity – and her conclusions from not finding them – are incredibly absurd. Topography can undergo vast transformations across the time scales considered. When mountains can be flattened or created by geologic forces, what chance do mortal structures stand for survival?</p> <p>Hastinapur is located near the tectonically active region of the Garhwal Himalayas.<sup>12</sup> Even at the present time, the entire state of Uttar Pradesh is known to lie in a zone of moderate to high tectonic activity.<sup>13</sup> The river Ganga is known to have changed course at least once and completely inundated the city. There is no way of knowing whether, in fact, portions of the old city currently lie under the present course of the Ganga; or at some other location removed from the excavation site. But even if the</p>
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<sup>12</sup> Tectonic activity in Garhwal Himalayas <http://www.ias.ac.in/curresci/feb252002/407.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> map showing areas of tectonic activity in Uttar Pradesh <http://asc-india.org/maps/hazard/haz-uttar-pradesh.htm>

				exact coordinates of the ancient city were known, one cannot reasonably expect physical traces of it to have survived centuries of geomorphology. <sup>14</sup>
13	262	2	"The text [the Mahabharata] refers to the quasi-Mauryan Artha-Shastra...."	The entire Mahabharata does not mention Kautilya Arthashastra even once. On the contrary, it refers to the ancient Arthashastra works of Brihaspati, Ushanas, Indra (Vishalaksha), Bharadvaja etc., and these very authors are cited by Kautilya in his own 'quasi-Mauryan' Arthashastra as his predecessors.
14	262	4	"The <i>Mahabharata</i> is generally regarded as having reached its final form later than the <i>Ramayana</i> , but also to have begun earlier; the <i>Ramayana</i> is shorter and in many ways simpler, certainly more coherent, but not necessarily chronologically prior. Both texts were in gestation so long, and in conversation during so much of that gestation period, that each of the great poems precedes the other, like Brahma and Vishnu, or dharma and moksha. The <i>Ramayana</i> cites the <i>Mahabharata</i> from time to time, and the <i>Mahabharata</i> devotes an entire long section to retelling the <i>Ramayana</i> (3.257-75), a version of the story that is probably later than the one told in the <i>Ramayana</i> itself."	<p>See Appendix 1 for a more detailed commentary on the chronology of these epics.</p> <p>To sum up, the <i>Ramayana</i> does <b>not</b> quote the <i>Mahabharata</i> (<i>pace, Doniger</i>); and the positions of dharma and moksha are not interchangeable.</p> <p>Dharma or righteousness <b>leads to moksha</b>, or freedom from rebirth, when the soul merges with the Infinite.</p> <p>Moksha being the ultimate goal attainable, <b>it makes no sense whatsoever to say dharma can follow moksha.</b></p>
15	262, 263	4 1	"There is a famous Sanskrit poem that can be read, depending upon how you divide the compounds and choose among the multiple meanings of the words, to	Doniger's end notes list the work referred to as the <i>Raghavapandaviya</i> of Dhananjaya. Dhananjaya, also referred to as Hemasena, <sup>15</sup> is said to have composed this work in 1123-1140 AD <sup>16</sup> to display his intellectual mastery of a literary form known as <i>slesha</i> , or double-entendre.

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix 1

<sup>15</sup> Western Ganga Dynasty [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western\\_Ganga\\_Dynasty#cite\\_note-pand-135](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Ganga_Dynasty#cite_note-pand-135)

<sup>16</sup> Jainism in South India <http://www.terapanth.com/impressions/south-india.htm>

