

Academic freedom duplicity at Harvard. Swamy and his Harvard enemies: the real story - Dr. Rajaram

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Academic freedom duplicity at Harvard: Some are more equal than others SOME ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS?

Swamy and his Harvard enemies I : the real story

An anti-Hindu clique has made a mockery of academic freedom using an unwieldy administrative mechanism to cancel Subramanian Swamy's courses. The result has been a fierce backlash.

Part I

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Background: Insular Indologists and generous donor

Georges Clemenceau (1841 – 1929), prime minister of France during World War I once said: "War is too important a matter to be left to the generals." This wisdom can now be applied to those calling themselves by names like Indologist, India Studies Expert, South Asia Expert (the latest fashion) and so forth. Thanks to their ham-handed expulsion of the economist and visiting professor Dr Subramanian Swamy, Harvard now has a major public relations problem on its hands.

To understand the nature of Harvard's public relations problem, it helps to recognize that Harvard has a dual personality: it is a university that is also a business. Harvard University is part of the Harvard Corporation which answers to its board. (Actually it has two boards, of fellows and of overseers—don't ask me why.) It is the richest university in the world with assets (called endowment) valued at \$32 billion (over one lakh sixty thousand crore rupees in today's values). Its assets are managed by the Harvard Management Company, a wholly owned subsidiary of Harvard.

In 2007, its assets stood at \$36 billion. During the global economic downturn Harvard endowment lost 22 percent of its value or eight billion dollars. It has recovered somewhat in the past two years and is now valued at \$32 billion, better but still well short of what it was five years ago. To grow, Harvard needs money from two sources— income from its assets and contributions from its 'customers'. The latter may now take a hit thanks to the controversy and the backlash following the cancellation of Subramanian Swamy's courses.

Like any successful business Harvard treats customer loyalty as its most valuable asset; it takes extraordinary care to cultivate and nurture good relations. Its customers are its alumni. They donate generously and also send their children to Harvard. Increasingly, Harvard is drawing its students—and donations—from the wealthy Indian-American community and in recent years from businesses and professionals in India. In the past year alone, individuals from major Indian business houses like Tata, Infosys and Mahindras (to name just a couple) have given tens of millions of dollars to Harvard.

Hubris results in backlash

The last thing that Harvard needs at this juncture is as it is just recovering from the fallout of the financial crisis is a public relations disaster of this nature. A question that needs to be answered is— how could Harvard, whose public relations skills are second to none, allow itself to be blindsided by an avalanche of this magnitude? The only answer I can think of is hubris—it took the goodwill and loyalty of an important segment of its 'customers'— the Indian alumni and students—for granted and failed to respond adequately to their complaints over the shrill anti-Hindu and anti-Indian rhetoric and propaganda of some of its faculty. The worst offenders were Indologist Michael Witzel and a few of his associates.

The dismissal of Subramanian Swamy was the last straw. He is regarded as a hero by a large number of Indians because of his uncompromising stand against terrorism and his crusade against corruption. Judged by Witzel's record over the past several years, going back to his unseemly involvement in the California school curriculum controversy— and the anti-Hindu rants of his hate group IER (Indo-Eurasian Research), it was a disaster waiting to happen. I had brought his unsavory activities to the attention of Harvard administration more than once, but they had always advised me that however disagreeable it may be, Witzel's (and other's) views were protected by academic freedom. (This was before Dr Faust took over as president.)

All this was public knowledge, and I was not the only one to object. Now for Harvard to dismiss Subramanian Swamy at the instigation of people like Witzel and his departmental colleague Diana Eck looks like hypocrisy of the first order. It is not only Indians that are outraged by this decision: academics and free thinkers who have nothing to do with India or Hinduism have expressed their outrage. This is made worse by the fact that other institutions like Yale have also buckled under Islamist pressure. Last summer (2011), Yale expelled Dr Charles Small (of the Yale Initiative for the Inter-disciplinary Study of Anti-Semitism), because he held a conference in which Islamic anti-Semitism and

Islamic terrorism were discussed. The following excerpt from a blog by a non-Indian (Pamela Geller) gives an idea.

