

Why We Should Fear A Hindu Rashtra: A Counter-Argument

In all the complexity in understanding how the Hindu culture is perceived, the question remains, “Is Indian culture simply synonymous to Hindu culture?”

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Updated on: 25 January 2024

Published at: 24 May 2018

Outlook

C.K. Saji Narayanan, in his recent *Outlook* article ‘Why fear a Hindu Rashtra?’, illustrates the RSS’s version of Indian identity based on an illiterate logic of transitivity, equating Hindutva as national identity, Hindu culture and Indian culture, thus making them seem one and the same.

He tries to redeem his article from his confusion of the notions of Hinduism, Nationalism and Culture by wrapping it in a language of progressive democracy. However, his attempt fails utterly by the violence his writing perpetrates on the psyche of democratic self. That is to say, his arguments may have an effect of killing a fragment of self in each of us. He portrays his dream of India as the only

legitimate one by substantiating it through an instrumental Hindutva-inflected history, one created by the propagandistic oversimplifications of the RSS.

In illustrating the idea of secularism as a manner of hospitality, Shiv Visvanathan defines secularism as “a way we respond to strangers”. “We welcome the other because he is not us. The stranger is the other who defines us”, he adds. In a country like India, democracy comes into being from the existence of multiple selves, and each ‘self’ defining the other. To claim the Hindutva self as greater than other selves of India, as Narayanan does in his article, should be read as an attempt to give dominance to one self or one of the parts that form the whole of India.

The argument advocates that Hindutva ensures the ‘sustenance of various religious groups’ in the country. However, this sustenance is linked to the underlying unity of being a “Hindu”. As such, a Hindutva notion of diversity does not convey the need for co-existence of diverse religions and cultures on an equal footing. Rather, it demands for the conditional accommodation of other religions and cultures under one homogenous identity, which subtly calls for the dominance of the Hindu majority. His notion of diversity is hierarchical rather than plural, and this conveys a double-standard implying, “If I dominate you, we are secular and accommodating, but if you dominate me, we are a theocracy and violent”. What he wants is yet another caste system where identities in India today operate in a hierarchy, where Hindus are the new upper caste.

This superiority of the Hindu identity derives its content as much from the exclusionary portrayal of ‘Semitic intolerance’, insidiously pointing at the Muslim, and then thus Islam as a whole. In doing so, the significance of Islam in the modern nation state narrative of India is judged only on how much it scores against the test of Narayanan’s notion of a Hinduistic-derived diversity. This test is, unsubtly, about assessing the perceived inferiority of other cultures, by keeping a lauded Hindu culture, praised for its innate tolerance, benevolence and “Indian-ness”, as the benchmark. With no regard to the difference in myths, theology and grammar of the two cultures, a judgment of inferiority is passed in

the ordering of the societies. As such, the co-existence of difference through multiple narratives, multiple truths, is lost to the rules of diversity dictated by a single homogenous idea of Hindutva. In comparing this ideology against other historical instances of segregation (Narayanan's reference to annihilation of minorities), it is made to seem less brutal by covering it with the notion of a fundamental Hindu accommodation and tolerance. However, the underlying subtext in both the cases resonates a single message. By slipping into the fear of a hybrid culture in the context of Muslims, Narayanan implies that 'We don't want to colonize you like the British or kill you like the Germans killed the Jews, in such a way that we don't want to rule you but rule over you because you are culturally inferior'. Such an implication is far more problematic than an overt act of ethnic cleansing because he speaks out the unsaid desire of many in India to rule over Muslims as historic revenge, or, to some eyes, justice.

The idea of ruling over Muslims is not specific to the Hindutva ideology alone. A more subtle version of asking the Muslim community to adapt to the demands of the modern Indian notion of secularism is conveyed in Ramachandra Guha's recent article, *Liberals, sadly*. Asking Muslims to abandon skullcap and Burkhas is to convey to them that if they don't abandon their religious symbolism in the public space, they will not be accommodated in the making of new Indian identity. The pushing of religious symbolism into the private lives of people is rooted in the Western idea of secularity. The existence of the symbolic in the public sphere has made religions and cultures converse and quarrel with each other which in turn made religions dialogical. In engaging with the other through a dialogue we work on our tolerance thus allowing for plurality of cultures to exist. This is not to say that the past was a joyous moment of pluralism where we celebrated our differences. But this is to say that the current trajectory of rigidifying identities and categories to form the hierarchical system for Rashtra is abysmal, and points out the intolerance in us. Sadly, this system can only make and take orders but can't engage in a dialogue with other(s), thus creating a system of command rather than a pluralistic society.

Narayanan's fear of mixed cultures clearly illustrates an exclusionary tendency by making a hypocritical argument that pluralism is going to dilute our diverse

culture. The anxiety of the Hindu right lies in the plurality of cultures and not in the diversity of cultures. As such, the desire for establishing a cultural supremacy becomes inherent to their idea of Unity in diversity. In doing so, Narayanan's illiteracy in his understanding of what forms and transforms a culture is obvious. In merging Indian culture with idea of Hindutva as the national identity, he reduces culture to a resource, a product to be consumed and a means to the ends of propaganda and power. This fails to understand the organic processes involved in the formation of culture as a way of life.

