

The Laine Controversy and the Study of Hinduism

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In 2003 Oxford University Press released a book by James W. Laine, *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*, just as the monsoon's storms were arriving in the subcontinent.¹ The book offered a fascinating inquiry into the historiography surrounding the Marāṭhā monarch Śivāji (1627–80), who is best known throughout India, and in the Western academy, as a Hindu king who heroically challenged the archetypically villainous Indian Muslim ruler, Awrangzīb (1658–1707). In *Shivaji* Laine brilliantly detailed how Marathi historians, biographers, and hagiographers have spun Śivāji's legacy into a Hindu one and set it against a constructed Muslim enemy. Furthermore, Laine showed that in Śivāji's own time, and largely under his control, Śivāji himself nurtured the persona of a kingly Hindu Kṣatriya (warrior) through his coronation ceremony in 1674 at Raigad, in Maharashtra² and through the creation of a regal genealogy by the Maharashtrian Brāhman, resident in Benares, Gāgā Bhaṭṭ. A study of narratives and stories, Laine's book was not intended to intercede in the history of Śivāji but rather comment on the rich parade of pronouncements and political uses that have circulated around the great Marāṭhā king's legacy for three centuries. Indeed, the author makes plain in the text that his audience is made up of "those who study religion and religious identity" and who seek a "thicker description of South Asian Islam" and a "richer portrait of medieval Hinduism" (Laine 2003a: 15). In addition, Laine hoped to "rescue" Śivāji's biography "from the grasp of those who see India as a Hindu nation at war with its Muslim neighbors" (2003a: 6). This rescue was to be accomplished by providing a nuanced account of how Śivāji became a representative of "Hinduism" in multiple ways, thus providing a counterpoint to a homogenized Hindu Right historiography that takes Śivāji as an exemplar of militant Hinduism. In this way, Laine's work joined a chorus of scholarly voices arguing multiple perspec-

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tives about “Hindu” and “Muslim” as inclusive terms of identification from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries (see Eaton 1978, 1993, 2000; Gilmartin and Lawrence 2000; Gordon 1998, 1999; Gottschalk 2000; Kumar 2002; Laine 1999; Mittal 2003; Talbott 1995; Wagoner 1993, 1996, 1999).³

By November, however, another storm was about to erupt, especially over the western state of Maharashtra. A group of five prominent Marathi historians and one Member of Parliament petitioned Oxford University Press to withdraw the book. They, and others, charged that the study defamed the memory of Śivāji’s mother, Jijābāi, and by extension, Śivāji and his father, Śāhaji. Among other things, the scholars and politician pointed to a passage in Laine’s book where he cites an oral “joke” that Śivāji’s biological father was his tutor, Dādāji Konndeva (Laine 2003a: 93). Laine never questions the veracity of Śivāji’s parentage but merely mentions this probably apocryphal anecdote. Yet, this, and a handful of other issues, was adjudged by the group of five historians to be sufficient evidence of bad historiography that was unnecessarily defamatory towards Śivāji and Jijābāi. Oxford withdrew the book on November 22 from the Indian market.

What followed made national and international news. On December 22, in Pune, Laine’s coauthor and cotranslator for *The Epic of Shivaji* (2001) the *Śivabhārata*, who merely had been thanked in *Shivaji*, was attacked by cadres of the Shiv Sena, a political organization formed in the 1960s to protect the “rights” and “sentiments” of Maharashtrians in general, but targeting Muslims specifically in the last three decades. Within days, Laine dispatched an apology to several scholars in Pune, which was reprinted or quoted in prominent papers such as the *Indian Express* (Laine 2003b) and *Times of India* (Laine 2003c). In the next week, on the morning of January 5, over a hundred men claiming affiliation to the Sambhaji Brigade carried out a systematic and well-planned vandalization of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune. The Brigade is a group named after Śivāji’s son and affiliated with a larger politico-cultural organization, the Maratha Seva Sangh, which vows to protect the sentiments of the Marāthā caste bloc. Reports claimed the group destroyed materials, both books and physical items, doing substantial damage to the premises, and battered employees and officers of the Institute. Reports also recalled they shouted slogans, in Hindi, asserting their defense of Śivāji’s legacy and that of his mother, Jijābāi, and claiming that Śanivārvādā, an architectural symbol of the Peśvā, and hence Brāhmaṇical political power, would be their next target (see *Times of India*, January 7, 2004; Juthar 2004).

