

**Cry Hindutva:
How Rhetoric Trumps Intellect in South Asian Studies**

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This piece addresses the misuse of 'Hindutva' in contemporary South Asian studies. In response to criticisms of the so-called text-historical method in Indology, the old guard of academia raises the spectre of Hindutva to scare off critics. With such anti-intellectual tactics, Indologists have betrayed liberal ideals. Originally submitted to South Asia: The Journal of South Asian Studies in response to Eli Franco's review of The Nay Science,¹ this piece makes a larger case for a discipline-critical philology. If we are to reclaim the university as a place for open dialogue and debate, we must continue the critique of professorial privilege. Facile self-righteousness must not become a cover for intellectual vacuity.

We thank Eli Franco for his review of *The Nay Science*.² Our response does not address technical errors and misrepresentations.³ Rather, it raises an urgent issue that tests the very principles of open discourse and intellectual freedom in academia: the use of 'nationalism' and 'Hindutva' to poison discourse and exclude critical voices from debate.

We understand the danger nationalism poses. We recognise that religious fundamentalism harbours tremendous potential for violence. Exclusivist conceptions of deity, intolerance for alternative lifestyles, and the imposition of universal norms, whether divinely inspired or secularly legitimated, threaten pluralistic societies everywhere. But Hindutva is too serious an issue to reduce it to name calling. When used indiscriminately, it loses its diagnostic value. It becomes a slur instead of a serious topic deserving of academic attention.

The Nay Science presented a careful critique of an episteme that contributed to the most grotesque nationalisms of the twentieth century. It undertook an inquiry into German Indology, a discipline associated with the application of the 'text-historical method'.⁴ In place of scientific criteria, we found Protestant, fundamentalist, anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic, anti-Judaic, anti-Brahmanic, nationalistic, and racist prejudices

¹ A shorter version of this piece was published as Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, Authors' response to Book Review of *The Nay Science. A History of German Indology*, by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, 512 pp., £27.99, paperback, ISBN 9780199931361, reviewed by Eli Franco, published in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 3 (2016), pp. 695–8, in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 42, no. 4 (2019), pp. 813–21.

² Eli Franco, review of *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology*, by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 3 (2016), pp. 695–98.

³ These issues have been addressed here: Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, 'Theses on Indology' [<https://www.academia.edu/30584186>, accessed 12 Feb. 2019].

⁴ For a continuation of the argument see Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, 'Paradigm Lost: The Application of the Historical-Critical Method to the *Bhagavadgītā*', in *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, Vol. 20, no. 2 (2016), pp. 199–301.

masquerading as scholarship under the banner of ‘*Wissenschaft*’ (science).⁵ In the humanities, discussions of profound issues, which affect the very possibility of open, democratic societies, should not encounter resistance. Yet Franco accuses us: ‘I am not sure whether the authors realise that what they recommend amounts to an open invitation for reading and using a text like the Gītā as a justification of the abominable concepts and practices of caste distinction, Hindu nationalism, Brahmin supremacy, Right-wing militarism and fascism’.⁶

Crying Hindutva to discipline non-conforming scholars is hardly new. What is more disturbing is that questioning Indologists’ criteria, arguments, and application of methods (especially their identification of textual layers) now suffices to be accused of directly or indirectly espousing Hindutva causes. No evidence for such a serious accusation is required. Apparently, the most beloved scripture of the world’s third largest religion so directly contributes to extremism that as scholars we must suborn, even against our better judgment, flawed and failed methodology.⁷ In reality, no such connection exists.⁸ One need not approve of Hindutva to see problems with Indology. Neither should a critique of Indology automatically strengthen Hindutva. Indologists’ deconstructions of the Gītā manifestly did not prevent Hindu nationalism. In fact,

⁵ For Indology’s role in constructing race see Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, ‘Indology the Origins of Racism in the Humanities’ [<https://www.academia.edu/37374680>, accessed 12 Feb. 2019]. See also Joydeep Bagchee, review of *Archives of Origins: Sanskrit, Philology, Anthropology in 19th Century Germany*, by Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn, in *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, Vol. 23, no. 1 (2019), pp. 93–6 [<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11407-019-09252-5>, accessed 1 May 2019].

