

Review of Chapter # 19 in Wendy Doniger’s “The Hindus, an Alternative History”

Chapter Title: “Dialogue and Tolerance Under the Mughals”

General Comments on the Chapter: The chapter is written in a very amateurish manner. Doniger’s main references are overview books on Indian history such as the one by John Keay, and she has reproduced errors already found in her sources. Though the title of the chapter implies that the Mughal rulers were tolerant towards Hindus, the data presented by her makes it clear to even a casual reader that the reverse was actually the case. In other words, she does a good job at demonstrating that the Mughal Emperors, with the honorable and partial exception of Akbar, held Hindus and Hinduism in utter contempt and disdain and also indulged in considerable religious persecution of Hindus. Doniger tries to counter this obvious conclusion by culling piece-meal data from the works of agenda driven authors, such as the communist historian Harbans Mukhia (who even advocated a ban on archaeological digs in India recently after a Jaina Saraswati idol was unearthed from Fatehpur Sikri, because it shattered the Indian Communist historians’ cherished claim that Akbar was uniformly tolerant towards Hindus and Jains)¹ and Richard Eaton, an apologist for Islamic iconoclasm in medieval India. Further, the chapter is replete with dozens of factual errors, and of course with questionable interpretations of historical data. As usual, Doniger focuses on horses, dogs, drugs, booze and sex in this chapter too. Lastly, several paragraphs are written in very hurried and careless English and are therefore either misleading or undecipherable. Below, the reviewer lists just a few of the errors found in this chapter of the book. If we have not cited references to point out the sources of our corrections, it is because these facts are too well known to students of medieval Indian history. Doniger has acknowledged the help of her students Manan Ahmed and Rajeev Kinra in writing this chapter. Perhaps they can help her with these corrections, and also learn good history in the process.

#	Page #	Paragraph # on the page	Error	Comments
1	527	1	“1530-1556 Humayun reigns”	Wrong. Humayun reigned from 1530-1540 AD and was deposed by Sher Shah Suri. He fled his kingdom and lived in Iran for several years before returning to recapture his throne in 1555. Humayun then died in 1556.
2	528	2	“But the Mughals also made spectacular contributions to the civilization of the world in general and	Throughout the chapter, the author has failed to demonstrate what contributions were made by the Mughals to Hinduism. The mere fact that they got some Hindu scriptures translated

¹ Mukhia, Harbans. “Demolishing temples wasn’t Medieval India’s only language”, *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, March 19, 2000. In this article, Mukhia makes the bizarre allegation that the demolition of the Jaina site might have been instigated by Hindus!

			Hinduism in particular.”	into Persian or that some Hindu saints lived in the same period as the 300 years of Mughal rule does not constitute sufficient proof of their ‘spectacular contributions’ to Hinduism.
3	528	3	“Like the Arabs of the Delhi Sultanate, the Turks who became the Mughals....”	Wrong. Individuals of several dynasties ruled as Delhi Sultans. Most of them were Turkic and Afghans and it is incorrect to term them as ‘Arabs’. The Arabs ruled kingdoms elsewhere, in southern and western Pakistan.
4	531	2	“In 1556, as keen on astronomy as on astrology, Humayun tripped going down the stone stairs from his makeshift observatory in Delhi...”	Misleading text. The building called ‘Sher Mandal’ was actually constructed by Emperor Sher Shah Suri and was used more as a library by Humayun. He was walking down the stairs from his library with books in his hands before his death.
5	532	2	“But he [Akbar] moved the capital back to Delhi in 1586, in part because of Fatehpur Sikri’s inadequate....”	Wrong. Akbar moved his capital from Sikri to Lahore in 1585, not to Delhi. After Lahore, he moved the capital to Agra, which is where he died.
6	535	3	“In 1605, a few weeks before Akbar’s death, Prince Salim.....had Abu’l Fazl murdered and had the head sent back to him (Salim)....Akbar was understandably infuriated and saddened; a few weeks later, he died in Agra.”	Wrong. Abu’l Fazl was murdered at the behest of Prince Salim in 1602, whereas Akbar died in 1605 – surely much more than ‘a few weeks later’.
7	535	4-5	Jehangir’s policy towards Hindus	Wendy omits the important details on what the Emperor stated in his autobiography about the reasons for having had Guru Arjan murdered. In his autobiography, Jehangir also refers to Hinduism as “a worthless religion”. A summary of his treatment of non-Muslims may be given as follows – “He kept the Muslim organization of the state intact. Generally he