"In response to the triple bombing in Mumbai on July 13, 2011 that left 26 people dead, Former Indian Law Minister Dr. Subramanian Swamy published an op-ed in a mainstream Indian daily called 'How To Wipe Out Islamic Terror'. Dr. Swamy is not much loved by the current Indian government as it was through his anti-corruption campaigning efforts that the previous Telecoms Minister ended up in jail on corruption charges, and he is actively pursuing other high ranking members of the government on similar charges.

"The article was unquestionably provocative, but what it provoked was debate -- a good thing for any democracy, especially on a difficult topic. However, it seems, it was too much free speech for Harvard University. For years Dr. Swamy, a Harvard Ph.D. and former Commerce and Industry Minister of India, has taught summer courses in economics at Harvard. This year, in an unprecedented move, his courses were taken away based on the article."

The author of the article went on to point out that the Harvard Crimson justified the move by saying, in part, "there is the further concern that his publications may incite religious violence." Religious violence where? On the Harvard campus? There were no incidents of 'religious violence' in India following the publication of Dr. Swamy's article. The Harvard Crimson seems to have a low opinion of the intelligence and maturity of its readers, of Harvard students and faculty in particular.

Unwieldy administration, disgruntled faculty

It is understandable that Harvard President Drew Faust should have caught much of the flak in this avoidable backlash. Actually, she seems to have been a victim of circumstances beyond her control: a combination of circumstances allowed a disgruntled faculty in its shrinking Sanskrit and India Studies program to take advantage of an unwieldy administrative mechanism. I will look at the former in some detail later, but a brief observation on the latter as seen by a U.S. academic (and administrator) with several decades of experience may be in order. (A phone call to the President's office at Harvard elicited the response that she, the President had nothing to do with the cancellation.) Here is how the cancellation of Swamy's courses seems to have come about.

The procedure at Harvard requires that the whole faculty of the college in question vote on the courses and instructors for each term, in this case the college of arts and sciences on the summer courses to be offered in 2012. Swamy's economics courses were voted down at the instigation of Diana Eck, a religious studies professor who heads something called the 'pluralism project'. As we shall see later Eck invoked reasons which made faculty competence irrelevant and steamrolled over the wishes of the economics department chair.

This strikes one as an unwieldy and inefficient procedure. Things were quite different in colleges where I taught. Once the department in question gets its budget approved by the college, the department chair, assisted by a departmental committee decides on the courses and assigns instructors. After all they have the competence. One cannot have the absurd situation—as happened at Harvard—of a theologian exercising veto power over science and mathematics courses! (One of the courses cancelled was 'Quantitative Methods in Economics'.) The last time anything like it happened was in Italy 500 years ago when Galileo was forbidden by the Church to teach astronomy.

Actually there is more to this bizarre episode than meets the eye. Diana Eck was sending a political message to President Drew Faust no less! Eck gave the game away when she haughtily told the faculty why Swamy's courses should be cancelled. Here is a revealing report (The Harvard Crimson):

"In her remarks, Eck emphasized the 'destructive' nature of the positions Swamy advocated in India, and characterized the proposals as going well beyond free speech to the advocacy of abrogating human rights, curtailing civil rights, and intruding on freedom of religion. She wondered why the courses had not been 'quietly dropped', rather than submitted for approval in 2012. Swamy's positions crossed the line to 'incitement' and to 'demonizing' Indian minorities, and were therefore sharply at odds with Harvard's pluralism," Eck said. But here was the real message: "Given President Faust's planned trip to Mumbai and New Delhi in January, it would be important for people in that country to know where the faculty stood on the views Swamy advocated."

(Dr Swamy's response: "... the vote at Harvard was nothing serious. ...non-economists at Harvard don't like my views on how to protect India." Citing Eck and a colleague who also wanted his courses dropped, Swamy tweeted: "I have been held accountable at Harvard for what I write in India. This means India studies' [Michael] Witzel and Eck are accountable in India. Healthy?")