⁶ Franco, review of *The Nay Science*, p. 698.

⁷ Malinar argues for a greater variety of methods in epic studies, including the ‘text-historical method’. See Angelika Malinar, review of Robert P. Goldman and Muneo Tokunaga (eds), *Epic Undertakings: Papers of the 12th World Sanskrit Conference*, Vol. 2, in *Orientalische Literaturzeitung*, Vol. 109, no. 6 (2017), pp. 492, 494. But she fails to demonstrate one instance where the text-historical method has actually worked. The central problem with Indology is not its critics’ alleged political affiliations, Hindutva or otherwise. It is that *its episteme has failed*. Franco likewise fails to provide examples where the text-historical method has worked. He merely pleads: ‘In hindsight, it is easy to point to the weaknesses and prejudices of these pioneering, often over-confident studies. However, it may be presumed that they were not all as wrong as the authors assume’. Franco, review of *The Nay Science*, p. 697. But what about foresight? What does he propose we do next? Can he offer a method?

⁸ Indeed, when challenged, Franco clarified that he had not accused us of these views but our work *could* be understood to support them. But the connection is never made. How exactly does highlighting the anti-Judaic inspiration for much Indological scholarship encourage Hindutva? Surely Franco’s argument is not that we neglect Indologists’ Nazism and anti-Semitism for Hindutva? See Adluri and Bagchee, ‘Theses on Indology’, 55, n. 73, and Eli Franco, ‘On ‘Theses on Indology’ by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee’, 7 [<https://www.academia.edu/31550298>, accessed 12 Feb. 2019]. See also Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, ‘Adaptive Reuse: Eli Franco, Plagiarism, and the Chair of Indology at Leipzig University’ [<https://www.academia.edu/38844141>, accessed 1 May 2019].

Indologists arguably facilitated Hindutva by emphasising the historical dimension and presenting India's colonisation as a necessary outcome of Hindu degeneracy.

We might have disregarded Franco's *ad hominem* remarks as an unfortunate outburst were they not illustrative of a fundamental problem in Indology. George Thompson called us 'Hindu fundamentalists' and Joydeep a 'hindutva racist'.⁹ Harry Falk asserted, 'they want to be taken as authorities, because they are Indians'.¹⁰ Needless to say, no criteria exist for determining when someone's work can be construed as supporting Hindutva. The important thing is the denunciation. We are fast entering a new era of McCarthyism.¹¹ In any other situation, the spectacle of white men calling Indians

⁹ Georg Thompson, email to RISA-L list, 8 May 2017 ('I don't think that the Bagchee and Adluri book, *The Nay Science*, is worth reading. They are Hindu fundamentalists who do not believe in philology. For example they deny that there are any textual layers in the epics or in the Gita'.) and George Thompson, email to INDOLOGY list, 10 Sep. 2018 ('re JOYDEEP As long as you all allow this Hindutva racist to post to this list, mr joydeep, who has regularly attacked 'German Indology' over the years, then I will fight with you'.).

¹⁰ See Falk's reply to Franco: 'As you say at the end: this useless book is not about German Indology, it is about the two authors. They want to be right, they want to be taken as authorities, because they are Indians, and for that reason at least one of them fought to get a university degree. This hubris presupposes that any view from the outside must be inferior to a view from the inside'. Harry Falk, email to INDOLOGY list, 16 Jan. 2017.