			tell the story of either the <i>Mahabharata</i> or the <i>Ramayana</i> . In many ways, the two stories are two sides of the same coin."	What bearing this work could possibly have on the chronology of the great epics is a mystery. Equally baffling is how Doniger believes Dhananjaya's creative retelling, composed in an age so far removed from the origin of the epics could be used to support her claim that the <i>Mahabharata</i> and <i>Ramayana</i> are flip sides of the same coin !
16	263	2	"The Mahabharata is a text of about seventy-five thousand verses*.... *Sometimes said to be a hundred thousand, perhaps just to round it off a bit.	The number 75000 is the number of verses in the critical edition of the text published in the last century and has no real basis in the Hindu tradition. The count of 100000 always includes the appendix Harivamsha (which has an additional 6000+ verses in the critical edition).  The text was traditionally said to have 100000 verses precisely because it did have these many verses. For example, the earliest commentator on the Mahabharata (Devabodha, before c. 1150 CE) gives a book by book number of chapters and verses, and totals the number of verses as 102555. <sup>17</sup>
17	264	2	"European approaches to the Mahabharata often assumed that the creators did not know what they were doing, and blindly cutting and pasting, accidentally created a monstrosity. But the Mahabharata is not the head of a Brahmin philosophy accidentally stuck onto a body of non-Brahmin folklore, like the heads and bodies of the Brahmin woman and the Pariah woman in the story. True, it was like an ancient Wikipedia, to which anyone who knew Sanskrit, or who knew someone who knew Sanskrit, could add a bit here, a bit there. But the powerful intertextuality of Hinduism ensured that anyone who added...was well aware of the whole textual tradition behind it ... It is a	With friends like Doniger, who needs enemies? Even as she seems to be attempting to rescue the Mahabharata from the slings and arrows of outrageous European scholars, she equates the unparalleled literary masterpiece to a Wikipedia stub that anyone "who knew someone who knew Sanskrit" could "add a bit here, a bit there."  The unspecified "contradictions" perceived by Doniger in the Mahabharata might come from the fact that it was never meant to read like a set of absolute commandments. Instead, it leads individuals to personal conclusions about right and wrong conduct. It does this by portraying the consequences of critical choices made by actors who combine heroism and frailty, whose moral dilemmas, human failings, as well as strengths are just as recognizable to us now they were in ancient times.  An analect of Confucius states:  <i>"By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest;</i>

<sup>17</sup> R N Dandekar (ed.), *Commentary by Devabodha on the Adi Parvan of the Mahabharata*, BORI (Poona), p. 17 (1941)

			brilliantly orchestrated hybrid narrative with no single party line on any subject...The contradictions at its heart are not the mistakes of a sloppy editor but enduring cultural dilemmas that no author could have ever resolved. "	<p><i>second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third, by experience, which is the bitterest.</i>"</p> <p>One way of avoiding the bitterness of personal experience is to live it through the narrated experience of others. The Hindu tradition achieves this through the genius of its two major epics and its rich mythological lore. Those who see only its contradictions are missing the whole point.</p>
18	264	3	"...the career of King Pushyamitra, the Brahmin who became a general and reinstated Hinduism over Buddhism in his kingdom, may have inspired an important episode in the Mahabharata, the tale of Parashurama....the son of a Brahmin father and Kshatriya mother."	<p>This is pure speculation and rests on the assumption that Brahmins actually considered the Mauryas (who were deposed by Pushyamitra) as Kshatriyas. In fact, the Mauryas were considered a low caste lineage in the Brahmin imaginary.<sup>18</sup></p> <p>It is simply more conservative to attribute Parashurama's elevation in the Mahabharata to the 'Bhrguization'<sup>19</sup> of the epic.</p> <p>In the Ramayana, Parashurama is finally overcome by Lord Rama, another Kshatriya, whereupon the Sage then retires. It is interesting to speculate what Doniger might construe as the historical inspiration for that part of Parashurama's story!</p>
19	267	2	"Take dogs. Hindu dharma forbids Hindus to have any contact with dogs, whom it regards as unclean scavengers, literally untouchable ( a-sprishya), the parasites of Pariahs who are themselves regarded as parasites....As for dogs symbolic of low castes, though the Gita insists that wise people cast the same gaze on a learned Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog, or a dog cooker (5.18) , the Mahabharata generally upholds the basic prejudice against dogs as in this story, which also makes clear the analogy	<p>This book's value could be considerably enhanced if it were made into a case study for failed intercultural communication. It is replete with reminders that successful communication depends as much on the processing skills of the receiver, as it does on the skills of the communicator.</p> <p>Doniger appears not to have read the story she summarizes (reproduced in Appendix 2 ) before jumping to her outlandish conclusions about dogs that are actually Pariahs.</p> <p>What is the story really saying? There is an enlightened sage, and a devoted dog that subsists on a diet of fruits and roots in order to please him. This could be interpreted as the human tendency to engage in ritual</p>

<sup>18</sup> R C Majumdar (1968), *Ancient India*, Motilal Banarsidass (New Delhi), p. 104

<sup>19</sup> A term from Indology referring to the transmission and expansion of the Mahabharata by Brahmins tracing their lineage to Bhrgu; Parashurama being of the same ancestry, was given prominence.

