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The Greys of Religious Bigotry

Reading Nishita Pahuja's *The World Before Her*

SHOAIB DANIYAL

Religious fundamentalism has been gaining currency in myriad forms, often defining itself as a legitimate aspect of modernity. Nishita Pahuja's *The World Before Her* tries to address this conundrum.

Storming through Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (isis) has “resurrected” the Caliphate, declaring the group's chief, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the new caliph and calling on Muslims around the world to swear loyalty to him. This latest outcome of the Arab Spring is one that western commentators did not predict. At the outset, the Arab Spring was welcomed for overthrowing autocratic governments. It was also almost implicitly assumed that these governments would then be replaced with secular, liberal dispensations modelled after present-day western polities. After all, this was what modernity was all about, right? As it turns out, this belief in the absolute telos of modernity was quite misplaced and the Arab Spring turned not to “European” secularism but to Islamism.

This in itself was a much condensed version of a debate which played out amongst sociologists from the 1950s to the turn of the century. In *The Sacred Canopy* (1960), for example, Peter L Berger, argued for a theory of secularisation which stated that as societies became industrialised, religion would die out. In other words, secularisation and modernity were necessarily coupled together. While this thesis held for western Europe, when applied to larger, global data sets, it didn't really do all that well. The United States (us) was an early outlier, where evangelical Christianity and modernity grew side-by-side. The same held for the Chinese, where industrialisation did not necessarily translate to society becoming less religious. By the 1990s, Berger had himself admitted that this theory of secularisation was simply incorrect.

Not only in China or the us, this theory fails to play out in India as well. Living standards have risen remarkably since

Independence and with it has increased the religiosity present in society. In 1947, while we had a prime minister who could publicly disassociate from religion, our prime minister today proudly proclaims himself a “Hindu Nationalist”.

The reason for this repudiation of secularisation and the simultaneous adoption of religion are multifarious and complex. However, one significant way in which religion has captured modern minds is through fundamentalist movements, from evangelical Christians in the us to Islamists across the Middle East and Asia. In India, the fundamentalist charge is led by the century-old Hindutva movement.

Ironically, in spite of its success and obvious mass popularity, there has been very little dispassionate exploration of the factors that drive the Hindutva movement. *The World Before Her*, a 2012 documentary directed by Nishita Pahuja, however does exactly that, breaking new ground as it explores the impact of Hindutva in modern India.

Released in theatres in June 2014 in India, the film moves along two streams, one documenting the 2011 Miss India pageant, the other a Durga Vahini camp, the women's wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organisation which subscribes to a particularly militant form of the Hindutva ideology. Through the lens of these two (ostensible) extremes, the film attempts to provide a glimpse into the status of women in modern India.

Thinking through the issue of fundamentalism as it applies in India, the film tracks Prachi Trivedi, a young girl who is a trainer at the Durga Vahini camp. *The World Before Her* claims this is the first time that cameras have been allowed inside to film the internal activities of the VHP. Maybe it is this novelty that makes Prachi's story riveting to watch. There is, of course, the expected (but still unsettling) hate. Preachers compare Muslims to demons and teenage girls proudly proclaim that they don't have a single Muslim friend. “I did have one friend when I was little”, one girl admits, smiling fondly at her naiveté, “but at that age I didn't know better”. Pahuja has mentioned in interviews that the brainwashing and

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manipulating of young minds by the VHP “shocked and depressed” her (this bit, incidentally, has interesting parallels with an American documentary, *Jesus Camp* which covers similar brainwashing by evangelical Christians).