¹¹ Note the inquisitorial logic, leading questions, and invocation of mob support, all while affecting the language of social justice, in Patrick McCartney, email to RISA-L list, 20 Dec. 2018: 'Dear Jeffrey, the amount of private emails I have received in support speaking to power in the way I did by choosing to bring out this issue of "soft hindutva" within the academy would otherwise suggest that this conversation is of interest to several, regardless of your presumption and attempt to dilute it. So too, the smaller number of emails I have received by people who seemingly support the HAF in official and unofficial capacities, and apparently wonder why I am "attacking" you shows that there is also a subset of people like yourself who share similar values... Curiously, however, the governmentality of moderators and perceived appeasement of Hindutva elements seems to be a particularly vibrant red thread as well. It is unclear to me how someone like yourself might try and argue they promote a tolerant exchange of ideas when they choose to support the HAF; which is obviously imbricated in the global Hindutva Parivar network; and which promotes a casteist ideology while seeking to attenuate the plight of minorities, and also seeks to gain symbolic leverage for high-caste NRIs as being oppressed through linking in with the PC-culture identity politic movement, while supporting the systemic oppression of lower caste groups in India. Perhaps, then, you could answer the following questions:

- 1) Why do you associate with the HAF when their Hindutva links are more than obvious?
- 2) Why do you promote a Vedantic/Brahminical view of Hinduism to the detriment of all other South Asian traditions?
- 3) Why do you support the erasure of caste politics in Hinduism and deny Dalits, Muslims and Christians their rightful due?
- 4) Why do you support the HAF in deploying divisive Hindutva politics to divide Indian-Americans by religion in a country which is known for its secular, syncretic ethos.
- 5) What do you mean by "cultural continuity" from the IVC?

It seems to be a curious thing, the way in which people like yourself who are positioned within the academy try and play both sides through appealing to be a moderately tolerant Vedantic

racist would be preposterous,¹² but when it comes to defending their privilege no accusation and no slander is beneath them.¹³

As scholars we have a duty to examine Indologists' claims, especially when they assert 'critical', 'text-critical', and 'philological' expertise. We must also examine their scholarship in historical context, given its role in fostering Aryanism, methodological

practitioner and scholar; yet also actively working to normalise Hindutva ideology a through a distanced, banal, euphemised projection of it. How is it possible to draw an alternate conclusion? If you have an alternative narrative, please share it with us.

All the best, Patrick McCartney'.

To their credit, the list moderators immediately censured McCartney, suggesting that, for some at least, these academic witch-hunts have become disturbing.

¹² Explicitly so in Robert Zydenbos, email to INDOLOGIE list, 29. Feb. 2016: 'In fundamentalist circles one tries, quite "politically correctly", to convince people that modern Western academic research of India is the continuation of a (neo-)colonial, [and] ultimately racist project. Ultimately, it is not really the beloved Americans who are to blame [...] but their wicked European relatives, who were colonisers, conduct "German Indology", etc. The opposite is true: such complaints are expressions of the worst Brahmanhood. Just as Brahmans in ancient antiquity claimed sole right to vedādhyāpana so also these Neo-Brahmans claim sole right to interpret Indian history and culture in all its facets everywhere in the world. [...] Employing similar politically correct posturing, a group of such Indians ensured that a "white" may not teach yoga at Carleton University in Ottawa, because, allegedly, this is to injure ethnic and religious sentiments. Who the real racists are is quite clear'.