	268	1	<p>between dogs and upwardly mobile Pariahs:</p> <p>THE DOG WHO WOULD BE LION<sup>20</sup></p> <p>"...This dog even has a human heart, but he must not be allowed to get ideas above his station....Both the dog and the sage are all wrong from the very beginning. The dog violates dog dharma by being a vegetarian, whereas he should be a carnivore, and the sage is wrong too to protect the dog...But the sage does not reciprocate the dog's devotion or attachment to him.</p> <p>Whereas the dog recognizes himself as a human, the sage in the end is cruel as a dog."</p>	<p>piety when in a state of powerlessness, as a way of winning favor with the particular entity that one worships.</p> <p>Then, in a time of real adversity, when the dog implores the sage for help, he is given the strength to overcome each successive trial. But in the end, when the dog becomes powerful and feared, he forgets how he got that way in the first place, and <b>tries to eat the sage!</b> This detail is inexplicably underplayed by Doniger in her single-minded focus on making a Pariah out of the dog.</p> <p>The story is in fact an allegory for the adage "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."</p> <p>The dog in this story is emblematic of an individual lacking humility, gratitude, and introspection.</p> <p>The dog's real violation of dharma has nothing to do with his temporary vegetarianism, which as we see was evidently a superficial behavior aimed at pleasing the sage. His real failing was succumbing to greed and pride when given freedom and power.</p> <p>In the end, he is symbolically transformed back to his original form not because he is really a Pariah with illusions of grandeur, but because his character fails to evolve in keeping with the "upwardly mobile" opportunities that he is given. Finally, possessed by hubris, he tries to devour the very agent of his good fortune.</p> <p>The sage could have been termed cruel if he capriciously changed the dog back for no good reason, or maliciously put the dog in harm's way. He does neither. He waits until the dog proves himself unworthy. In the end, the dog is driven out of the ashram because he will never be fully reconciled to being a dog. He mopes resentfully out of his lack of awareness of what he did to deserve his fate.</p> <p>And the sage in the story is not meant to be representative of a Brahmin – Doniger is either ignorant or forgetful of the fact that <i>sanyasins</i> (ascetics) in the Hindu tradition have no caste. Given his role in the story, it is more</p>
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<sup>20</sup> A transcript of the story as narrated by Doniger appears in Appendix 2

				<p>likely the sage symbolizes the Almighty.</p> <p>For more analysis of this story, see Appendix 1.</p>
20	268	2	<p>"...Yudhishtira refuses to go to heaven without the stray dog who has attached itself to him... What is most striking about that passage is the god of Dharma himself becomes incarnate in this animal; it is as if the god of the Hebrew Bible had become incarnate in a pig."</p>	<p>Besides being offensive, this observation by Doniger is highly dishonest. She knows full well that the god of Dharma is not a counterpart to the all-powerful immutable Creator God of the Old Testament. In the Semitic tradition, only Satan may take the form of a beast.</p> <p>Once again, Doniger fails to grasp the point that Dharma is an <b>aspect</b> of God, a lesser deity, emblematic of a governing principle that permeates the world. The story is meant to illustrate Yudhishtira's strength of conviction. But by making the dog the central character of this tale, and truncating it at the point of Yudhishtira's admission into heaven, Doniger perverts its message to fit her inflammatory theory that the dog is a symbol for Pariahs.</p> <p>No practicing Hindu would see this story as anything but a parable for steadfast righteousness. One has never heard anyone interpret it as a veiled justification to ill-treat or exclude Pariahs! That species of insight is reserved for scholars like Doniger who approach Sanskrit text as though it were a Rorschach inkblot, subject to the same arbitrariness of meaning.</p> <p>The dog that is Dharma in disguise is not an "illusory cop-out" (as Doniger states in the next chapter, page 281) but a reminder that the code of ethics must be applied in all circumstances to all beings. And the dog is only part of Yudhishtira's test, which continues after he enters heaven.</p> <p>That part of the story is presented as a separate excerpt by Doniger in Chapter 11, which is beyond the scope of this review. A commentary on Doniger's presentation of Yudhishtira's experiences in heaven is attached in Appendix 3.</p>
21	269	5	<p>"...it is just a story – and not only just a story, but just a test ( as they used to say of air-raid signals on the radio), one of a series of tests that Dharma set for his son, all of which he passed (17.3.18). For the dog never does go to heaven,</p>	<p>This self-righteous blather does not deserve to be dignified with a response. See Appendix 3 for a commentary on Yudhishtira's experiences in heaven.</p> <p>The irony of Doniger's pious distaste for the imagined endorsement of the caste system emerges in the next and final excerpt. Of course, Doniger</p>

