Hinduism and Hindu Nationalism Online

Juli L. Gittinger

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Review

Religions are widely accessible in the digital community and Hinduism and Hindu Nationalism Online engages with some of the internet’s representations of Hinduism, with a focus primarily on political and politico-nationalist representations. Juli L. Gittinger focuses on three organizations throughout the book: Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Though the title of the text is wide in scope—Gittinger prefers to focus on the Hindutva agenda. She quotes extensively from the primary texts of the RSS and VHP to argue that these organizations create a brand of Hindu nationalism and Hindu ideology—or Hindutva—that is not warranted by historical or textual evidence.
Gittinger follows in the line of scholars who maintain that the millennia-old narrative of Hinduism “was historically constituted by the nationalist imagination of the nineteenth century” (11). By doing so, Gittinger, probably unknowingly, conflates the Indian Independence Movement with the Hindutva agenda. This perspective, however, does not explain the fact that, while all parties struggling for Indian independence concurred on this millennia-old history of Hinduism, these very parties are, today, warring factions on the topic of Hindutva.

Gittinger argues that Hindutva is “the phantasmic, the impossible site of identification” (13). She distinguishes, between the public culture and the national culture of religion, of Hinduism. She relies on the “Aryan Invasion Theory,” which itself is highly contested, having been debunked by many Western scholars, such as Edwin F. Bryant of the Rutgers University and Michael Witzel of the Harvard University. However, Gittinger does not substantiate her statements in support of “Aryan Invasion Theory.” Gittinger uses various tools to analyze these websites, and discusses critical issues of Hindu nationalism and Hindutva—for example, the online management of Hinduism—while also proposing a digital hermeneutic, engaging with the encountering of authoritative sites, dealing with interactive or “two-way” sites. She further explores problems associated with “cyber-activism”—and its real-life consequences such as lynching and the banning of books—assesses online rhetoric and the prevalent laws on cyber activity, analyzes the gender dynamics of Hindutva and Hindu nationalism, and finally, deals with the phenomenon of “saffron effect.”

With an introduction and seven chapters, this slim volume displays Gittinger’s painstaking research, evidence of a career’s work on both Hindu nationalism and Hindutva. Gittinger juxtaposes thoughts of social thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, and then applies these philosophies in the Indian context. She discusses the phenomenon of print capitalism, and the play of languages on the internet. However, ironically, Gittinger fails to grasp some of the nuances of the Hindi language—spoken by a large Indian population—and she ends up incorrectly treating walaar waleas slang for insult.

Throughout Hinduism and Hindu Nationalism Online, Gittinger revisits the notions of cultural authority and authenticity. She argues that the agents of Hindutva use all the tools of the legitimization of cultural authority. She asserts “that the issue of authenticity is a very sensitive issue in Hinduism at present” (31), and concludes that “Hinduism has an inherent adaptability that makes it amenable to new mediums” (32). She also maintains that “the notion that Hinduism is intrinsically tolerant is a lovely fiction” (36). Critiquing Swami Vivekananda’s first speech at the World’s Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, Gittinger says that Vivekananda gave a “very well-crafted presentation,” and that “he is in truth both a father and mentor of Hindutva” (35).
This book offers the reader ways to rethink the analyzing and interpreting of information on the internet. The analytical presentation of *Hinduism and Hindu Nationalism Online* enables one to form an understanding of the associations and linkages to be made from the apparently disjointed material available on the web. Through this work, Gittinger begins a new discourse on digital hermeneutics. She discusses, in detail, the methods and techniques to analyze the images, hyperlinks, and text on a website.

Gittinger’s arguments could be more balanced. For instance, she could have also discussed, in more detail, the large amount of material—textual and media—available on the internet and accessed by millions, particularly the young, across the world to inform themselves about the authentic traditions of Hinduism, presented in a language and context accessible to contemporary global citizens. Further, Gittinger hardly refers to the corpus of academic writing countering the arguments she puts forth, and cites only from non-academic and propagandist material. Nonetheless, this book could be helpful for scholars of Hindutva, Hinduism, Hindu nationalism, religious studies, digital studies, cultural studies, and political science.

**About the Reviewer(s):**
Swami Narasimhananda is the editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*.

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**About the Author(s)/Editor(s)/Translator(s):**
Julii L. Gittinger is Lecturer in South Asian Religions and Islam at Georgia College. Her research interests include Hindu nationalism, Islam in pop culture and virtual methodologies. She has written multiple articles on these subjects and has contributed chapters in forthcoming edited volumes.

**Comments**

Julii Gittinger
Tuesday, April 9, 2019 - 11:56
Thank you for the thoughtful review. There is one point in particular I’d like to clarify as I feel it’s an important one. At no point do I defend “Aryan Invasion Theory,” but rather discuss Savarkar’s use of Aryan narrative to undergird his claim of “jati” or “race” as a constitutive element of his Hindutva. “Savarkar’s historical narrative affirms an Aryan-migration theory rather than inversion, portraying them as settling and contributing to the ‘noble bloodline’ of Indians today” (10). As you noted, this claim is very problematic (I agree 100%), which is why I find it fascinating that Savarkar’s
ideas of race are still iterated across Hindu nationalist sites today. It is his rhetoric I use to frame and challenge modern propaganda.

The second point is a minor one, regarding the suffix –walle. I understand Hindutvawalle (i.e. a Hindutva fan or follower) as a pejorative term because I regard Hindutva as a negative, not –walle. I noted clarification of this term to avoid precisely this confusion in the Introduction, endnote 13.

Thank you!

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