To get back to Eck's reasoning, she wants President Faust to tell ALL Indians—1.2 billion of them— most of whom have never heard of Harvard let alone Professor Eck, that they should toe the line drawn for them by this religious scholar—a Christian who claims to speak for all of Harvard in the name of 'pluralism'. Hinduism is and has always been a pluralistic "religion," which Christianity and Islam with their exclusive beliefs are not, but this Christian theologian would stand this on its head as only a theologian can.

L'affaire Swamy: policing academic freedom

So this committed Christian fanatic masquerading as a 'pluralist' wants to turn the Harvard President's goodwill visit to India into a crusade against Hinduism! It is not hard to imagine what President Faust can expect if she were to carry Diana Eck's message to India! As it is, she can expect a torrid time defending the sacking of Dr Swamy against Harvard's own professed policy of safeguarding academic freedom.

This brings us back to Eck's (and her colleagues') contempt for academic freedom when it rubs against their Orwellian brand of pluralism. It may not be out of place here to mention that a large number of Christian theologians led by Diana Eck signed a long letter of apology addressed to Muslim divines for past Christian violence against Muslims including the Crusades. No such apology has been forthcoming for violence against Hindus and other pagans during the Goa Inquisition in India (instigated by 'Saint' Xavier).

It is hardly necessary to point out that academic freedom cannot come with strings attached. In the memorable words of Abraham Lincoln, 150 years ago, "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free." This applies to academic freedom no less than to personal freedom. But Diana Eck was able to persuade her faculty colleagues that her higher principle of pluralism cancelled out Swamy's academic freedom along with the freedom of the economics department to choose whom it may teach its courses.

When it comes to curtailing academic freedom, the problem is where to draw the line? Can a theologian like Diana Eck be allowed to act as thought police cum moral police to rule on the freedom of others? What if one were to apply a similar standard to Eck and her ilk? It is no secret (see Wikipedia) that she (and her likeminded colleague Wendy Doniger of the University of Chicago Divinity School) follows a lifestyle that many in India and even in the U.S. consider perverse. Can this be brought up in approving Eck's fitness to teach her courses? It can be argued, and has been argued that such people should be kept away from impressionable young minds who might be corrupted by their teaching and example. There would be howls of protests if Eck were treated in the same manner as Swamy for her personal conduct in her private life and for her negative public image in the eyes of majority in the U.S.

Actually what Subramanian Swamy wrote and said had been said before by others before him including Jawaharlal Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar. (In addition, Swamy himself has close relatives who are non-Hindus including a Parsi-Zoroastrian wife and a Muslim son-in-law. He doesn't need any lessons in pluralism.) All that is beside the point, what is at stake is academic freedom being derailed by moral policing. Even at Harvard, other faculty members have engaged in hateful activity (which Swamy has not) that has been defended in the name of academic freedom. Diana Eck's colleague Michael Witzel is a prime example.

It is unnecessary to go into the details of the now discredited campaign by Michael Witzel and his associates trying to stop the removal of references to the Aryans and their invasion from California school text-books. What is remarkable is that a senior tenured professor at Harvard of German origin should have concern himself with how Hinduism is taught to children in California. Witzel is a linguist, but he presumed to tell California schools how Hinduism should be taught to children. It turned out that Hinduism was a convenient cover; his real concern was saving his pet Aryan myth from being erased from books. (This is not to deny his dislike of Hindus, especially those who question him, more of which below.) In the same way, Eck and her colleagues too are concerned about academic survival— of themselves as well as their discipline.

Preserving a defunct belief system

The reaction of the likes of Eck and Witzel can be understood only when we recognize that though Nazism and European colonialism, the twin pillars that supported Indology up to World War II are now defunct, some of their beliefs are part and parcel of what these academics represent. In particular they hold on to the notion of Indians, especially Hindus, as an inferior subject race who should submit to their stereotyping and behave accordingly. The fact that they don't makes them react viscerally when challenged as seen in what Eck did to Swamy and Witzel's reaction to Hindus rejecting his Aryan theories. Having seen Eck's reaction, it is worth taking a brief look at Witzel.