The problematic of culture here is three-fold: how India sees its own eclectic culture, how the West sees Indian culture and how Hindu right sees Indian culture. It is the common refrain of Indians abroad that their culture is not understood in the West, and reduced to certain oversimplified stereotypical understanding of what it means to be Indian. The controversy surrounding Apu from the Simpsons in the US is testament to this narrative, which demands a broader, more plural imagination of South Asia. In this context, Narayanan's understanding of Indian culture as Hindu, based on certain static categories, is reinforcing the stereotyping of Indian identity, coupled with even more disastrous consequences on the Indian imagination of itself, irrespective of the actual identities at play. Thus the stereotyping of Indian culture by the Orientalist West seems tamer than that by the Hindu Right in India. In all the complexity in understanding how the Hindu culture is perceived, the question remains, "Is Indian culture simply synonymous to Hindu culture?" Or to push it further, "Whether Narayanan's imagination of Indian culture captures the complexity of Hindu culture in itself?"

Narayanan, like the Hindu Right, tries to derive secularism out of the Hindutva, by making it a mode of social organization of religions, while negating the inter-personal relationship between God and the Hindu spirit. In doing so, Hindutva negates the unique narrative of divinity present in Hindu spirit. So Hinduism as an ideology of the Hindu spirit is reduced to nothing but a mere theory for modern state and political cohesion. The idea that the sacred can be deeply embedded in the personal is completely shattered by this sort of thinking. The renaissance movements, or the Samajs, in different parts of the Indian

subcontinent, in effort to rationalize Hindu spirit as a religious doctrine, tried to translate Hindu religion into a modernity's variant of Hinduism to appeal to those of Hindus who showed inclination to the doctrines of Islam and Christianity. The question of the sacred in Hindu spirit was sidelined in colonial and thus the post-independence making of Hinduism. While the Samajs rationalized the divinity in Hinduism, Hindutva negates it.

C.K. Narayanan wraps up the sentiments of the majority pertaining to anti-Semitism, Islamophobia in his narrative and provides them with the framework of Hindutva. The Hindu majority finds it comfortable because it doesn't unsettle them. Offering the framework of Hindutva in the jargon of democracy makes it look more civilized as against its demonic self. But what the majority does not realize is that in surrendering itself to Hindutva ideology, it, along with minority, loses its own agency to think, re-think, and introspect.

Further, his argument takes as given the idea that "the West means progress" and since the West has started distrusting Islam and regulating Islamic practices, India too needs to join the chorus of progress by following suit. The distrust of Islam resonates with the Western idea of Islamic terrorism and is further propagated among the Indian population by the RSS, using the narratives of national security and terrorism. These narratives form the basis of fear of the Muslim in the public, political, religious and social. In addition, history becomes over-simplified with Muslims as evil-doers and the other identities, even majoritarian ones, as cross bearers. Thereby Narayanan's narrative constructs the Muslim as a clear villain to hate without looking into the complexities of history (where in the organizing of a technocratic state, even Muslims rulers found themselves grappling with theological paradox), let alone complexities of the personal.

To understanding the complexity of "evil-doers", one has to revisit Gandhi's address to the RSS workers of the Bhangi Colony at Delhi in September 1947. Gandhi in his address said, "One has to be an infallible judge as to who was the evil-doer before the question of killing could arise." PiyushBalele, in his article about this visit in DailyO states that, "Now when RSS pracharaks are ruling the country and also showing full faith in the ideals of Gandhi, his teachings on the

Gita should be made part of...this government ceremony (Gita Jayanti).” But it is not only the RSS which needs to take Gandhi’s teachings seriously but also us as a civil society needs to understand who the evil-doer is. Is there by any chance the evil lies within us?

One can see this when the GauRakshak is regarded as a comic yet a sinister. One wonders if GauRakshak, through his very act of lynching, captures our anxiety towards the outsider, the other. While the act of lynching is definitely violent, and the barbaric nature of lynching demands a satirical ridiculing of the GauRakshaks by the “civilized” popular; in the act of mocking we tend to see violence as an external element, far from “civility” and distanced from “us” the “civilised”. Gau Rakshak as a singular explanation of brutal violence doesn’t capture the notion of evil that’s developing as violence in our country.

Today’s exemplary movements like #Notinmyname, can be read as acts of blame shifting or swaying away responsibility. The movement says violence should not be committed in my name, in the name of Hinduism, in the name of Indian people, in the name of Hindu people. But a corollary to this assertion is also that I, as a Hindu, as an Indian, am not responsible or accountable when a Muslim kid is raped in the name of communal violence. The #Notinmyname protests, as mere acts of gathering on the roads, is symbolic and further assertion of one’s unaccountability for the evil nature that can lie within oneself. Here we want to re-iterate this core question: “Is there any chance the evil lies within us?” In seeking for answers, one will find the importance of introspection and hence her own agency in the times when the state is highly anxious about the power of introspection and the effect on its subjects.

Bura jo dekhani main chali

Buramila nahī koi

Man jo khojā apna

Mujhse burāna koi

-Kabir

Translation:

I went into the world to search for evil

But I couldn’t find it in anyone

When I searched within my-self
There was no bigger evil than me.

-Translated by Aditi

(Misria is a researcher and Aditi is a member of the faculty at Jindal Global School)