¹³ Robert Mayer, of the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Oxford University, provides the best proof of this. When Eli Franco, professor of Indology at Leipzig University, was found to have plagiarised, Mayer reactivated the Hindutva charge—what else?—to take the edge off the criticism. After raising an utterly quixotic defence of Franco's plagiarism: 'If those whom he is said to have plagiarised, Klaus Mylius, Manfred Taube, and Alexander von Rospatt, have no argument with Eli Franco, then neither should anyone else. There can be no further discussion of the matter, it dies there', he continued: 'Internet hate-mongering and bullying, and the telling of lies on an industrial scale, have been widely commented on in the international press as dangerous features of contemporary Indian life, linked with the resurgence of Hindu fundamentalism and Hindu fascism. I have not followed this particular controversy at all, but it looks to me that maybe this accusation must be seen in that light'. Robert Mayer, 'If those whom', 16 Jun. 2019, comment on Eli Franco, 'A short response to Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee', <https://www.academia.edu/s/4946ab39bd/>. But this was neither 'internet hate-mongering' nor 'bullying'; it was a demonstrated case of academic wrongdoing, reported to the university authorities, who saw fit to take down Franco's plagiarised article, previously featured on the institute's homepage (see <https://web.archive.org/web/20180706011442/http://www.gko.uni-leipzig.de/indologie-zaw/institut.html>, accessed 14 Aug. 2019). Does Mayer mean to accuse the university ombudsman of Leipzig University of Hindutva? Or is the accusation reserved merely for us—for whistle-blowing and on account of our skin colour? And where does it end? Should Indian students or scholars not call out on sexual harassment by faculty for fear of being called Hindutva? Lest there be any doubt, what is at stake here is neither Hindutva nor the objectivity and impartiality of scholarship but naked self-interest: the defence of the entrenched privilege of an elite minority.

anti-Judaism and anti-Brahmanism, and Indologists' collaboration with Nazism.¹⁴ As *The Nay Science* and its successor volume *Philology and Criticism* demonstrated,¹⁵ we err when we rely uncritically on the work of predecessors, merely because they are institutionally accredited scholars. Franco's own work attests to the problems that arise from not reading critical scholarship: he ignores known facts about his predecessors' anti-Semitism and Nazism, substitutes hagiography for history, and plagiarises his sources, to boot.¹⁶

Franco should be especially sensitive to the 'share in the immense suffering brought recently on mankind and on the Jewish people [by] the modern German-Protestant science of the Old Testament'.¹⁷ Instead, he chooses to reassert a system of institutionalised privilege. In his view, merely because we critique Indology, we are fit to be associated with Hindutva: 'Under such circumstances, we as 'German' and other Indologists may gladly accept the epithet 'nay science' for our discipline; we gladly say 'no' to this promotion of ignorance, shallowness, arbitrariness, prejudice and eccentricity by the authors, and say 'yes' to serious, methodically sound and sober scholarship free of allegedly 'traditional' and political constraints by Hindutva ideology and the like'.¹⁸

The dichotomy is false and self-serving. Many Indologists produced astonishingly poor scholarship.¹⁹ We nowhere defended Hindutva. The alternative to bad scholarship is not Hindutva, but a corrective: historical analysis, testing of arguments, and understanding the reasons for Indology's failure. To use Hindutva as a smokescreen is to instrumentalise real pain and suffering.²⁰

The Nay Science refuted scholars as central to Indology as Christian Lassen, Rudolf von Roth, Hermann Oldenberg, Richard von Garbe, and Hermann Jacobi. It uncovered the principles behind two centuries of *Mahābhārata* scholarship and showed that they

¹⁴ For a summary see Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, 'Jews and Hindus in Indology' [<https://www.academia.edu/30937643>, accessed 12 Feb. 2019].

¹⁵ Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, *Philology and Criticism: A Guide to Mahābhārata Textual Criticism* (London: Anthem, 2018) [<https://www.academia.edu/36999444>, accessed May 1, 2019].

¹⁶ See Eli Franco, 'Indologie', in Ulrich von Hehl, et al. (eds), *Geschichte der Universität Leipzig 1409–2009*, vol. 4: *Fakultäten, Institute, Zentrale Einrichtungen* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2009), pp. 393–406. Franco's plagiarism is documented in Adluri and Bagchee, 'Adaptive Reuse'.

¹⁷ Benno Jacob cited in Alan T. Levenson, *The Making of the Modern Jewish Bible: How Scholars in Germany, Israel, and America Transformed an Ancient Text* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 66.

¹⁸ Franco, review of *The Nay Science*, p. 698.

¹⁹ See Adluri and Bagchee, *Philology and Criticism*, pp. 269–74.