In addition to his support for the Aryan theories and the California campaign, Witzel is known for his association with the notorious Indo-Eurasian Research (IER), which has been accused of a hate campaign against the Hindus. An article that appeared on December 25, 2005 in the New Delhi daily The Pioneer (for which Rudyard Kipling used to write) began: "Boorish comments denigrating India, Hindus and Hinduism by a self-proclaimed 'Indologist' who is on the faculty of Harvard University has unleashed a fierce debate over the increasing political activism of 'scholars' who teach at this prestigious American university.

"Prof Michael Witzel, Wales professor of Sanskrit at Harvard, is in the centre of the storm because he tried to prevent the removal of references to India, Hinduism and Sikhism in the curriculum followed by schools in California which parents of Indian origin found to be inadequate, inaccurate or just outright insensitive." The author of The Pioneer article (Kanchan Gupta) went on to observe: "Witzel declared Hindu-Americans to be 'lost' or 'abandoned', parroting anti-Semite slurs against Jewish people. Coincidence or symptom? Witzel's fantasies are ominously reminiscent of WWII German genocide. He says that 'Since they won't be returning to India, [Hindu immigrants to the USA] have begun building crematoria as well. ..."

This extraordinary behavior on the part of Witzel, Eck and their colleagues can be understood only when we recognize their venial fear that the academic discipline which they represent may be on the verge of extinction. This is what we may look at next.

SWAMY AND HIS HARVARD ENEMIES II: SAVING FROM EXTINCTION

Indology is an anachronism with colonial and racist roots that has outlived its purpose. India Studies should outgrow Indology if it hopes to be relevant and not join Indology in the dustbin of history.

Navaratna Rajaram

Part II

A dying discipline

To understand the visceral reaction of Diana Eck and her colleagues within and outside Harvard, it helps to recognize that the discipline they are part of is on its way into the dustbin of history. This is thanks to science and progress. The fact that Eck, a religious scholar who knows little or no Sanskrit should be the chair of the Sanskrit Department (or was until recently when the department became part of South Asia Studies) is testimony to the state of Sanskrit at Harvard. There are village schools and undergraduate colleges in India with better Sanskrit scholars—and students—than those on the faculty of Sanskrit Department at Harvard today.

Diana Eck wears several hats: in addition to religious studies she is listed as Professor of Law and Psychiatry in Society and also heads her pet pluralism project. In other words, she is many things except a "Sanskrit scholar." The fact that someone like her should be the Sanskrit chair speaks eloquently on the state of her discipline and the department she headed. This cannot go on forever and they know it. So these people have to find some gimmick just for academic survival. For Eck it is her 'pluralism' project; for her colleague Michael Witzel, it is the Aryan myth and fighting 'Hindutva forces'.

These academics are surviving on the decaying remains of the subject called Indology that came into existence during the British colonial era. It was created by 'scholars' sponsored by the British East India Company and Christian missionaries. Its goal was to help the British administer its expanding possessions by making British rule acceptable to Indians. At the core of this was the Aryan myth, a racial-cum-cultural myth that sought to attribute all Indian achievements to a mythical race of invaders known as Aryans.

This is the famous or infamous Aryan Invasion Theory (or AIT). It had two incarnations—British colonial-missionary and the German nationalist that led to Nazism. The German version and the horrors of Nazism are well known but for some reason the way the British put the myth to political use has remained largely unnoticed. As a recent BBC report admitted (October 6, 2005):

"It [Aryan invasion theory] gave a historical precedent to justify the role and status of the British Raj, who could argue that they were transforming India for the better in the same way that the Aryans had done thousands of years earlier."

Although both versions have been fully discredited, its proponents have found a refuge in U.S. academia behind some fig leaf like Eck's 'pluralism'. This too is now under threat. This is what is behind her unusually blunt message to President Faust quoted earlier: "Given President Faust's planned trip to Mumbai and New Delhi in January, it would be important for people in that country to know where the faculty stood on the views Swamy advocated." Eck's real concern is not survival of pluralism in India which owes nothing to Eck or her message to President Faust but Hinduism's innate tolerance; her concern is the survival of her own pluralism project which may also come under the axe.