			never violates Hindu law, because there was no dog; it was all an illusion. In case of a real dog... what then? The story shows just how rotten the caste system is but does not change it. No dogs get into heaven."	ignores the positive images of dogs in classical Hinduism, where four dogs are sometimes said to represent the four Vedas! For example, the deity Dattatreya is accompanied by four dogs, and in the hagiographies of Shankaracharya, Lord Shiva and the four Vedas appear before the sage in the form of a Chandala and his four dogs.
22	271	Fn	"No mother in India nowadays names her son Yudhishtira, as she might name him Arjuna or even Indra."	Untrue. A simple Google search will reveal some individuals with this name. This reviewer personally knows a gentleman with this name (nicknamed 'Yudi').
23	275	2	<p>INDRA'S ANIMAL SACRIFICE DEBATE</p> <p>"Once upon a time, Indra began a great sacrifice, involving the slaughter of many animals. But as the sacrificial animals were seized...the great sages...were consumed by pity... a sacrifice performed with materials wrongly obtained, or with an evil mind, does not yield the fruits of dharma.</p> <p>People – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras – do go to heaven by giving away what they have gleaned, and also by compassion to all creatures, and chastity, and sympathy (14.94.1-34) "</p>	<p>Aha.</p> <p>So there IS a story in the Mahabharata after all, that lays out <b>a way for everyone belonging to every varna to get into heaven. And they may do so not just by going through the prescribed motions of some ritual sacrifice but by demonstrating key qualities of character.</b></p> <p>Perhaps this is what Doniger means by "contradictions" in the Mahabharata – those annoying details that spring up despite her most vigilant efforts to exclude them -- that defeat her best efforts to create chaos out of order.</p>

## POSTSCRIPT

This is just a critique of some 24 pages out of a total of 690, one chapter out of 25. And though it appears exhaustive, there are aspects of the chapter that remain unaddressed. A complete analysis with supporting research would practically require an alternative book.

In her introduction, Doniger describes what she terms her “double agenda” :

“...first to point out the places where the Sanskrit sources themselves include vernacular, female and lower-class voices and then to include, wherever possible, non-Sanskrit sources. The (Sanskrit) medium is not always the message; it’s not all about Brahmins, Sanskrit, the Gita. I will concentrate on ... the times of the “mixing of classes” (*varna –samkara*) that the Brahmins always tried – inevitably in vain – to prevent.”<sup>21</sup>

Having stated that, *she proceeds to devote the major portion of the book to discussing the Sanskrit texts -- Rig Veda, the Upanishads, the Mahabharata, the Shastras, and the Puranas – all of which might be considered “mainstream” Hinduism. There is just one chapter on Bhakti in South India. She omits mentioning significant works from Tamil literature, the great Tirukkural of Tiruvalluvar being just one example.*

Avvayar and Tiruvalluvar were among the greatest philosopher-poets of Tamil literature. Avvayar’s verses appear simple, but encompass profound social truths. Tiruvalluvar, a weaver by trade, wrote a literary masterpiece on ethics and statecraft that even today is sworn on in South Indian law courts.<sup>22</sup> Some sources claim Avvayar and Tiruvalluvar were siblings, born to Bhagavan, a Brahmin, and Adi, a non-Brahmin. If this is true, it would mean that Indian society took *varna-samkara* pretty much in stride some 2000 years BD ( Before Doniger ).

