

## Controversial books meet different fates

By Julie L. Kessler

### Cultural Commentary

A few weeks ago I wrote in this column about the upcoming copyright expiration in Germany of "Mein Kampf," Adolph Hitler's delusional and bigoted rant and one of the most offensive books ever penned. It helped outline Hitler's "Final Solution," designed to rid the German empire of Jews, Communists and other undesirables for good. The government of Bavaria plans to reprint the book in the original German upon the copyright's expiration. I argued then, and will always argue, that such books, regardless of how undeniably offensive they are, must be allowed to be published so that we, as individuals, may be permitted to decide for ourselves what is vile, racist, and morally reprehensible. It was a discussion also of the importance of free speech to notions of democracy, and of the concept that even bad books, or perhaps especially bad books, may ultimately have good outcomes for a just society.

Ten days ago, Penguin Books India, a unit of New York publishing giant Penguin Random House, agreed as part of a legal settlement to recall and destroy all copies of "The Hindus: An Alternative History," by University of Chicago religious historian Wendy Doniger. Doniger, a feminist historian of Hinduism, interpreted some Hindu texts as sexual in nature and described others as fictional in part. The ban comes as Narendra Modi, a Hindu nationalist politician, and his party, Bharatiya Janata, make increasing strides at the polls in advance of general elections this year.

One could argue that, given the availability of Doniger's book via the Internet, the

ban of her book and the burning of the remaining copies in the world's largest democracy is not as tragic as it might have been had the ban occurred during an earlier era. That argument, however, would fail for a host of reasons, one being that while many in India have access to the Internet and to electronic books, far more do not. But of course, this is not a technical question, nor one of supply and demand. It is a much more fundamental question of freedom of thought, freedom of expression, free speech, and plain old garden-variety democracy.

India's democracy may be rooted in liberal principles; many of its laws, however, are apparently not. In the same vein as my discussion of the republication in German of "Mein Kampf," I would say that if there are factual or other issues with Doniger's book, they should be discussed among its readers. A wholesale ban, and all that represents, only serves to make the book a type of desired contraband, which leads to a host of other undesirable outcomes.

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As happened after a religious fatwa was issued against author Salman Rushdie immediately following the 1988 publication of his novel "The Satanic Verses," Doniger received threats; but thus far, those threats have apparently been limited to critics throwing eggs at her while she was giving a lecture in London in 2003. (India was the first country to ban Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses" following its publication, when Muslims staged nationwide protests against it. Likewise, the state government of Gujarat in 2011 prevented the sale of a biography of Mahatma Gandhi, written by Pulitzer prize-winning author Joseph Lelyveld.)

Whether you are a Hindu, Muslim, Jew, Christian or atheist living in India or elsewhere, you should be alarmed by the ban on Doniger's book. While of course non-Indians like me have no say in how a freely elected Indian government chooses to govern its people, it is particularly difficult to comprehend how this ban (and the bans on Rushdie's and Lelyveld's books) correlates with Indians' notions of free speech and the basic tenets of democracy. I can imagine no greater threat to creative expression than one in which the fruits of your labor are banned and burned, and your physical safety is imperiled simply because of that expression. That said, this is really not a question of secular modernism

versus religious faith; it is more a question of whether those whose ideas are on the fringe are, for whatever reason, becoming the mainstream in the world's second most populous country.

India's recent history has been long on progress since it gained independence from Great Britain in 1947. However, as has become evident in the way in which many of its society's most vulnerable are denied equal protection (including the victims, both Indian and foreign,

of the current epidemic of violent gang rapes against women), and in these continuing book bans, it is clear that India has a long way to go and much to do before it can take its true place among the great democracies of the free world.

**Julie L. Kessler** is an attorney based in Manhattan Beach, and is the award-winning author of "Fifty-Fifty, The Clarity of Hindsight." She can be reached at [www.JulieLKessler.com](http://www.JulieLKessler.com).