It is a similar story with Indology as a whole. Ever since he moved to Harvard from Germany, Witzel has seen the fortunes of his department and his field, gradually sink into irrelevance. Problems at Harvard are part of a wider problem in Western academia in his field. Indology departments and programs are shutting down across Europe. One of the oldest and most prestigious, at Cambridge University in England, has recently shut down. This was followed by the closure of the equally prestigious Berlin Institute of Indology founded way back in 1821.

Positions like the one Witzel holds (Wales Professor of Sanskrit, previously known as the Prince of Wales Professor) were created during the colonial era to serve as interpreters of India and Indian tradition to the ruling powers. They have lost their relevance and are disappearing from academia. No one today goes to these 'experts' to learn anything about India and Indians when they can get it from a next door neighbor, an office colleague or a relative by marriage. So these people need to show something to justify their existence. This was the real story behind Witzel's California school campaign— not teaching Hinduism to California children.

Institutionalized anti-Hinduism

Indology as practiced by colonial scholars and their successors like Eck and Witzel should really be called Hindu Studies. Their targets are the Hindus, their religion, traditions and history. While they treat Islam and Muslims with

utmost deference, partly out of fear of violent reaction, they don't hesitate to heap criticism and abuse on Hindus and their beliefs. It is safe because Hindus usually don't get violent.

A central though usually unstated premise of these Indologists is that the Hindus are an inferior race and they should accept this characterisation without question, and also anything said about them by these scholars who constitute a superior race in every way. They have even constructed a 'history' of Hindus as a people who owe everything to a race of invaders called Aryans (or Indo-Europeans). Some religious scholars, notably Wendy Doniger of Chicago can see nothing but sex in Hindu texts. (It seems she can see nothing but sex in anything. She denounced the famous Bhagavadgita, probably because it gives no scope for her sexual fantasies. What is it about 'religious scholars' that makes them sex obsessed?)

If any Hindu scholars that object to this stereotyping pointing to recent discoveries in natural history, genetics and archaeology that have discredited all these claims of these Indologists, are immediately denounced by them as chauvinists and fanatics incapable of logic or reason. Western scholars like Koenraad Elst and David Frawley are also not spared for criticizing their theories as unsound.

This bizarre conduct of Indologists (calling themselves also Indo-Europeanists) intrigued the Swedish scholar Stefan Arvidsson who went on to ask: "Today it is disputed whether or not the downfall of the Third Reich brought about a sobering among scholars working with 'Aryan' religions." One may rephrase the question: "Did the end of the Nazi regime put an end to race based theories in academia?" We may answer it by saying it is surviving in mutated forms on the fringes of Western academia in the hands of people like Eck and Witzel though they vehemently reject they are racists. (Who admits it?)

In this academic and political conundrum it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the Aryan myth is a modern European creation that has little to do with ancient India. The word Arya appears for the first time in the Rig Veda, India's oldest text. Its meaning is obscure but seems to refer to members of a settled agricultural community. Also, it was nowhere as important in India as it came to be in Europe. In the whole the Rig Veda, in all of its ten books, the word Arya appears only about forty times. In contrast, Hitler's Mein Kampf uses the term Arya and Aryan many times more. Hitler did not invent it. The idea of Aryans as a superior race was already in the air— in Europe, not India.

Before World War II reduced Hitler's Thousand Year Reich to ashes, anti-Semitism was very much part of the discourse about Aryans and Indo-Europeans. But following the war this was no longer academically respectable. The American Civil Rights Movement that followed placed Afro-Americans (or Negroes as they were then called) also beyond the pale of these theories. Race is now a dirty word so some subterfuges have to be found to advance the same ideas, especially of one's own superiority over a lesser race like the heathen Hindus, if no longer the Hebrews. This is the dirty little secret of Indology that India Studies seems to have inherited.

The final word on their discipline was pronounced by Stefan Arvidsson quoted earlier. He observed: "There is something in the nature of research about Indo-Europeans [or Aryans] that makes it especially prone to ideological abuse— perhaps something related to the fact that for the past two centuries, the majority of scholars who have done research on the Indo-Europeans have considered themselves descendants of this mythical race." Implicit yet unstated— a superior race.