Throughout early 2004, several Indians who were thanked in Laine’s acknowledgements were placed under armed police protection in Pune, while the author had court cases registered against him for offending a figure of Indian national

pride. An order to arrest Laine was issued on January 9, and efforts to have him extradited to India began on March 23. A state-sponsored probe was launched on April 10, and Laine offered another apology on April 17, which the state rejected in early May. By May 21, the Supreme Court issued a stay for the Bombay High Court's order to investigate the Laine controversy, and in July several prominent figures in Bombay, including the documentarian Anand Patwardhan, filed a public interest litigation challenging the state ban on Laine's book. However, the Rājā of Satara filed a new legal suit against Laine and his so-called "informants" in early September of 2004, and on a recent visit to Pune in the summer of 2005 I learned of further legal action taken against several people named in Laine's acknowledgements. The Laine controversy thus appears to endure.

In the Indian media, in both Marathi and English, the problem was analyzed on many levels, from anti-Brahminism to political wrangling to fascist censorship, all cast in the light of the upcoming elections in the spring of 2004 in India. In the United States and Europe, however, a different explanation emerged for the reception of Laine's book. Several Euro-American scholars and journalists attributed the violence and censorship to the "Hindu Right" or to the defense of Hinduism. This may have happened because Laine's book is so explicitly pitched as an antidote to the discourse of religious communal difference in historiography or because of the violence against Muslims in Bombay and Gujarat with which the Hindu Right has been associated in the last decade. Yet it was a centrist Congress state government that brought legal charges against Laine and officially banned the text, and it was the Maratha Seva Sangh, a group unrelated to the Shiv Sena or the dominant Hindu Right national parties, that carried out attacks on the Institute. Here we see Hindus attacking Hindus, not Muslims. The roots of the violence and legal persecution surrounding Laine's book lie in the regional caste politics of Maharashtra invested with "anti-Brahmin" animosities rather than in the sentiments of Hindutva, the Hindu Right, or the defense of Hinduism. This makes the violence and censorship no less odious but does require scholars of religion to look more carefully at social violence in India, especially when it is so intimately related to the scholarship we produce.

In this essay I will point out why understanding the events that surrounded the reception of Laine's book in India within the context of Hindutva or the ideology of the Hindu Right is a misapprehension. Instead, following the dominant reading of this event in Indian English news media and tracing the reasons given by the various attackers and persecutors themselves, I will situate the "Laine controversy" within the history and regional caste politics of Maharashtra. In this environment Śivāji has regularly been used to reinforce

Maharashtrian identity, and specifically Marāṭhā caste pride, as well as to present “anti-Brahmin” sentiments, all invocations set alongside his use by militant Hinduism in the service of anti-Muslim sentiment, which Laine engages in his book. My goal in this section is to briefly survey the field, not to provide an in-depth analysis of its history, which that has more ably been done by others (see Carter 1974; Deshpande 2004; Fukazawa 1968, 1991; Gordon 1998; Jasper 2003; Lele 1981; O’Hanlon 1983, 1985; Omvedt 1976). Lastly, I will suggest that the reception of the Laine controversy in Euro-American scholarship and journalism is symptomatic of an uncritical application of a Hindu-Muslim axis of contestation. Elsewhere, I have detailed the contents of Laine’s excellent work (Novetzke 2005) and will invoke little of the text itself here. In many ways, this is not an inappropriate approach to take given that the actual substance of Laine’s text did not receive significant scrutiny within the Indian or Euro-American public spheres. What concerned people far more were the events surrounding the release and reception of the book, which forms its own story.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I would like to mention at the beginning that James Laine has been my teacher, colleague, and friend for many years. I was his student as an undergraduate at Macalester College fifteen years ago and have been an admirer of his work since then. In addition, I know well, have studied with, or collaborated with several of the scholars in Pune who were victims of the violence perpetrated by the Shiv Sena and Sambhaji Brigade and who suffered the legal persecution initiated by the Congress-Coalition Democratic Front government of Maharashtra. My hope in this essay is not to rekindle the sense of hurt felt by those who were offended by Laine’s book nor to increase the suffering experienced by Laine and his colleagues in Pune. The content of this essay, its statements and opinions, are mine alone. My intention here is to explore the highly contentious reception of the book in India and abroad, especially in terms of the debates that animate the study of South Asia in the spaces where history, politics, and religion meet. I also hope the reader perceives here no sympathies with any political organization that uses violence to achieve its ends.

