

## Debate or Debatement? A Rejoinder to Vamsee Juluri

CHINNAIAH JANGAM

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Chinnaiah Jangam ([chinnaiahjangam@cunet.carleton.ca](mailto:chinnaiahjangam@cunet.carleton.ca)) teaches at the Department of History, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.

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Vamsee Juluri's [response](#) (EPW, 2 August 2016) to my [article](#) (EPW, 16 July 2016) starts with an interesting statement: "California textbooks process has brought out a slew of dishonest, poorly informed, and ideologically predetermined articles pretending to lend expertise on the situation, which is first of all a debate on the history curriculum in American schools, rather than Indian history alone." Not only does this first sentence points to the author's regrettably intolerant opinion towards ideas that differ from his own, it also contains the puerile argument that the debate on the history curriculum in American schools can somehow preclude discussions on Indian history, even when the representation of the latter is the moot point in this debate.

### Identity and History

Juluri accuses me of indulging in "sophomoric guessing game based on names and identities." I was born and educated in India and like any other Indian I do not have to guess anyone's caste. I am aware of how names and surnames are proudly flaunted by upper caste-Hindus to legitimise intellectual authority, among other things. In fact, caste-identity is central in this context because perspectives are rooted in cultural and social experience. Caste Hindus have a nostalgic perception of Hinduism because for centuries their inherited privileges have been sanctioned by Hinduism; but a Dalit, with his/her everyday experiences of humiliations and violence will not talk about Hinduism in the same way.

Thus my ideas do not stem from personal presumptions; rather I read the social and historical implications of Hinduism critically not just as a historian but also as a Dalit. For English educated caste Hindus, it is easy and convenient to pretend that they do not believe

in or have a caste, while continuing to reap the benefits, material and intellectual, overtly and covertly, through the power of their given names and caste networks.

Identities of individuals and communities are important because they reflect historical and social experiences, and political and ideological agendas also emanate from them. Very rarely do we come across people who step outside their inherited privileges to stand with the oppressed and the deprived. Since I point out the privileged caste roots of the advocates of Scholars for People, Juluri asks “would Jangam censure Irfan Habib, say, for writing about Hindu history the way he takes umbrage at some of us in Scholars for People?” Perceptive readers would no doubt see the covert communal orientation of the Scholars for People behind Juluri’s picking of Irfan Habib and not another Indian historian.

To answer his rhetorical question, however, I would contend that no, I do not subscribe to the dogmatic idea that only a Hindu should write Hindu history. In fact, I believe anyone with professional expertise and empathy for the communities they engage with, are eligible to write their history.

## **India and Hinduism**

Juluri says “the mandate of Scholars for People from the beginning was neither Hinduism nor caste, but fundamentally to debate the fashionable academic notion that India did not exist before 1947, and to challenge the belief that the late cold war concoction “South Asia” was somehow more accurate and inclusive instead.” Historically, India as a territorial nation, for that matter, the idea of nation itself is a product of capitalism and its avatar, modernity. It is ahistorical and dogmatic to argue that in the pre-modern world there were nations, and India existed as a nation among others. Benedict Anderson, Partha Chatterjee and others have provided fascinating theoretical and historical analyses of this basic historical process.

To further understand how the territorial imagination of Bharat/Hindu nation matured during colonial times, one may refer to Manu Goswami’s *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (2004). The idea of imagining ancient India as Hindu is the product of Orientalism as Brahmin leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak inspired by Max Muller, who traced the roots of the Vedas to the Arctic. This idea in the course of time became a potent political weapon in the hands of Hindu fundamentalists who now claim a natural right over the nation and its imagination. This imaginary concept delivered political dividends and continues to do so. In addition, they have also attempted to co-opt Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Maldives as part of this imagined, Hindu India and have quibble with the entity of “South Asia”.

Juluri claims that the petition campaign by the Scholars for People had the support of more than 25,000 people, including “several non-Hindu, and even non-Indian persons,” and also that “several academics and secular public intellectuals joined the Scholars for People forum, and several academics also wrote independently to the Instructional Quality Commission to express their opposition to the SAFG position.” Yes, numbers do speak well, but one needs to ask who are these people signing and endorsing the project? The majority of them are caste Hindus of privileged backgrounds who have never borne the burden of caste stigma and never experienced violence and humiliations imposed by Brahmanical Hinduism. Can Juluri get even a hundred Dalits to sign his petition? This reflects the problem in the politics of the majority.

Juluri questions my position on Sheldon Pollock and Wendy Doniger who were viciously targeted by the Hindu right in India and outside. I may disagree with some of their views but I stand with them as a South Asian historian, in defending their freedom to write and critically engage with the production of knowledge. About Hinduism, Juluri says “I had added several points that would enrich students’ appreciation of Hindu philosophy and culture to make the Hinduism content on par with that of other religions, without asking for any deletions of caste”, as he states that there is “an issue of inequity in the depiction of Hinduism.” Let me address the issue of Hinduism and its inequity in depiction of their historical context. Firstly, the consolidation of Hinduism as a religion was a result of the 19th century project of colonialism. The problem with Hinduism is that it doesn’t have one authoritative text or one god as its focal representation, unlike other religions. In fact, if there is one thing, which binds all Hindus together like a spinal cord, it is caste.

Historically, Hinduism as a religion is a newer development, but influenced by orientalism and Brahmanical imaginations, caste Hindus assume the notion to have come from antiquity. So inequity of representation is part of the legacy of Hinduism itself, not an imposition from outside, as it lacks clarity in terms of origins, beliefs and ideas. The second aspect of Juluri’s edits is about the “appreciation of Hindu philosophy and culture”. It is again a problematic assertion because foundational ethics of Brahmanical Hinduism rely on hierarchy of castes and the principle of discrimination. If one has to teach Hindu culture and philosophy it should start with its ethical fault lines rather than a distorted version of glory of Hindu philosophy and culture.

## **Perpetrator-Victim Doublespeak of Diasporic Identity**

Juluri's chooses to gloss over the cultural and social (capital) advantages needed to gain privileged access to education and resources to migrate to privileged first world countries like the United States of America, and land in privileged positions. Juluri asks me as "to introspect whether "beneficiaries of ... colonialism" as he calls us would really be struggling so hard to contest ignorant and racist textbook content from the colonial era in 21st century America". This position of victimhood with respect to racism and minority status is simultaneously ironical and surreal.

Finally I urge Juluri to relook at the video of his book launch and talk in Hyderabad about where he begins his talk thanking people and says "our cause is our home, our Sanatan Dharma is always home".<sup>[1]</sup> These words express his world view of Sanatan Dharma, which aims to restore the caste system in the form of Chaturvarna. Even the god man he claims to believe and worship—Sri Sathya Sai Baba also had to bear the caste as "a poor peasant caste child of Rayalaseema" in his mention.

I write this rejoinder in the backdrop of a painful reality of unfolding violence against Dalits by caste Hindus across India. Finally let me end this rejoinder by invoking a famous debate on justice in Plato's Republic which says "The only way really to injure a man is to make him a worse man. (qtd in *The Republic of Plato* 1941, 12)." It cannot and should not be overlooked that Hinduism, as practised as a religion and philosophy, through its often violent and violating ideas and practices, has perpetuated injustice and inequality and denied basic human existence to millions. Moreover it lacks a moral imagination to recognise the humanity of fellow humans like Dalits and Muslims.

## References

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