This is what is driving the likes of Eck and Witzel. To make matters worse, after a long period of colonization, Indians today, Hindus in particular, are on the ascendant, excelling in many fields and prospering economically while Indologists and their discipline are heading into oblivion. Worse, Indians are no longer looking up to these scholars much less supporting them. They are donating generously but to programs in science, technology and other professions where Indians and persons of Indian origin are visibly successful. Even at Harvard, there are few students of Indian origin in their Sanskrit department, whatever it may now call itself.

Given the situation, the growing importance of India and Indians in the U.S. and the world and their own precipitous decline, it is natural that Witzel, Eck and their colleagues should have made common cause with other anti-Hindu groups and individuals. So it should not be surprising that these and pro-Pakistani groups and Jihad apologists, as 'birds of a feather' should be drawn to each other by the common platform of anti-Hinduism and also as a matter of expediency.

It is worth noting here that while the Jews and the Hindus have been willing to stand up to intimidation by Islamists (or Islamofascists to use President George Bush's memorable if infelicitous phrase) the Christian leadership has all but surrendered to it. This is evident from the letter of apology for Christian violence against Muslims through history signed by Diana Eck and a host of her Christian theologian colleagues. But others have gone further and sought to use anti-Hinduism as a potential source of funding from Islamic sources.

One of the first acts of Michael Witzel following his California campaign was to advertise his services in Pakistan's leading newspaper Dawn as a 'South Asia Expert' on education. His pitch was he could serve as a consultant to publishers and others to maintain academic integrity on works on South Asia. He didn't mention he was a Professor of Sanskrit, which might have turned off potential Pakistani clients, but a South Asia Expert. (He knew that Pakistanis have no great love for Sanskrit.) At first the Indian Marxist historian Romila Thapar was also part of his enterprise, but prudently withdrew.

A combination of anti-Hinduism and financial compulsions has brought together this motley group of academics, writers and propagandists on platforms spewing anti-India (and anti-Hindu) propaganda. Some like the novelist Arundhati Roy are publicity seekers while others like the India baiter Angana Chatterji are academic lightweights trying to make hay while the sun shines by pandering to anti-India outfits like Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence Agency (ISI).

It has now come to light that Chatterji, who taught anthropology at something called the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) was being funded by the ISI agent Gulam Nabi Fai. Fai has pleaded guilty to being an unauthorized lobbyist for the ISI and Pakistan. He had funded several anti-India propagandists including Chatterji. The FBI brought this to the attention of the CIIS authorities who dismissed her. The curious thing is that the Harvard history professor has participated in programs organized by Chatterji even at Harvard.

Sugata Bose is the odd man out. Unlike Angana who is at best a fringe figure in academia, Bose is a respected scholar of modern history; he has no need to have any truck with a character like Chatterji. He takes pride in the fact that he is the grand-nephew of the Indian freedom fighter Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, but he is anything but pro-India. One possibility is that he was acting under the influence of his Pakistani wife Ayesha Jalal, also a distinguished scholar. As a prominent member of the South Asia group at Harvard he is seen as part of the anti-Hindu clique. His was one of the influential voices to lend support to Diana Eck's demand for the expulsion of Subramanian Swamy.

India Studies: real pluralism, not clash of civilizations

As India and persons of Indian origin gain in importance in the world, the study of India should necessarily keep pace with it. But this cannot be based on anachronistic notions based on defunct ideologies of the colonial era or scientifically discredited race theories in whatever disguise. The distinguishing feature of the Indian civilization throughout history has been and remains pluralism in the real sense. This should be at the center of any study of India today. This brings us close to one of the popular academic theories of our time.

One of the more influential political theories of our time is Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis. It holds that future conflicts will be along civilizational fault lines of which he identifies several, most notably what he calls Islam and its 'bloody frontiers'. It would be an interesting study to see if this thesis can be extended to academia also—like what we are currently witnessing at places like Yale and Harvard. There is no denying that the influence of Islam, largely because of its accumulated wealth (from oil) is quite pervasive in academia. The tension created by its presence in academia and academic freedom may be seen as a manifestation of the clash of civilizations extending its reach into academia.