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<sup>21</sup> *The Hindus ...* by Wendy Doniger, Preface, page 2

<sup>22</sup> *Dancing with Siva* by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, page 620

As the survivor of a hurled egg at her 2003 lecture in the UK, Doniger passionately describes her overarching sense of mission. She responds to the accusation that she

“cited a part of the Hindu textual tradition that one Hindu ‘had never heard of,’ my reply is: Yes! And it’s my intention to go on doing just that. The parts of his own tradition that he objected to are embraced by many other Hindus and are, in any case, historically part of the record. One reason why this book is so long is that I wanted to show how very much there is of all that the egg faction would deny. And so I intend to go on celebrating the diversity and pluralism, not to mention the worldly wisdom and sensuality of the Hindus that I have loved for about fifty years now and still counting.”<sup>23</sup>

And there, in plain view, lies the answer to the question as to why Doniger mocks, diminishes, and misrepresents Hinduism over the greater part of a nearly 700 –page book.

Love hurts.

Also see “*Calling her Bluff*” at <http://inquest-chitra.blogspot.com/>

Reader feedback is welcomed; please email [nokturnelle@gmail.com](mailto:nokturnelle@gmail.com)

Editorial input, additional perspectives and references from Vishal Agarwal are gratefully acknowledged.

For detailed reviews of other chapters of this book, see

<http://vishalagarwal.voiceofdharma.com/articles/thaah/>

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<sup>23</sup> *The Hindus...* by Wendy Doniger, Preface, Page 16

## APPENDIX 1

### ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

*By*

*K.S. Ramachandran*

#### CHRONOLOGY OF THE MAHABHARATA AND THE RAMAYANA

Doniger says that cities like Hastinapura were established before other cities like Varanasi (Kashi) in Eastern India. The basis for this assertion is not clear.

If Doniger bases her rationale on the Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT), which visualizes Aryans coming in from Central Asia, via the Khyber pass and gradually moving into India from the Northwest down through the Ganga valley to Eastern India – she is on very thin ice. The AIT currently stands challenged, if not totally discredited. Any conclusions based on that theory – like the inference that Western Indian cities MUST have been settled earlier than the Eastern Indian cities—should be considered equally discredited or challenged.

Doniger claims that the Ramayana makes reference to Mahabharata from time to time. I have never heard anything this in all my 80 years. I consulted Dr. L. Swaminathan, an individual who made it his life's mission to translate the Valmiki Ramayana into English for the younger generation of India, releasing the first eight volumes back in 2002. He has spent years reading every word of it. He states categorically that there is no such reference to the Mahabharata in the Ramayana.

There are innumerable retold and amended versions of the major epics. It is said that there are over 300 different versions of Ramayana in Sanskrit and the 14 major languages of India. In an Indonesian version, Hanuman is the hero and Rama the minor player. However, the only versions relevant to a discussion of chronology are the Valmiki Ramayana and Vyasa's Mahabharata.

With respect to Doniger's contention that the Mahabharata narrative was composed earlier than that of the Ramayana, the following specific points are relevant:

- a. The Ramayana does not refer to the Mahabharata, but the Mahabharata refers to the Ramayana.
- b. During the Pandavas' stay in the forests, Draupadi sends Bhima to find a Parijata flower. On his way, he comes across an old monkey which later reveals himself as Hanuman, the devotee of Rama.
- c. When some years later, Bhima asks for Hanuman's assistance in the war against the Kauravas, Hanuman refuses to fight. He agrees to sit on top of the chariot of Arjuna in his flag to give him moral support. However, he insists on facing away from the battlefield, stating that he has no interest in witnessing any battle after participating in the greatest of them all, between Rama and Ravana.
- d. Toward the end of the epic, Krishna is mistakenly shot with a poisoned arrow by a hunter. Krishna tells him that he forgives the hunter, because the latter was Vaali in his previous birth, who was killed by Rama (the previous birth of Krishna). The incident ending the Krishna avatar squares up the accounts for the wrongful killing of Vaali from behind a tree in the Rama avatar.
- e. In the Ramayana, the area south of the Vindhyas is described as Dandakaranya, a densely forested region populated by monkeys, bears and Rakshasas. In the Mahabharata, Arjuna's travels take him all over India, including South India. Reference is made to his having married Princess Chitrangada of the Pandya kingdom in the extreme south of India. At the Kurukshetra battle, the kings of 56 States of India participated. This suggests that that the subcontinent was more widely settled during the Mahabharata period than that of the Ramayana, where, with the exception of the kingdom of Sri Lanka, there is no reference to other established southern states.