Of course, things are not in black and white and this is where *The World Before Her* shines; because this is a side of the Hindutva movement that has rarely been communicated, neither by its supporters nor by its detractors. The Durga Vahini has an interesting relationship with modernity and the status of women in society. On the one hand, like all fundamentalist movements, it is wary of the changes modernity brings. A female preacher warns the girls in the camp that the lure of careers is nothing but a ploy to destroy the Hindu religion (in the VHP world view, there are a bewildering number of things that can destroy the Hindu religion). However, there is a paradox here. If the VHP really wanted every woman to be a good housewife there would be no one in their camps; no one to defend Hinduism from the many, many threats it faces on a daily basis. Thus, in another scene, where the women are being taught how to use a gun, the trainer also mocks them for wanting to be *only* housewives: “*Poori zindagi kanda-batata kaatenge kya?*” (Will you spend your entire lives doing kitchen work?) This is reflected in the way Prachi sees the VHP as well. The VHP is not regressive for Prachi. She feels a sense of purpose here because she can boss the other girls around and dedicate her life for the “Parishad”. While her father wants to push her into a life of tame domesticity, Prachi hates the very idea. “I am not like other girls”, she declares, using this difference to provide a rationale for not wanting marriage, otherwise the supposed Holy Grail for every Indian woman. Her orthodox father, on the other hand, thinks that a woman is only complete when she has experienced motherhood and is baffled by Prachi’s insistence on remaining single.

Faced with a life of *kanda-batata* chopping, for Prachi, the VHP is a way out. It is, against all odds, her ticket to modernity. A muscular Hindu identity, in the service of a larger “cause” trumps

the “staidity” of motherhood for Prachi in much the same way a big city woman (who Prachi and her father unite in despising) might chose a career in banking over having children.

However, most fundamental movements are set up to counter modernity but they are also defined by the contours of modernity. A complete rejection of modernity – particularly in the case of the Durga Vahini camps – would mean that the camps would be deserted for the most part of their existence.

With respect to the Hindutva movement, while women’s emancipation is a good example of this dichotomy, maybe an even better illustration could be found in caste. Mainstream Hindu reform movements moved slowly on caste and its abolition. In 1920, Gandhi wrote that “caste has saved Hinduism from disintegration” and “the law of heredity is an eternal law and any attempt to alter that law must lead us, as it has before led [others], to utter confusion” (Gandhi 1999a: 67). In fact, throughout the duration that he led the Congress, Gandhi maintained that caste (i.e., hereditary occupation) must *not* go, even as he opposed untouchability, a position that Ambedkar denounced as pointless, even hypocritical. It was much later in 1945, at the ripe age of 76, that Gandhi relented on caste and proclaimed that there existed only “one *varna* today, that is of Shudras” (Gandhi 1999c: 23).

Co-option of Modernity

In sharp contrast, as early as 1922, in his seminal book *Hindutva*, Savarkar argued that instruments such as caste which had “survived their utility” be dismantled. For this he proposed that “intermarriages between provinces and provinces, castes and castes, be encouraged where they do not exist” (Savarkar 1923b: 53). This was, for its time (and, in many ways, even today), a radical prescription – inter-marriage, the breakdown of sexual barriers was a holy grail that very few dared to touch. At about the same time, for example, Gandhi was firmly opposed to inter-caste marriages. When asked why this was so, he replied:

I cannot picture to myself a time when all mankind will have one religion. As

a rule there will, therefore, be the religious bar; people will marry in their own religion. The caste restriction is an extension of the same principle. It is a social convenience. I am opposed to Untouchability because it limits the field of service. [But] marriage is not an act of service (Gandhi 1999b: 396).

Of course, it must be noted that Savarkar saw nothing intrinsically wrong or unjust in the practice of caste itself. He held that, in an earlier age, “all that the caste system has done is to regulate its noble blood on lines” and helped “to fertilise and enrich all that was barren and poor, without famishing and debasing all that was flourishing and nobly endowed” (Savarkar 1923a: 31). Savarkar’s stand was purely functional. He wanted a complete abolition of barriers such as caste because they had “survived their utility”. Radical measures such as inter-marriage were needed so that the “[Hindu] race gets consolidated and strong, sharp as steel” presumably in order to be ready to face the same dangers the Durga Vahini was preparing its volunteers for.

Much like the VHP’s stand on women’s emancipation, this was a necessary compromise to make in service of the large Hindu “cause”. In the process, the Hindutva Movement had used modernist methods (such as inter-caste marriage), albeit under the rhetoric of tradition and religion, far more effectively than traditional Hinduism, which still floundered in its old ways.

