On January 5, 150 Hindu nationalists armed with bats and chains vandalized the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) in the city of Pune in Maharashtra, India, to protest a scholarly monograph on a 17th-century Hindu ruler named Shivaji by James W. Laine, a religious studies professor at Macalaster College in Minnesota.

According to the Global News Wire January 7, the nationalists, calling themselves (after Shivaji’s son) the Sambhaji brigade, attacked BORI “because one of the scholars cited by Laine happens to be a member of the Institute’s managing committee.” Two weeks earlier, members of the nationalist party Shiva Sena had tarred the face of another Indian scholar because Laine had mentioned him in the preface of his book.

After the January 5 incident, all of the 13 scholars named in the book were given police protection. On January 9, Laine told the Minneapolis Star Tribune that some people had considered the book, Shivaji: A Hindu King in Islamic India, disrespectful because he had raised questions regarding “the cracks in the narrative” about the king, who has become a figure of mythic significance in Maharashtra.

On page 93, Laine wrote, “[T]he repressed awareness that Shivaji had an absentee father is also revealed by the fact that Maharashtrians tell jokes, naughtily suggesting that his guardian Dadoji Konddev was his biological father.” This is not quite like suggesting that Jesus was fathered by a Roman soldier but came close to it in the Hindu nationalist imagination.

After the tarring, Laine had done what he could to soothe nationalist feelings. “I faxed letters to Indian newspapers, taking full responsibility for my book and apologizing for causing offence,” he told the Los Angeles Times January 12. By then his publisher, Oxford University Press, had already withdrawn the book from the Indian market.

Nonetheless, further protests took place on January 14, the date that services are held in memory of Shivaji’s mother Jijabai, who is equally revered in Maharashtra. Other Indian scholars believed to have helped Laine were targeted, threatened, and portrayed as traitors to the Hindu cause. "Why

Meanwhile, the Maharashtra government banned the book and initiated legal action under sections 153 and 153A of the Indian penal code, charging author and publisher with spreading ill will with the intention of disturbing the peace. (The ban on the book coincided with the birth anniversary of Shivaji, giving it additional symbolic significance). After initially saying that he preferred verbal criticism to criminal prosecution, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, head of the nationalist BJP party, announced the central government’s support for the Maharashtra government’s action, and promised that the central government would itself take action if Maharashtra failed.

The conflict over Laine’s book can be understood as arising from political competition among Hindu nationalists. In taking up Shivaji’s cause, Shiva Sena, which operates all across India, was clearly appealing to Maharashtrian sensibilities. The Sambhaji Brigade, a local group, apparently wanted to outdo Shiva Sena. The state government then apparently set out to outdo both by initiating its criminal prosecution.

But why should the perceived misrepresentation of a figure like Shivaji be capable of generating such tumult in India?

The affair must be seen as part of a larger controversy over the study and representation of Hinduism as a whole. And that controversy is incomprehensible unless it is recognized that what we know about Hinduism’s past derives almost exclusively from the work of Western scholars, whom some consider responsible for inventing “Hinduism” as a single religion.

Even today, with Indian scholars also involved in the academic study of Hinduism, Western scholarship exercises a sway on the Indian mind out of all proportion to its size and in a way not comparable to its role in other religions. Indeed, in India Hinduism is still widely understood in Western terms—terms that include a highly negative perspective on its role in Indian public life and public education.

During the first 50 years of Indian independence, this perspective was embraced by an Indian government that was guided by principles of socialism and secularism. Socialist thought treated all religion as a non-scientific relic of the past. Indian intellectuals specifically blamed Hinduism (along with imperialism) for India’s appalling poverty, and denounced any Hindu
political expression as a threat to the
state even as they were sparing in their
critique of the minority religions of Islam
and Christianity.

In the 1990s, two developments began
to disturb the ease with which Hinduism
could be criticized with impunity in
academia and the media. The first was
the rise to political power of the BJP
party as the major partner in a new
governing coalition. This meant that it
was no longer possible to dismiss
Hinduism out of hand as a species of
social pathology.

Concurrently, and impinging more
directly on the Western scholars of
Hinduism, was globalization and the
consequent growth of a well-educated,
professional, and computer-savvy Hindu
community in North America. Previously, North American academics
could write without having to take into
account the reaction of the Hindu faith
community, which lay halfway around
the world. But immigration was now
bringing Hindus to the door of the
American ivory tower.

Of course, the academics continued to
insist that their work was open to
critique by other academics only, and
not by the faith community. But
educated Hindus were increasingly
critical of the new vogue of using
psychoanalytic methods to interpret
Hinduism. This approach was, they
claimed, far more subjective than
traditional historical and philological
methods. And with the emergence of
the Internet they began to go over the
heads of the academics and express
their dissatisfaction with psychoanalytic
presentations of Hinduism directly to the
Hindu faith community itself.

The turning point came with the
publication of *Kali's Child* by Jeffrey
Kripal in 1995. This book made the
sensational claim that Ramakrishna
(1836-1886), one of the most revered
swamis, or holy men, of modern India,
who was known for being a life-long
celibate, was actually a latent
homosexual.