At the same time, academia (and society in general) has to live today in a secular world whose distinguishing feature is pluralism—pluralism in the real sense and not the Orwellian travesty held up by the likes of Diana Eck. Pluralism has to serve as an effective counter to civilizational clash, but that will require both imagination and openness to new ways of looking at history and civilization.

Here is where India Studies can make a contribution if constructively studied. While pluralism is relatively recent in the West, beginning with French Revolution and the adoption of the U.S. Constitution, it is of untold antiquity in India. Unlike the exclusivist Christianity and Islam with their one God (and the only true One) Hinduism left the choice of which god to worship—or none at all—to the individual. The separation of priestly power from secular power is also an ancient tradition. (The Buddha who was born a prince gave up his right to rule before being recognized as a religious leader. And there are other such examples beginning with Vishwamitra.)

Hindu India welcomed and allowed Judaism to survive unmolested for thousands of years. Even when Islam came with its exclusivist binary vision of believer and kaffir, the Indian genius somehow found a way to preserve its pluralism. If India today is a thriving pluralistic society it is because pluralism is an integral part of the Hindu tradition and experience, and not because of the advocacy of phony pluralists like Diana Eck or their gimmicks. (It is curious that Eck and other theologians in their letter of apology to Muslims should not have mentioned pluralism. Her pluralism message is only for the consumption of inherently pluralist Hindus, not for those who really need it. Those who want to destroy pluralism get apologies!)

Here is an important lesson. The problem faced by the West (U.S. and Europe) today is that Islam is seen to be threatening long standing traditions founded on pluralism and individual freedom. The same problems were faced by India a thousand years ago. The West like India values pluralism. Islam abhors it. At the same time, Islam with its billion people and enormous economic power cannot be wished away. So some balance must be achieved. This is the challenge of our time.

This suggests that academic study of India, or India Studies have a lot to learn from Hindu India and should make pluralism of the Hindu civilization and its capacity to survive for centuries in the face of repeated attacks one of its central concerns. In contrast, China under Mao lost its pluralistic character in a single generation, and went on to erase it from Tibet also. This is of more than academic importance. In today's world businessmen, diplomats and others have to deal with India and Indians in the real world. These cannot be left to the mercy of 'India experts' trapped in the past, of whom Shakespeare wrote: "What private griefs these men have, alas I know not." We need new thinking.

Conclusion: Free India Studies from India Experts

The 200 year-old discipline called Indology as it now exists represents the soft underbelly of academia. Its creation was an accident of history, perpetuated by a combination of scientific ignorance and the self-interest of an academic priesthood. As far back as 1939, Sir Julian Huxley, one of the great natural scientists of the twentieth century wrote:

“In England and America the phrase ‘Aryan race’ has quite ceased to be used by writers with scientific knowledge, though it appears occasionally in political and propagandist literature.... In Germany, the idea of the ‘Aryan race’ received no more scientific support than in England. Nevertheless, it found able and very persistent literary advocates who made it appear very flattering to local vanity. It therefore steadily spread, fostered by special conditions.” (Emphasis added.) Needless to say, these ‘special conditions’ were the rise of Nazism in Germany and British imperial interests in India.

But this product of ‘special conditions’ continues to survive on the fringes of academia— thanks to a priesthood striving to maintain a precarious existence. It has no value beyond being a nuisance to better understanding between India and the West. What we need today are not ‘experts’ trapped in the past but a new generation of thinkers aware of present needs and sensitive to the beliefs and practices of others in a pluralistic world. This will not come from the likes of Diana Eck and her colleagues. As Max Planck once observed:

“An important scientific innovation rarely makes its way by gradually winning over and converting its opponents: it rarely happens that Saul becomes Paul. What does happen is that its opponents gradually die out and that the growing generation is familiarized with the idea from the beginning.”

Planck was one of the founders of modern physics and his observation was about the reaction to the quantum revolution that he (and Einstein) had launched. But his observation applies equally to other fields like what we have discussed in this essay. It means that a new generation has to make a fresh start and let history take care of these anachronisms.

Dr Navaratna Rajaram is a scientist and historian who has written extensively on the subjects of this article.

<http://www.sookta-sumana.blogspot.com/2011/12/academic-freedom-duplicity-at-harvard.html>