

# India: Books withdrawn from circulation after threat from Hindu right

Deepal Jayasekera  
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The withdrawal of books on Hinduism from circulation in India in the face of opposition and legal threats by Hindu supremacists is the latest example of their pernicious influence within the Indian political establishment and a warning that further attacks on basic democratic rights are to come.

On February 11, Penguin Books India reached an out-of-court settlement with Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti (SBAS), a small Hindu extremist group, to recall and destroy all unsold copies of *The Hindus: An Alternative History* by academic Wendy Doniger. The SBAS filed a civil case against the book in 2011, arguing that it was offensive toward Hindu religion.

Strengthened by Penguin's retreat, SBAS, on March 1, demanded the withdrawal of another book by Doniger, *On Hinduism*, published by Aleph Book Company, alleging that its contents were, like her previous work, "malicious and offending." Aleph issued a statement several days later, denying that it had issued a recall and saying only that it looked forward to "the right resolution of the situation."

Hindu supremacist organisations and parties have been waging a censorship campaign for some time against books, films or anything else that "offend" Hinduism, or more accurately, that undermines their Hindutva communal doctrine and the gross historical distortions on which it is based.

The latest campaign against Doniger's books is bound up with the turn by powerful sections of political and business elite to Narendra Modi, the prime ministerial candidate of Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP). Modi, an arch communalist, was involved in instigating the 2002 anti-Muslim pogroms in western Indian state of Gujarat, in which hundreds of Muslims were killed. He was Gujarat chief minister at the time.

Hindu chauvinists denounce Doniger's for insulting the Hindu gods, citing the book's reference to the god Surya (Sun) as a seducer or rapist. They are also object to the suggestion that the wife of the god Rama, Sita, might have had a lustful relationship with her brother-in-law, Lakshman. The proponents of Hindu fundamentalism regard the mythical Sita as portrayed in the *Ramayana* as the model of faithfulness of a married woman to her husband that they wish to enforce in modern Indian society.

SBAS and its milieu also oppose Doniger's reference to Mahatma Gandhi agreeing to people eating beef. The Hindu right bitterly opposed Gandhi during the struggle against British colonialism, but it objects to any claims that cut across their injunctions not to eat beef. Their promotion of the cause of "cow preservation" is one element of their poisonous communal attacks on Muslims, who do eat beef.

A number of Indian media commentators, writers and intellectuals have expressed outrage at the way in which the SBAS and other Hindu extremists are imposing a communal code of censorship and that leading publishing houses like Penguin have caved in.

In a letter to Penguin, Indian writer Arundhati Roy declared: "What are we to make of this? Must we now write only pro-Hindutva books? Or risk being pulled off the bookshelves in 'Bharat' [India] (as your 'settlement' puts it) and pulped? Will there be some editorial guidelines perhaps, for writers who publish with Penguin? Is there a policy statement?"

Lawrence Liang, an attorney from the Bangalore-based Alternative Law Forum, filed a legal notice on Penguin over its withdrawal of *The Hindus*. Commenting on reports that Aleph had recalled Doniger's book, he said: "It's absolutely shameful and

ridiculous. If you want a publisher to withdraw a book, all you have to do is file a police complaint. Reading has no future in this country.”

An online petition launched by a group of leading Indian and international academics, including Partha Chatterjee and Romila Thapar, urged Penguin to “contest the suit against *The Hindus* through the higher courts, to ensure that a strong precedent upholding freedom of expression be established.”

The Hindu extremists have gained the upper hand under conditions where the ruling Congress party, despite its claims to be “secular,” has connived with the Hindu right. Congress, which has held power in New Delhi for nearly a decade now, has failed to take any action against Modi over his state government’s role in 2002 anti-Muslim pogroms.

Rural Development Minister Jairam Ramesh from the Congress party branded Penguin’s withdrawal of Doniger’s book as “atrocious” and described SBAS as a “Taliban-type outfit. .. distorting and destroying our [India’s] liberal traditions.” However, Congress has adapted to the Hindu right ever since it agreed to the 1947 partition of India by Britain that unleashed a communal bloodbath.

Indian Stalinists have played the most treacherous role in paving the way for the Hindu right. The main Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—have worked tirelessly to politically subordinate the working class to the parties of the Indian bourgeoisie, from Congress to various regionalist and caste-based parties. By blocking any independent struggle by the working class to defend living standards, the Stalinists have opened the door for the Hindu right to posture as advocates for working people.

The law used by SBAS to mount its case against Penguin shows just how entrenched communal politics has become. Article 295(A) of Indian Penal Code, cited by SBAS, states that “deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs shall be punished with imprisonment or fine, or both.”

In explaining its decision to withdraw Doniger’s book, Penguin said the growing use of Article 295(A) “will make it increasingly difficult for any Indian publisher to uphold international standards of free

expression without deliberately placing itself outside the law.”

In response to Penguin’s decision, Doniger issued a statement criticising India’s sweeping defamation law, “that makes it a criminal rather than civil offence to publish a book that offends any Hindu, a law that jeopardises the physical safety of any publisher, no matter how ludicrous the accusation brought against a book.”

Far from preventing communalism, Article 295(A) is being used to suppress the basic democratic right to free expression. India’s wide ranging defamation laws are also being used as a legal weapon against those who expose corrupt practices in the upper reaches of the political and corporate establishment.

In January, London-based Bloomsbury Publishing decided to withdraw its book *The Descent of Air India* by Jitendra Bhargava from the market and destroy its copies in response to a defamation case filed in an Indian court by Praful Patel, former aviation minister and currently heavy industries and public enterprises minister, who was named in the book.



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