This religious reaction to (and simultaneous co-option of) modernity is, of course, not unique to Hinduism alone. Traditional Islam has been slow to react to modernity as well. In rural Pakistan, for example, belying its somewhat benign, even glamorous image, Sufism is the keystone of a feudalistic social order. For centuries, the institution of the *pir* supported the feudal lords of the area and, in some cases, the pirs were the feudal lords themselves. In such a scenario, fundamentalist ideologies such as Wahhabism or Deobandism, with their rejection of a priestly class and their severe egalitarianism, act as emancipatory agents for the peasant beholden as chattel to the *pir* or lord. Of course, just like Hindutva, while Islamism might

claim to go back to a golden age and reject modernity, in reality the ideas it is propagating now are unique and are shaped by modernity as much as any other movement. The complete rejection of Sufism, for example, is mostly a new line of thought within Islam. Aurangzeb, to take up a famous example, was an orthodox Muslim of his time but chose to be buried next to a man who he considered his pir, Zain-ud-din Shirazi, a practice that would be looked up with extreme displeasure by the Islamists of today.

Of course, the co-option of modernity by fundamentalist movements is mostly done by stealth. On paper, they market themselves as anti-modern, looking back to a (mostly imagined) past. This marketing is sometimes done so well that they end up fooling quite a few people around them, including other movements grounded in modernity. Communism, for example, embarked on an all-out war against religion, understanding little of how it worked. Of course, the results of the war are well known: Communism lies dead as religion still exists, flourishes even. Another notable example of an equally shrill (if less violent) attack on religion comes from an intellectual movement known as the New Atheists. The New Atheists possess a rather healthy conviction in the veracity of their opinions, so much so that their style of debate often borders on the supercilious. However, other than preaching to a group which already believes in their argument in the first place, they seem to have achieved very little. Dawkin's *The God Delusion*, for example, has sold 2 million copies, which does seem like a respectable figure at first glance. However, to put things in perspective, *The South Beach Diet* has sold 23 million copies (CNBC.COM 2013). As a movement to replace religion, the New Atheists seem to be a pale shadow of even the Communists.

This mistake of dismissing religion and movements based on faith has been committed in India as well, specifically in the style of politics practised by the Congress and the Communists. Congress secularism uses this to convince Muslims to vote for it while denying both Muslims as well as other lower castes a real share

in political power. This point had been brought out brilliantly, way back in 2002, by Kancha Ilaiah who had pointed out that while the Congress/Communists ignored Hindutva, Hindutva was, via an age-old utilitarian flexibility towards caste, rapidly attracting Other Backward Castes (OBCs) (Ilaiah 2002). In a throw-back to Savarkar, this caste consolidation was driven by that most powerful of modern forces – ethnic nationalism, with Muslims posited as the “other” to the Hindu nation. In communal violence, for example, Hindutva movements depended on OBCs for muscle power, as seen most recently in 2002. This ethnic nationalism, with quasi-religious overtones, provided far more political power to disadvantaged groups such as OBCs than more avowedly modern, liberal formations such as the Congress. In a remarkable prediction, Ilaiah pointed out that if things continued the way they were, Narendra Modi, the tallest OBC leader within the BJP, might stand a chance to be the BJP's prime ministerial candidate sometime in the future.

Marrying Modernity with Religion

In the normal course of things, of course, Modi, who belongs to a politically insignificant caste in Gujarat, might not have gotten anywhere, much like Prachi whose gender acts as a solid barrier. But

in both cases, limits of identity (caste, gender) were overcome, in however limited a manner, by a religious fundamentalist movement even as secular political formations struggled to provide similar internal mobility.

And it is in this contradictory observation that could provide an answer to why the theory of secularisation has failed in India as well as around the world. By marrying modernity with elements of religion, fundamentalist movements have become more powerful than either of its parents, making it far more attractive and even useful to its focus groups, at least in the short run.

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