PRELUDE TO A CONFLICT: MARĀṬHĀS, BRĀHMAṆS, AND STATUS IN MAHARASHTRA

Before exploring the Laine controversy, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the regional caste politics of Maharashtra invested in the term “Marāṭhā.” Prior to the fourteenth century, Marāṭhā appeared to indicate anyone

from the Marathi-speaking regions of India and anyone whose mother tongue was Marathi (Gordon 1998: 14–15). Beginning in the sixteenth century, the term began to connote Marathi-speaking regiments within various *ad hoc* military brigades, many primarily under Islamic rule, such as the five Deccani kingdoms of the sixteenth century, centered in Bijapur, Golconda, Ahmednagar, Berar, and Bidar. Here we see the word “Marāṭhā” first invested with a sense of martial valor. These military units were drawn from otherwise agricultural sectors of society. Then, as now, Marāṭhās in general are sometimes qualified as Marāṭhā-Kumbīs or “Marāṭhā cultivators.” Here too we have the sense of Marāṭhās as both the tillers of the soil and the defenders of it. In the seventeenth century, under the leadership of Śivājī Bhosale, Marāṭhā became a regional and occupational designation associated with politico-military power. Not all Marāṭhās served under Śivājī—indeed many Marāṭhās retained their positions within armies led by Śivājī’s enemies. But the reign of Śivājī signaled a reinvention, and purposeful application, of the term “Marāṭhā” that marked its modern ascendancy into the Marathi, and pan-Indian, public sphere. In this period, Marāṭhās as a group of occupation-based castes (*jāti*) became intertwined within the pan-Indian cosmic-social division of caste (*varṇa*) as “warriors” or Kṣatriya. Yet this typology did not meet with universal agreement. For many Marāṭhās, their caste designation referenced a “twice-born,” and thus elite status as Kṣatriyas. However, for some Brāhmaṇ *panditas* and scholars, Marāṭhās remained low caste or Śūdra, despite Śivājī’s coronation and its attendant śāstraic caste interventions.

Following Śivājī’s death, his heirs declined in power within the Marāṭhā Empire, relegated to the status of nominal leadership. Real military and political force rested with the Peśvā or “prime ministership,” a position held by Cittapāvan Brāhmaṇs exclusively throughout the eighteenth century. During the Peśvā period, caste and its attendant rules of social and political engagement became hegemonic practice (Fukazawa 1998: 91–113; see also 1968). An emphasis on lineage, caste status, and the proper documentation of caste pedigree may have begun to exploit a division within the general Marāṭhā-Kumbī bloc of castes, bifurcating the elite Marāṭhās (enumerated as ninety-six specific families) from the ordinary peasantry who claimed Marāṭhā status. Thus two sorts of Marāṭhās emerged in this period—one, an elite or “pure” Marāṭhā genealogy of castes, and another, often designated simply as Kumbī or peasant Marāṭhās.

Another shift in the use of the caste term Marāṭhā occurred when the Marāṭhā Empire under the Peśvā rulership fell in 1818 to the British. The nineteenth century saw a reinforcement of Marāṭhā as a high-caste group within the *varṇa* echelon, but a category that could allow for movement up the social hierarchy.

A period of relative peace, an increase in agricultural production, and the socio-ethnological obsessions of the colonial state all interacted to make the sphere of the Marāṭhā both porous and politically powerful. Yet the swelling of the Marāṭhā ranks led to internal divisions presaged in the Peśvā period. A powerful non-Brāhmaṇ protest emerged with figures like Mahātmā Jyotirao Phūle (1827–90) that galvanized Marāṭhās and others around anti-Brahmin sentiment.⁴ By the early twentieth century, Marāṭhā princely states, such as Kolhapur, Gwalior, Vidarbha, Baroda, and perhaps Indore, were central to reifying Marāṭhā as both a widely construed political category and a social sphere that exhibited a clear elite stratum within itself. Thus two visions of Marāṭhā were consolidated by the early twentieth century. One view saw within the Marāṭhā ambit a revolutionary potential, both against colonial power, but more especially in opposition to a perceived Brāhmaṇical domination, a legacy of the Peśvā era. This was Marāṭhā as representative of a disenfranchised populous that nonetheless embodied the very essence of “being Maharashtrian.” Another view designated Marāṭhā as an elite Kṣatriya caste, also inheritors of Maharashtra’s true legacy, but in an elitist way.