²⁰ Compare Walter Slaje, 'Was ist und welchem Zweck dient die Indologie?', in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Vol. 153, no. 2 (2003), pp. 316–17: 'In contrast to its sister Orientalist subjects, Indology has so far been saved—fortunately—from a financial boom created by international terror attacks. But naturally even disciplines such as Islamic studies do not wish to see the relevance of their subjects derived solely from a suddenly arising short-term political need for subject competence'.

originated in a racial fantasy about a heroic race of conquering Aryan warriors. It demonstrated that only institutional consensus, supported by shared prejudices and selfish interests, sustained the illusion of a discipline. Rather than answer these criticisms, Franco has chosen the game of othering and delegitimation: treating nineteenth-century European Indology as sacrosanct and any criticism of it as native insurrection and grounds for excommunication.

We delayed our response to give Franco every benefit of doubt. When he claimed, ‘it is quite probable that computer-based analyses of metrical patterns and other statistical features will [...] reveal structures that will provide a more robust basis for future attempts at stratification’,²¹ we wished to be certain we had not overlooked anything of value in Indologists’ analyses of the *Mahābhārata*. Franco called our focus on the methods of biblical philology (so-called higher criticism) akin to ‘the famous drunkard in reverse’ and reeled off a frequently recited platitude from A. W. Schlegel’s essay, ‘Über den gegenwärtigen Zustand der Indischen Philologie’ about ‘the nature and origin of “Indology”’ as ‘philology’.²² G. W. F. Hegel already mocked this claim.²³ It also does not explain why so much Indological textual criticism (so-called lower criticism) is actually so poor. In the meantime, we have checked whether Indologists’ lower criticism corroborates their higher criticism of the *Mahābhārata* in any way. *Philology and Criticism* not only validated *The Nay Science*’s claim that Indologists did not know textual criticism; it also showed that they continued with anti-Brahmanic prejudices even after the *Mahābhārata* critical edition had disproved the theory of a pre-Brahmanic Kṣatriya Ur-epic. Franco called John Brockington ‘arguably the greatest living scholar on Indian epic literature’.²⁴ We established that Brockington had not grasped the principles of the *Mahābhārata* critical edition.²⁵

Readers must judge for themselves whether Franco’s review embodies ‘methodically sound and sober scholarship’. Brandishing epithets such as ‘critical’, ‘philology’, and ‘careful and critical scholarly reading’ cannot substitute for real scholarship. Crying Hindutva does not exonerate Indologists from examining their own

²¹ Franco, review of *The Nay Science*, p. 697.

²² *Ibid.* For another example of the platitude in action see Roland Steiner, ‘Indologie? Vom Feiern und Sterben’, in *Südasiens: Zeitschrift des Südasiensbüro e.V.*, Vol. 38, no. 3 (2018), pp. 16–19. Steiner quotes the exact same sentence on p. 16.

²³ See G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Bericht über die Indische Bibliothek. Eine Zeitschrift von A. W. von Schlegel’, in *Neuer Berliner Monatsschrift für Philosophie, Geschichte, Literatur und Kunst*, Vol. 1 (1821), pp. 81–126. Hegel calls Schlegel’s remark ‘tasteless’ (*abgeschmackt*), and adds sarcastically: ‘what a wonderful prospect for the philologist! The epic poem Ramayana will fill a good 25–30 quarto volumes, there will be [occasion for] scholia, emendations, and conjectures! The Indian poems additionally have the advantage for the philologists that there is no meaning and reason in them in the genuine sense and that they, thus, will become a stomping ground for scholars’. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁴ Franco, review of *The Nay Science*, p. 696.

²⁵ Adluri and Bagchee, *Philology and Criticism*, pp. 429–80.

discipline's epistemic and institutional shortcomings. It also will not prevent other scholars in the future from writing critical histories of Indology such as *The Nay Science*. Beyond Franco's review, there is a serious question we must address: is it legitimate to use unwarranted accusations of Hindutva to discipline an entire nation and, above all, to dissuade critical scholars from scrutinising the discipline? It is a question that should concern all South Asianists. Crying Hindutva only makes us rabid demagogues in a self-righteous republic.