## THE DOG WHO WOULD BE A LION

Doniger takes the story of the sage and the dog and imparts to it her own ingenious distortions. She sees it as symbolic of the upwardly mobile aspirations of an untouchable being cruelly thwarted by a higher caste mentor-turned-oppressor. The simple truth is that this story has never been viewed in this light in India, nor was it intended to be. Here first is the moral that an Indian would draw from it.

The dog ultimately was banished from the ashram by the sage for its **ingratitude**, which is regarded as an unpardonable offence. The following story, possibly from the *Katha Sarit Sagara* by Somadeva (11<sup>th</sup> Century CE) conveys the same lesson:

A prince fleeing from a tiger clammers up a tree. When he thinks he is safe from the tiger, he finds that there is a big bear on the same branch where he took refuge. The bear tells the prince not to be scared: "Do not worry, I will protect you."

Later that night, when the prince nods off, the tiger tells the bear to push the prince down. "We are animals, and this prince is a human, whose only purpose in coming to the forest is to hunt us down. So it would not be wrong for you to betray him. Throw him down so that I may feast on him." The bear refuses.

In the latter part of the night, when it is the bear's turn to sleep and the prince keeps vigil, the tiger tempts him to push the bear down. "That way you can be absolutely sure you will be safe," the tiger says. The foolish prince agrees and tries to push the bear. But the bear, ever vigilant, wakes up and curses the prince. It says:

*Mitra-drohi, krutaghnascha  
Yascha vishwasa-ghaatakaha  
Triyasthey narakam yaanti  
Yaavat chandradivaakaram.*

*The betrayer of a friend, an ungrateful person  
and one who commits a breach of faith  
all these three go to hell  
as long as there is a sun and a moon.*

Here it is the animal that curses a human being, even though he is from the second-highest caste. Beyond the moral admonishment of the final verse, this story teaches one to look beyond external attributes to gauge the true worth of an individual. Fine clothes and high birth do not automatically bestow high character; a bear may well have more integrity than a prince.

But Doniger's inventive genius may yet divine some hidden justification for caste oppression from this story!

Returning to the story of the dog and the sage, the following points come to mind with respect to Doniger's analysis:

- a. The dog did not **ask** to be made a leopard. It simply went to the sage for protection. It was the sage who turned the dog into a leopard in order to save it. In other words, the dog did not **seek** "upward mobility," only safety. But it was **granted** upward mobility by the sage, not once, but several times over the course of the story.
- b. The sage converted the dog back not because he suddenly decided he was against the dog's "upward mobility," but because the dog that has been made a lion is so blinded by his sense of power and self-importance that he decides to eat the sage.
- c. Most significantly, the dog does not aspire to be the sage. The dog aspires only to have power over the sage.
- d. The stronger animals are not portrayed as having any objection to a dog being made one of their species

In short, no reasonable person could draw the conclusions derived by Doniger, that this is a story that illustrates the resistance of the upper castes to the upward aspirations of the lower castes.

There is a more subtle lesson in the sage's actions. The sage ultimately sends the dog away because he has become too attached to it, and projects too much of his personal expectations and standards on the dog. This likely comes at the expense of his intellectual and philosophical pursuits. Detachment is one of the primary requirements of a *sanyasin*, a sage.

And there is no wisdom without discrimination. When we find ourselves pouring ourselves into supporting thankless individuals or causes that consume us without yielding any positive outcome, the greatest wisdom may lie in knowing when to stop and channel those energies inward.