As Prachi Desphande (2004: 30) notes, by the 1930s, the latter view of Marāṭhā appeared victorious, while those Marāṭhās who were politically active in the anti-Brahmin movement shifted their allegiances to the Gandhi-Nehru Congress Party. In postcolonial Maharashtra, the Marāṭhā voting bloc and Marāṭhā public figures are found throughout the political spectrum, within both the Congress Party (the Congress Party and the National Congress Party) and in alliance with the dominant Hindu Right party, the Bharatiya Janata Party. The decade and a half after Independence saw tumultuous struggles over the formation of Maharashtra State out of the larger Bombay State, the Samyukta Maharashtra or “United Maharashtra” movement, and this struggle took language and ethnicity as well as class as central issues of debate. The movement for a Maharashtra State with Bombay (now Mumbai) as its capital inspired and largely created groups like the Shiv Sena or “Śivāji’s Army” (see Gupta 1982: 39–40). The Shiv Sena, as a “nativist” organization, made Tamils and other non-Marathi speakers, as well as communists, their first enemies, not Muslims.⁵ The constituency of the Shiv Sena were white-collar Marathi speakers, factory workers, and “disenfranchised” youth (Lele 1995: 199). For the Shiv Sena and other groups, Śivāji became an emblem for the fight for a Maharashtrian (and sometimes Marāṭhā) autonomy, which was first expressed in class and linguistic, not religious, terms in the postcolonial period. A significant “saffronization” of the Shiv Sena did not occur until the mid 1980s (Lele 1995: 201). Yet an anti-Brahmin sentiment endured, though less noticeably within the Shiv Sena, who maintained cordial alliances with the largely Brāhmaṇ nationalist organization

quartered in Maharashtra, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (Gupta 1982: 173). Even then, however, the Shiv Sena carried out attacks on Brāhmaṇ scholars who wrote in ways they found derogatory of Śīvājī. Claiming a more direct political lineage to the non-Brāhmaṇism of Phūle, the Maratha Seva Sangh, the parent organization of the Sambhaji Brigade, was formed in 1990 in Maharashtra (see Jathar 2004). Today, people who identify themselves politically and socially as Marāṭhās constitute almost 40 percent of the voting public in Maharashtra. However, they do not form a homogenous group. For decades in Maharashtra, a majority of Marāṭhās supported the Congress Party in general, under the leadership of figures like S. B. Chavan and Sharad Pawar, Marāṭhās by birth. In recent years, the Shiv Sena-Bharatiya Janata Party alliance in Maharashtra has appealed to Marāṭhās in part through symbols, such as Śīvājī and his family, and in part through fielding Marāṭhā candidates for elections and placing a Marāṭhā in the position of chief minister in 1999. That year saw an almost even split of the Marāṭhā vote for the Congress coalition (Congress and National Congress Party), on the one hand, and the Bharatiya Janata Party-Shiv Sena coalition, on the other.

Anti-Brahmin sentiment does not define the platform of a Marāṭhā voting bloc. But the history of the term, "Marāṭhā," and especially its usage in the last century and a half, suggest that when it is invoked in the Marathi public sphere, we should consider whether or not anti-Brahminism lurks within its discourse. During the attack by the Sambhaji Brigade on the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in January, the vandals chanted slogans identifying their mission as the defense of Jijābāi's honor, a defense from a perceived insult generated by a scholar influenced by Brāhmaṇs, his informants, and a "Brāhmaṇical" institution. We should note that there were no slogans raised deriding Muslims or extolling the power of "Hindus." Indeed, what was witnessed in Pune that morning was violence by Hindus against other Hindus or, specifically, by a group identifying themselves as "Marāṭhās" against a group they identified as "Brāhmaṇs." As Adheesh Sathaye has pointed out in reference to the "joke" quoted by Laine that enflamed passion in Pune, "We should realize that jokes about Shivaji's parentage are *Brahman* jokes" (2004: 6; emphasis added).

THE CONTOURS OF A CONFLICT: MARĀṬHĀS, BRĀHMAṆS, AND POLITICS

Where the trouble began is hard to trace. The initial opposition to Laine's book, encapsulated in the letter issued by five prominent Marathi historians, was not

an anti-Brahmin call to arms. Three of the scholars—Gajanan Mehendale, Shivshahir Purandare, and Ninad Bedekar—are Brāhmaṇ by caste, and the Member of Parliament who joined them in condemning the book, Pradeep Rawat, is a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party, a party whose core constituency is often described as Brāhmaṇ and upper caste.⁶ They opposed the work as bad historiography and inflammatory rhetoric, from their point of view, not as a challenge to Hinduism. The first violent incident by the Shiv Sena, the attack on the eminent Sanskritist Shrikant Bahulkar, a Brāhmaṇ by caste, did appear to have an anti-Brahmin impetus, but here too, one finds confusion. One of the first laudatory reviews of Laine's book in the Marathi press came in the September 7 issue of *Sāmnā*, the official news media outlet for the Shiv Sena (see Sathaye 2004: 5). Following the attack on Bahulkar, Rawat condemned the attack, and Raj Thackeray, the nephew of Shiv Sena leader, Bal Thackeray, offered a bizarre public apology to the scholar, promising no more violence on the part of the Shiv Sena unless specifically authorized by Raj Thackeray himself (Vijapurkar 2004).