				continued the tolerant policy of his father and did not differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims in public services and did not restrict public celebration of religious festivals and fairs. But the Sikh Guru Arjan was tortured to death. The Jains were persecuted. At times, Jahangir acted as the protector of Islam rather than the king of non-Muslims. Thus as compared to Akbar's reign, the outlook had changed in Jahangir's times." ²
8	536	2	"But Shah Jahan was still open to the culture of Hinduism....When he [Shah Jahan] built the great Jami Masjid, the Friday Mosque, in Delhi, he included a rather miscellaneous arcade made of disparate columns from twenty-seven demolished Hindu temples. Despite the alleged aniconic nature of Islam, the pillars are still graced with figures, some of Hindu gods, a few of them still with their heads on."	It was a common practice of Muslim rulers in India to demolish Hindu temples and then use the fragments (including pillars with defaced icons of Hindu Deities) as trophies by incorporating these fragments in the construction of mosques and other Islamic structures. These acts do not represent their tolerance towards Hinduism. If Muslim rulers had truly appreciated Hindu art, they would have gotten new pillars carved with Hindu motifs for their mosques rather than demolish pre-existing and functioning temples to procure them! Moreover, Doniger seems to have confused the Mughal built Jama Masjid with the Jami Masjid (also called 'Quwwat al Islam' mosque) in Mehrauli started in 1193 CE by Qutbuddin Aibak after destroying 27 Jain temples there. It is another matter that natives of Delhi alleged that Shah Jahan destroyed 3 pre-existing Hindu temples in old Delhi to make way for his mosque.
9	536	3	"Shah Jahan also built the Shalimar Gardens in Kashmir...."	Wrong. These gardens were constructed by Emperor Jahangir for his queen Nur Jahan. Shah Jahan added to these gardens, and constructed another garden with the same name in Lahore.

² Jadunath Sarkar (1984), *Mughal Polity*, Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delhi (New Delhi), p. 406

10	536	3	"...Mumtaz [Mahal, whose tomb is the Taj Mahal], died in bearing him their thirteenth child,,,"	Wrong. She died during her 14 th childbirth.
11	537	3	"When Aurangzeb sacked Hyderabad in 1687, he stabled his horses in the Shiite mosques as a deliberate insult to what he regarded as the city's heretics. Thus began twenty years of discrimination against Shiites, Hindus and Sikhs."	Misleading comment. Aurangzeb had started persecuting Hindus and other non-Muslims several decades earlier, even before he became the Emperor in 1658 and when he was the Governor of Deccan under his father's reign. He demolished several temples and persecuted Hindus and Sikhs, including getting Guru Tegh Bahadur murdered in 1675 AD. These historical facts are too well known to be repeated here.
12	537	4	"Many Muslims converted to Sikhism, so infuriating Aurangzeb that he condemned Tegh Bahadur for blasphemy and executed him."	Very misleading remark, at variance with both the traditional Hindu-Sikh narratives as well as the official Moghul narratives. The former clearly state that the Guru took cudgels on behalf of Kashmiri Hindus who were being forced to convert to Islam at the orders of Aurangzeb. He was arrested and the Emperor gave the Guru the choice of death or conversion to Islam. The Guru chose the latter.
13	537-538	4,1	"In 1708, Govind Singh was assassinated while attending the emperor Aurangzeb."	Wrong. Emperor Aurangzeb died in 1707, and the assassination occurred during the reign of his successor Emperor Bahadur Shah I. It is an insult to suggest that the Guru was 'attending' on the Moghul emperor.
14	538	2	"In 1679, he reimposed the Jizya on all castes....and the tax on Hindu pilgrims that Akbar had lifted."	Misleading statement. The part on Jaziya is correct, but the pilgrimage taxes paid by Hindus were in effect as late as the reign of Shah Jehan, who abolished them at the request of his liberal son Dara Shikoh and the Hindu ascetic Kavindracharya Saraswati.
15	538	3	"He [Aurangzeb] also renamed the cave city of Ellora Aurangabad."	Ellora is 19 miles away from Aurangabad and two places are quite distinct. Aurangzeb had renamed another town named Fatehnagar as Aurangabad in 1653.