Written under Wendy Doniger, a pre-
eminent Indologist at the University of
Chicago, and published by the Chicago
University Press, *Kali’s Child* won a book
award from the American Academy of
Religion (AAR), the largest professional
organization of religion scholars in the
world. The author spent a year teaching
at Harvard. Here, it seemed, another
brilliant career was being made by
applying psychoanalysis to the study of
Hinduism—or, depending on one’s point
of view, by making Hindu saints appear,
as it were, biodegradable.

But the book generated profound
uneasiness in the Ramakrishna Mission
and then in the Hindu community at
large. It was said that the author had
obtained access to the mission under
false pretences, and further, that the
Bengali language expert at the
University of Chicago was absent on the
day of Kripal’s dissertation examination.
But these were just allegations.

Then, in November 2000, Swami
Tyagananda, a member of the
Ramakrishna Order and the Hindu
"chaplain" at Harvard University,
produced a tract entitled "*Kali’s Child
Revisited or Didn’t Anyone Check the
Documentation*," which questioned the
author’s linguistic competence in Bengali
on which the whole thesis hinged.
Bound copies of the tract were
distributed at the annual meeting of the
AAR and it was posted on the Internet as
well (http://home.earthlink.net/~vag/KCR.d
oc).
Kripal did not respond to Tyagananda’s critique in any detail, and to date still has not. Such perceived indifference to an obviously credible critic was noticed by the Hindu community, and independent scholars within the community took it upon themselves to explore the matter further.

The tipping point in the relationship between the academic and faith communities came on September 6, 2002, when Rajiv Malhotra, the founder-chairman of the Infinity Foundation—which is devoted to the promotion of Indic and global spirituality—posted a 40-page paper on the Internet entitled “Wendy’s Child Syndrome” (http://sulekha.com/expressions/column.asp?cid=239156). In it, Malhotra examined the use of psychoanalytic interpretation in the work of Doniger, Paul Courtright of Emory University, Sarah Caldwell (of California State University at Chico and Harvard University), and others, exposing what he considered to be the shortcomings of this approach. The paper, which received over 8,000 hits within a week, transformed the Hindu perception of the Western academic community from one of adulation, or at least acquiescence, to one of suspicion and even hostility.

Malhotra drew special attention to some examples of the psychoanalytical approach in Courtright’s book on the elephant-god Ganesha. The book, Ganesa: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings, had earned considerable notoriety in Hindu circles for describing Ganesha’s trunk as a limp phallus, and led many Hindus to wonder if what appeared to them to be nothing more than methodologically sophisticated slander of Hinduism was fast becoming an American academic pastime. Petitions against the book, drafted by Hindu groups in Louisiana and Atlanta, began to circulate, and Courtright even received death threats.

Amidst the controversy an Indian edition of the book hit the stands featuring a picture of Ganesha on the cover, dancing in the nude. (The author was apparently not involved in the selection of the cover art.) There is considerable tolerance for celestial nudity in Hinduism, so apparently it was the fact that the nude image appeared in the already phallically charged atmosphere that rendered its publication incendiary. Passions reached such a fever pitch that the Indian publisher thought it prudent to offer a public apology and withdraw the book from circulation.

This was a rare instance in which the actions of the Hindu faith community in North America influenced the course of academic events in India. To be sure, India has a history of banning books that hurt the sensitivities of the faithful, including the non-Hindu faithful. Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses, for instance, was promptly banned in India. At the same time, it’s worth noting that Courtright visited India in December to attend a regional conference of the International Association of the History of Religions without incident.

Meanwhile, during a public lecture in London last November Wendy Doniger had an egg thrown at her and was vociferously questioned about her qualifications to speak on Hinduism. According to witnesses, she avoided giving an answer when pointedly asked whether she had herself been psychoanalyzed. It was clear that the Hindu faith community in the United Kingdom had joined the fray.

**What lies ahead?**

In North America, relations between the academic community and the faith
community are likely to get worse. The Indian diaspora is almost two million strong now, and enjoys the highest median income among all the ethnic communities in the United States. There, it is beginning to follow the pattern of other minority religious communities such as the Jews and the Muslims, who are openly accepted as role models for how to mobilize against what are considered slights to one’s faith.

This tension will probably continue to be reflected back in India, where the sensational defeat of the BJP in the May national election has placed a huge question mark over the role of Hindu nationalism in Indian public life. The potential criminalization of any perceived misrepresentation of Hinduism by the authorities in Maharashtra is a particularly ominous development in this respect.

The situation is not, however, beyond redress. The Hindu community needs to recognize that, in the search for pattern or truth, bona fide scholars of religion go beyond the self-understanding not just of Hindus but of all other faith communities as well. Vandalism, book-banning, and egg-pelting are not the best way to exorcise the imperial ghost that hovers over Hinduism. Physical and legal intimidation has no place in civilized discourse and must be eschewed, however tempting recourse to it might be.

For their part, Western academics should understand that depicting Hinduism in a manner perceived as provocatively demeaning by the Hindus themselves does nobody any good. Nor is the cause of civilized intellectual discourse advanced if they decline to respond to informed critiques simply because the critics do not happen to be academics. It tempts the critics to conclude that the emperors have no clothes.