The Sambhaji Brigade's attack on the Institute one week later appeared to be a direct challenge to the Shiv Sena and Thackeray's control of the "defense" of Śivāji and, by extension, Marāṭhās. Seventy-two of the vandals were rounded up shortly thereafter, while the Pune police issued an arrest warrant for Laine, though he was far away in snowy Minnesota, and began legal action against Oxford University Press in India. These prosecutions were initiated and supported by the Congress-led Maharashtra State government. Laine (2004) published a response one week later in the *Los Angeles Times*, expressing both his shock at the events at the Institute and his sense that freedom of speech had been trampled in India.

A full assessment of the response in Indian media to the Laine issue, particularly within Marathi journalism, waits to be analyzed.⁷ My own access to these sources has been curtailed by their limited availability in the United States or over electronic media, so I offer here a reading that is unfortunately bereft of good Marathi and Hindi journalistic materials. Yet the incidents recorded and the contours of debate are still clearly accessible, though sometimes inferred, from available sources. It is apparent that in the wake of the attack at the Institute, journalists and political scientists speculated about the intentions of the Sambhaji Brigade, supposedly the "youth wing" of the Maratha Seva Sangh, which itself appeared to have some relationship with a student group organized on college campuses, called the Vidyarthi Maratha Mahasangh. Both groups formed in the late 1990s to "protect" the interests of Marāṭhās and appeared to emerge from Marāṭhā communities throughout Maharashtra.

The political alliances of groups that claim to represent Marāṭhās have

recently shifted. The Maratha Mahasangh, another organization purporting to speak for Marāṭhās (and unrelated to the Maratha Seva Sangh), recently implored its constituents to vote for the Shiv Sena-Bharatiya Janata Party alliance, an about-face from its endorsements for Congress in previous elections. At least one major news source asserted a connection between the Maratha Seva Sangh and Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party (see Chawarc 2004). Yet the leader of the Maratha Seva Sangh, Purushottam Khedekar, is married to Rekha Khedekar, a Bharatiya Janata Party member of the legislative assembly. In any case, the Shiv Sena asserted no alliance with these Marāṭhā organizations. Furthermore, a connection between the Maratha Seva Sangh, its affiliates, and the larger network of Hindutva is highly unlikely given that the Maratha Seva Sangh seeks to establish a new "religion" in India for the "bahujan community," called Shiv Dharma. P. Khedekar, the leader of the Maratha Seva Sangh, put it this way: "Brahmins will not be allowed to embrace Shiv Dharma. Hinduism has become a slave to Brahmanism...Hinduism is not a religion, it is a way of life. So it will be wrong to say that we will be converting. We just want to form our religion" (cited in Jathar 2004).

Such a sentiment must not have sat well with the upper-caste leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party or the upper-caste members of its constituency. P. Khedekar went on to assert that Shiv Dharma adherents would not celebrate Divāli, but rather memorialize the "demon king" Bali and burn an effigy of Viṣṇu's incarnation as the Brāhmaṇ "dwarf" Vāmana (see Jathar 2004).

Though a rupture may be apparent in the Marāṭhā bloc, perhaps reflecting at least two centuries of dispute over who is an "authentic" Marāṭhā, the forces behind the attack on the Institute seem unrelated to the defense of "Hinduism" in a political or cultural sense. The Marāṭhā castes in many ways condition politics in Maharashtra. For years, S. B. Chavan and Sharad Pawar remained the Congress "strongmen" in Maharashtra, using their powerful ties to the Marāṭhā community for political gain: Pawar still leads his Nationalist Congress Party in Maharashtra.⁸ Bal Thackeray, though not a Marāṭhā by birth,⁹ has successfully portrayed himself and the Shiv Sena as leaders of the Marāṭhā community by combining Maharashtrian, and particularly Marāṭhā, pride with anti-Muslim rhetoric. They came to pose the most visible challenge to Congress rule in Maharashtra in the 1990s. At its inception, the Shiv Sena chose not Muslims but South Indians as their primary target, claiming these "immigrants" were stealing work from Maharashtrians in Bombay. The later addition of Muslims to their blacklist helped align this regionally powerful party with the rising fortunes of the Bharatiya Janata Party, which overtly expressed anti-Muslim sentiment, in the mid 1990s. At times during the recent elections in India in March and April 2005, from the perspective of Maharashtrian news media, it seemed that Śivājī

and Marāṭhā legitimacy were the sole issues at stake (see Koppikar 2004).