*K. S. Ramachandran is a former officer of the Indian Administrative Service whose career accomplishments are too numerous to mention. Before his retirement, he was the first Chairman and Managing Director of The National Aluminum Company (NALCO), being closely associated with all stages of project inception, planning, and foundational development of what was to become one of the nation's most successful public sector undertakings. His knowledge, integrity, humility, and humor make him a trusted source of information not only for his immediate friends and family, but also for his academician friends in the United States with whom he shares deep ties of mutual regard and affection.*

## APPENDIX 2

### THE DOG WHO WOULD BE A LION

Once there was an ascetic of such goodness that the flesh-eating wild animals – lions and tigers and bears, as well as rutting elephants, leopards and rhinoceroses – were like his disciples. A dog, weak and emaciated from eating only fruits and roots, like the sage, became attached to him out of affection, tranquil, with a heart like that of a human being. One day a hungry leopard came there and was about to seize the dog as his prey when the dog begged the sage to save him. The sage turned him into a leopard, and then, when a tiger attacked, into a tiger, and then a rutting elephant, and a lion.<sup>24</sup> Now that he was carnivorous, all the animals feared him and stayed away, and finally he wanted to eat the sage, who read his thoughts and turned him back into a dog, his own proper form by birth (*jatī*). The dog moped about unhappily until the sage drove him out of the hermitage. [ 12.115-19]

Source: *The Hindus, An Alternative History* by Wendy Doniger; Chapter 10, Page 267

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<sup>24</sup> He also becomes a *sharabha*, a fierce mythical beast, variously described.

### APPENDIX 3

## Yudhishtira in Heaven

by  
Chitra Raman

In Chapter 11, Doniger manages again with tedious predictability to misrepresent the point of Yudhishtira's experiences in heaven.

She introduces her version of the narrative with the absurd statement that "The Mahabharata totters on the brink of a full-fledged concept of the transfer of karma, in ... the story after Yudhishtira has entered heaven ( with Dharma, no longer incarnate as a dog). " ( Page 280)

To summarize, in the original *Svargavarohanika Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, Yudhishtira is angered by the sight of Duryodhana enjoying himself in the best part of heaven. Yudhishtira demands to be taken to his brothers and Draupadi. He is led to an evil-smelling and hideous place where he hears voices calling out in torment. As he is about to return, the voices ask him to stay, identifying themselves as Draupadi and his brothers. Furious and grief –stricken that they should be languishing in such a foul place, he rails against the gods, and declares he will stay behind to alleviate their discomfort. It is at this point that Yudhishtira's stature as the epitome of dharma is confirmed, the illusion dissolves, his virtue is extolled by the gods led by his father Dharma, and he is restored to heaven -- where those he seeks were really residing all the while.

However, the distinguishing quality of Yudhishtira's commitment to dharma entirely eludes Doniger, who is intent on making her point about "the transfer of karma."

She says "Yudhishtira's ability to ease his brothers' torments takes the form of a cool, sweet breeze that counteracts the hot, putrid air of hell, through a kind of transfer of merit." (Page 281) She adds in a footnote: "There is a rough parallel to this idea in the Catholic practice of offering up your suffering to shorten the sentences of souls in purgatory."

The parallel is ridiculous. The point is not that Yudhishtira eased anyone's suffering – the suffering he witnessed was an illusion meant to test him. Nor is karma presented here as a kind of transferable currency that can be loaned out -- **in fact the exact opposite is shown to be the case**. The reason Yudhishtira experiences hell, however briefly, is punishment for his only transgression on the battlefield: that is, deceiving Dronacharya into believing that the latter's son, Aswaththama, was dead.

The Hindu understanding of karma is completely distinct from the Catholic concept of expiation, which visualizes one's sins as being absorbed and nullified by the very act of surrender to their savior. Hindus certainly have their rituals of expiation, such as bathing in holy rivers and performing specific Pujas. However, these are instruments of mitigation, rather than total erasure, of bad karma. Every individual is regarded to be subject to the consequences of his or her karma – not even Krishna was exempt. His death at the hands of a hunter is presented as expiation for his wrongful killing of Vaali in the previous Rama avatar.