16	538	4	“He destroyed few <i>old</i> temples, generally only those that had political or ideological power.”	A blatantly false statement. There were very few ancient temples left by the time of Aurangzeb because most of the old temples had already been destroyed in northern India and Pakistan by preceding Muslim rulers. The number of temples destroyed by Aurangzeb perhaps runs into 4 figures. Doniger has relied on agenda driven Indian communist historians such as Harbans Mukhia to make such a ridiculous claim. He did attack notable old Hindu temples like the temple at Pandharpur. If he did not destroy many Hindu temples in South India, it was because he did not want to incite the Hindus as suppressing a revolt by Hindus there would have been very difficult. ³
17	539	1-2	“Aurangzeb lived to ninety and died in bed, alone. When Jahandah Shah took the throne, he immediately reversed all of Aurangzeb’s policies that had curbed the pleasures of the flesh.”	Aurangzeb was succeeded by Bahadur Shah I who ruled from 1707-1712, and not by Jahandah (sic!) Shah. The latter’s correct name is Jahandar Shah (Doniger has copied the wrong spelling from John Keay’s book) and he ruled only for 11 months.
18	545	2	“In 1647, when he [Shivaji] was just seventeen years old....”	There is a controversy on his date of birth. Sometimes, 1627 is stated to be his year of birth. Doniger should have stated this ‘alternative’ version too!
19	546	1	“There is evidence of fewer than 200 conversions under Aurangzeb.”	Quite a travesty of truth. What would constitute proof for Doniger? We cannot expect conversion certificates to survive from the 16-18 th centuries. Single instances, such as forcible conversions in Kashmir during Aurangzeb’s reign would have lead to literally thousands of Hindus forsaking their faith under duress.
20	546	3	“In the fifteenth century the Brahmins thought that there was already a need	Doniger’s source again is the communist historian Harbans Mukhia. It is difficult to understand why Doniger brings in the

³ Sarkar, p. 428

			for conversions back to Hinduism; they overhauled ancient ceremonies designed to reinstate Hindus....”	15 th century here when Mughal rule started in India at the end of the first quarter of the 16 th century (i.e. in 1526). Clearly, these changes in Hinduism had nothing to do with Mughals. In fact, Hindus were reconverting their brethren converted forcibly to Islam several centuries earlier.
21	Pp 548-550	All pages	These pages of the book have a description of supposed religious fusion of Islam and Hinduism during the Moghul Empire.	The description is quite questionable and exaggerated, following the line of India’s communist historians. The examples given are largely from the elitist stratum of the society or are exceptional.
22	549	2	“Urdu (“camp”), a hybrid dialect that Akbar developed in the military encampments...”	Wrong statement. Urdu developed several centuries earlier.
23	549	3	“Thanks to Akbar and Dara, Sanskrit became an important literary language in the Muslim world.”	Doniger apparently relies on a book by Ann Marie Schimmel. The statement is quite an exaggeration. Where in the Muslim world did Sanskrit become an important literary language? Arabia? Egypt? Morocco? Persian Empire? Ottoman Empire?
24	550	2	“Since there were no Rama temples in Ayodhya until the sixteenth or seventeenth century, there is some irony in the strong possibility that Babur, whose mosque was to become such a cause célèbre, may have sponsored the first Rama temples in Ayodhya, built when he built the ill-fated Babri Mosque.”	This is a meaningless, if not a pervert statement. Doniger not only misrepresents Hans Baker’s book on Ayodhya but does not also ask a logical question – “Why is it that none of the ancient and revered Hindu pilgrimage centers in northern Indian, including Varanasi, Mathura, Ayodhya, Haridwar etc., have no ancient temple predating 300 years of so?” The answer should be obvious (that they were destroyed by Islamic invaders) in light of extensive historical records and archaeological evidence to this effect. But some great scholars have other ethereal, and agenda driven theoretical explanations that have no empirical basis.
25	550	4	“As always, the common people of India picked up the tab.....As there was	A false parity. Mosques were often constructed by demolishing pre-existing sites, unlike temples that were

			no free temple, there was certainly no free mosque.”	constructed on virgin land. Temples served the religious needs of the masses of the country. In contrast, mosques were often an expression of the political victory of the small Muslim minority (or of Muslim rulers) over the Hindu masses of India. Temples were supported by land grants made by the rulers, so that that the government actually lost the revenues of the lands granted. Mosques were built through crippling taxes collected or looted from the largely Hindu peasantry.
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Post Script: The above are just a few of the errors that litter this chapter of the book. Some of the errors pointed by us above can be a matter of interpretation, but most are plain errors of fact. The chapter covers a period of almost 200 years (from 1526 – 1713 AD) and to attribute all natural developments within the Hindu society to Moghuls is insulting to the intelligence of the Hindu community. Toeing the official ‘secularist’ line of history writing followed by India’s communist historians, Doniger exaggerates the supposed contributions of Moghuls and of Islam to Hinduism. She glorifies Akbar in a rather ahistorical fashion not asking the most elementary of all questions – “When Akbar fashioned the vast Moghul empire during his 49 year reign, were his conquests of a peaceful nature or were they preceded by terrible violence and bloodshed in the invaded territories of India?”

For all her pretenses that her book is about the under-privileged sections of Hindus whose voices are not heard, Doniger too forgets them completely in this chapter, and instead glorifies their feudal and imperial lords. It is just the very last (and short) paragraph of the chapter that highlights the plights of the masses, but even this para closes by drawing a false parity between the construction of temples earlier and royal mosques during the Moghul rule.

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