On January 15, the Democratic Front, the ruling coalition in Maharashtra composed primarily of the Congress Party, led by then-Chief Minister S. K. Shinde, and the Nationalist Congress Party, headed by Sharad Pawar, banned Laine's book in the state, even though it had already been withdrawn from circulation throughout the nation. English and Marathi news media seemed univocal in their condemnation of the attacks, while retaining a rather negative view in general about Laine's text itself. Indeed, details of Laine's book receded in importance on the national stage as issues of academic and personal freedom, censorship, and the role of the state to protect the sentiments of citizens came fully into public view (see, for example, Chitre 2004a,b; Vajpeyi 2004a). Yet much national Indian media in English remained aware that the primary focal point of this conflict, both at the regional and national level, was not situated along a "Hindu" versus "Muslim" axis. Ananya Vajpeyi, writing for *Outlook* magazine, made this point plain:

A Congress or Communist-ruled state in this country is not automatically pro-people; it is no safer a haven for artists and intellectuals, nor is it a stronger guarantor of the democratic rights of the citizenry, than a state ruled by the Hindu Right. We should not harbor any illusions about the ubiquity of the threat to the liberty, equality and justice that were promised to all in the Constitution (2004a).

In Maharashtra, a war of words ensued between the Democratic Front and the Shiv Sena over who could "speak for" the Marāṭhās and Śivāji's legacy. Bal Thackeray asserted that Sharad Pawar had been "born into [Śivāji's] community by mistake," and Pawar declared that the Shiv Sena intended only to "commercialise" Śivāji's legacy for political gain (cited in Koppikar 2004). Yet both clearly hoped to benefit from the actions of the Maratha Seva Sangh in the upcoming elections. By contrast, Gopinath Munde, the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Maharashtra, who is not a Marāṭhā (he is a Vaṇajārī, a low caste from the Marāṭhavādā region), appeared to make his popular appeals exclusively in reference to anti-Muslim positions. On January 17, the prime minister at the time, A. B. Vajpayee, expressed what some may have considered a measured sentiment regarding the Laine controversy and the attacks on the Institute, suggesting that discussion and further study was a better response to Laine's work than violence (*Times of India*, January 18, 2004). However, it is difficult not to see the strategies of politics rather than tolerance in his statement, particularly as he reversed his position on March 20. While campaigning in Beed, a district of Maharashtra with a high concentration of Marāṭhās, Prime Minister

Vajpayee declared the incidents surrounding Laine's book to be a "warning" to foreigners (*The Press Trust of India*, March 20, 2004). This warning, however, was not issued in the context of Hindu-Muslim divisiveness but to those who would insult India's national heroes, not necessarily their Hindu nationalist ones.

A CONFLICT OF INTEREST?: THE PAN-INDIAN HINDU-MUSLIM AXIS AND SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES

Early on periodicals in Asia, Europe, and the United States, including the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Times Higher Education Supplement*, picked up the story of the Laine controversy. In this international context, the vagaries of regional politics in India were glossed over, and the violence and legal persecutions surrounding the book were attributed to the Hindu Right. The *Chronicle's* headline, "Hindu Protesters Attack Prestigious Research Institute in India" (Overland 2004) made this point plainly. The characterization of the events surrounding Laine's book in India as an issue instigated by the Hindu Right was apparent also in reportage from *The Times* in London (Philp 2004), *The Guardian* (Marqusee 2004), *The Washington Post* (Vedantam 2004a), *Times International* (Rajan and Chaim 2004), and the *South China Morning Post* (Abdi 2004), as well as other media organizations, such as the British magazine *Today's History* (Menon 2004) and the BBC (March 23, 2004). In the context of an article on gender, the body, and the attacks on Muslims in Gujarat in February of 2002, Martha Nussbaum (2004) attributed the reception of Laine's book in India to the reactions of "extremists of the Hindu Right." In contrast, *The Christian Science Monitor*, writing on March 29, 2004, presented a much more nuanced view, noting that various players within the broad Indian political spectrum sought to use Śivājī for their own purposes (see Baldauf 2004).

Scholars of South Asia exchanged views on the matter over the Internet, and dispatches from colleagues in Pune at the time provided updates on events. Contributors were primarily interested in the safety and well being of Indian colleagues in Pune, but a current of concern ran through many postings that academic freedom was being suffocated by the weight of "Hindutva."¹⁰ This point seemed to rest on the thesis of Laine's book, which was primarily concerned with nuanced issues of Hindu and Muslim identity. In addition, these responses no doubt echoed issues raised by freelance critics like Rajiv Malhotra as well as the fresh memory of vociferous reactions to scholars such as Paul Courtright, Wendy Doniger, and Jeffrey Kripal.¹¹ Articles in the *Washington Post* (Vedantam 2004a) and *Toronto Star* (2004b) conflated Laine's case with

responses to Courtright, Doniger, and Kripal. Similarly an otherwise excellent review of Laine's book (and the only one I have come across in American academic journals to date) by Richard Davis concludes that the Laine controversy highlights "Hindu nationalist ascendancy in India" and the call for scholars to be aware that their work may pose "dangers to Hindutva definitions of nationality" (2004: 1050).¹² William Dalrymple, in a very recent treatment of this and other incidences in an article in *The New York Review of Books*, likewise attributed the violence at the Institute to "Hindu militants" (2005:1).¹³ Like many other reviewers and journalists, Davis viewed the reaction to Laine's book as pivoting on the single statement about Śivāji's mother, Jijābāi. While the reaction to *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* took many other features of the book to task, any reaction based upon this single "joke" cited by Laine has little to do with Hindu or Muslim identity and would certainly not entail a response from defenders of "Hinduism." The affront to Jijābāi was one of fidelity and propriety, not religion.

Recent controversy and protest over monographs by non-Indian scholars on Indian subjects has become a minor genre in the field of Hindu Studies. From Rāmakṛṣṇa on the analyst's couch (Kripal 1995) to a denuded Gaṇeśa (Courtright 1985), we find strident responses from Indians (and non-Indians) to academic work by Euro-American scholars. It appears that studies invested with psychoanalytical theory applied to an Indian religious figure or deity raises the greatest levels of ire. Laine's work does indeed invoke Sigmund Freud briefly with speculations on Śivāji's relationship to his mother, Jijābāi, and on the subconscious expressions of a nineteenth-century hagiography of Śivāji (Laine 2003a: 87, 92). Yet the anger expressed over Laine's book was of a different order than that directed at other scholars. Where Courtright, Doniger, and Kripal faced, for the most part,¹⁴ intellectual and personal attacks in the press, on the Internet, and in academic venues, Laine has faced legal action. But what is the most striking difference is the violence supposedly engendered by Laine's book, unleashed upon Laine's friends and associates in Pune and upon the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.

Unlike the work of Courtright, Doniger, and Kripal, Laine's book has fully entered a volatile stream of political and cultural life in India, specifically in Maharashtra in this case. What is unique about *Shivaji* is the way it became a part of the contentious historiography that is its very subject and how it proved that history invests political actors with motivation and rhetoric. Laine (2003a: 6) does not shy away from this venture, as we see in his statement on the "rescue" of Śivāji's historiography. However, Laine engaged only one of the threats to Śivāji's legacy—the vision of militant Hinduism prompted by the Hindu Right—while forgoing a thorough investigation into the contention over

Śivāji that is most germane to Maharashtra, one based on caste not “religion,” that pits Brāhmaṇs and a perceived Brāhmaṇical elite against Marāṭhās and the “common man.”

Though people associated with the Hindu Right were active in the response to Laine’s book, it does not appear that a call to defend “Hinduism,” so often the battle cry of the Hindu Right, can account for the attacks on the Institute, the censorship of Laine’s book, or the legal persecution of him, his colleagues, and his publisher. The Shiv Sena did claim responsibility for attacking Bahulkar, but there is no reason to believe the attack was motivated by the need to defend “Hinduism” or Hindu sentiment. The adoption of a fully virulent form of anti-Muslim rhetoric akin to that of the Bharatiya Janata Party sits next to, and is subordinate to, the Shiv Sena’s mandate to represent the sentiments of Maharashtra, for whom Śivāji is a regional hero (see Katzenstein, Mehta, and Thakkar 1997). Indeed, the Laine controversy seemed to work against Hindu Right political groups at a national level, and the disorganized response to it from national Bharatiya Janata Party leadership served to further alienate their Shiv Sena partners in Maharashtra (see *Times of India*, January 18, 2004).

However, this does not soften the politics of communal antagonism and violence practiced by the Shiv Sena, the Bharatiya Janata Party, or Hindutva at large, nor has it stopped some pro-Hindu Right writers in India and abroad from characterizing Laine’s book as an affront to “Hindus” (see, for example, Jain 2004; Patvardhan and Bhagwe 2004). Indeed, the characterization of reactions to Laine’s book in India as the result of “Hindutva” only adds more power to the Hindu Right’s résumé of violence. Yet, as Vajpeyi (2004a) puts it, “The monster of fascism no longer growls at the gate—it has crossed the threshold, into the house that Gandhi built.” This monster, one might argue, crossed long ago, in the mid 1970s, during Indira Gandhi’s Emergency Rule and during the organized violence committed against Sikhs after her assassination in 1984, but we must now reckon with the fact that censorship, limits of freedom of speech, and the “monster of fascism” are not the sole purviews of the Hindu Right but have been demonstrated to exist with “Centrist” parties, such as those that make up the Democratic Front alliance in Maharashtra.¹⁵

Laine’s book is an exemplar of genealogical historiography and an important work in one of the most vital areas of the study of Indian religious history, the codification of identity around key terms like “Hindu” and “Muslim” and the political, cultural, and public environments that develop. Yet there is another book, another story, translucent in Laine’s text, which charts a negotiation not of Hindu and Muslim worldviews, but Brahmin and anti-Brahmin, high caste and low caste, subaltern and elite—the particulars of political and social life in Maharashtra, of which Śivāji is such an intimate part. Inasmuch as Laine’s book

shows that Hindu and Muslim life-worlds were not always in conflict throughout the centuries during and after Śivāji's period, we must endeavor to find those many places in Indian public culture, history, and politics where Hindu and Muslim are likewise categories subordinate to other ones, such as caste, gender, and class. Scholars of South Asia, whether Indian or non-Indian, must resist constructing a monolithic entity called the "Hindu Right" that operates under the saffron banner of Hindutva. Indeed, the very concept and deployment of "Hindutva" is in need of careful scholarly inquiry as it has changed in the last decade in the face of its own successes and, more recently, failures, as well as its place within an increasingly open economy that influences public culture in India. If we are not capable of more subtle observations of religiously inflected public politics we run the risk of reifying all appeals to "Hindu" identity as belonging to the "Hindu Right" and all moments of violence from Hindus as examples of militant Hinduism. This would be, ironically, to countermand the very triumph of Laine's work, an investigation into the variety of ways "Hindu" and "Muslim" were plied by agents in history around the figure of Śivāji. Our reaction to appalling events like those which surrounded Laine's book must dig deeper and trace other genealogies of social division, for now, more than ever, these issues are inextricable from the work and lives of all scholars of South Asia.

Notes

1. This essay has benefited from close readings and stimulating conversations from colleagues in America, Europe, and India. Though all have asked for anonymity, I thank them here collectively for their invaluable assistance.

2. I use the word "Maharashtra" here to refer to both the modern state of Maharashtra and the Marathi-speaking regions that existed for centuries before formal statehood in 1960.

3. Also see a review of Laine's book by Vajpeyi (2004b) in which she argues for a shift away from investigating "Hindu" and "Muslim" as categories of differentiated identity and towards the "poetics" (invoking Jacques Rancière and Hayden White) of these histories.

4. O'Hanlon (1985: 141–42) points out that Phūle was reluctant to use the term "Marāṭhā" and preferred Śūdra and Kṣatriya, deriving the latter from the term "kṣetra" or land.

5. Bal Thackeray and the Shiv Sena instantiated clearly anti-Muslim activities in 1970 (see Gupta 1982: 168).

6. See Chhibber and Misra (1993) for statistics on caste and class in the

electorate in the early 1990s. Rawat lost his seat following the 2004 elections.

7. See Sathaye (2004) for an excellent beginning to this project. Spencer Leonard of the University of Chicago is also at work on a political analysis of the coverage of the Laine controversy in Marathi print media.

8. S. B. Chavan passed away on February 26, 2004 in Bombay.

9. Bal Thackeray is from the Candraseniya Kāyastha Prabhu community. The core constituency of the Shiv Sena aligns so-called "Other Backward Castes and Classes" with the higher-caste Candraseniya Kāyastha Prabhu community. Yet the Shiv Sena has presented itself as an organization that defends Marāṭhā sentiment.

10. See, for example, Sharma (2004), where the Sambhaji Brigade members are described as "Hindu nationalists."

11. Malhotra (2004), in an online response to an article by Vedantam (2004a), asserts no link between reactions to the work of Courtright, Doniger, and Kripal, on the one hand, and Laine, on the other. Also see Vedantam's (2004c) reply to Malhotra.

12. Another review in the *Asia Times* (Mathur 2004) does not attribute the reaction to Laine's book to Hindutva.

13. In this excellent review essay, Dalrymple unfortunately makes two mistakes in his historical recollection of the events. The first mistake is the date of the attack on Bahulkar, which he claims took place in October, thus preceding the withdrawal of the book. It actually took place on December 22. Second, Bahulkar, at least in my estimation, is not "elderly"....

14. Wendy Doniger in November 2003 had an egg flung at her while lecturing in London. Described by one bilious website as "the Gita-hating porno writer from the University of Chicago," Doniger managed to avoid the avian assault (see <<http://jtinasa.india-forum.com/>>).

15. Nefarious politics is by no means confined to India. See a discussion of the recent national elections in the United States by Miller (2005).

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