



Letter to a Progressive Hindu


Secularism and civil rights in India took a beating last December when the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), a right-wing extremist Hindu political party, won the elections in the western Indian state of Gujarat for a fourth consecutive term. For Narendra Modi, chief minister of Gujarat, this election secures his second term. Modi's electoral victory comes in the wake of the carnage of 2002 in which rioting mobs of Hindus butchered close to 2000 Muslims, raped scores of Muslim women, looted and burned their properties, and terrorized many more for a period of three days ([Human Rights Report](#)). Most independent NGOs, citizen groups and international human rights organizations regarded the Gujarat massacre as a state-sponsored pogrom orchestrated under Modi's watch (see the special issue of *Tehelka*, and a [report of one citizen tribunal](#)). In 2005, Modi's visa to the United States was denied by the U.S. State Department due to concerted efforts by large sections of Indian expatriates or non-resident Indians (NRIs) in the U.S. who highlighted his complicity in the politicized violence perpetrated against Muslims in Gujarat ([Coalition Against Genocide](#)).

Progressive Hindus have also lost out in the Gujarat elections. Modi enjoys a messianic hero status among his NRI supporters in the U.S., particularly with Gujarati-Americans, many of whom actively legitimized and financially supported Modi in the recent elections through web-based campaigns such as www.supportgujarat.org. Here, Modi and the state of Gujarat are constructed *not* as hate-mongering perpetrators of human rights violations, but rather icons of *charisma* (Moditva or Modi-ness), neoliberal *nationalism* (Vibrant Gujarat based on Development or the so-called economic success of Gujarat), and *democracy* (defined simply as security versus terrorism with no regard for state terrorism or civil liberties). Behind the Moditva, Development and Democracy rhetoric lies a fervent appeal to Hindu nationalism, or *Hindutva* - an ideology embraced by the BJP and its parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), that draw unsettling parallels to the treatment of Jews under fascist Germany and Italy to how Muslims should be dealt with in contemporary India.

Moditva, Development, Democracy efforts to mask *Hindutva* ideology is evident through a closer reading of the "Support Gujarat" web-campaign. The *About* page carefully refrains from using terms like Hindu or Hindutva. But, this veneer quickly falls off as we read about Modi's strong RSS background, and his rise as master strategist for the BJP. The *Take Action* page details exhortations that replay the most stereotyped fears of a Hindutva vision. Here "Gujarati brothers and sisters" are warned that if they do not vote for Modi, then it would be an "insult to Hindus & Hindu ethos, appeasement of minorities [read: Muslims] by suppressing the majority population, accelerated conversion of Hindus, and thousands more Hindu temples coming under government control."

The Hindutva vision also comes out clearly in a document titled "[Q&A on NRI involvement](#)" on the same site which regurgitates standard Hindutva reasons for the pogrom of 2002. Such calls to NRIs are the overseas expression of what political psychologist Ashis Nandy has noted about those who voted for Modi. According to Nandy, the Gujarati middle-classes who voted for Modi have "found in militant religious nationalism a new self- respect and a new virtual identity as a martial community" ([Nandy, Gujarat: Blame the Middle Class](#)).

The outcome of recent elections in Gujarat exposes increasing popular support for *Hindutva*. It underscores the irony of Hindu claims of "tolerance" by advocating a tolerance for hate and

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By: [Biju Matthew](#) | From: [Issue 43: Special Issue: The 2014 Indian elections \(6/18/2014\)](#)

How can an event be at once ordinary and extraordinary, simultaneously decisive and indecisive? The victory of Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the Indian parliamentary elections of 2014 is indeed a watershed moment; for the first time in the history of independent India, it will be ruled exclusively by a Hindu supremacist party. And yet, a careful look at the way the Modi/BJP campaign produced this victory yields a picture that can only be characterized as simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary, decisive and indecisive.

politicized religious violence. While many Hindus have condemned the Gujarat pogrom and opposed the further communalization of society, there are also many who have remained silent or supported Modi's handling of Gujarat in 2002. Justifications for Gujarat usually follow standard Hindutva rationale that Hindus killed Muslims in reaction to a "mob of Muslims" who allegedly killed 58 Hindus a few days earlier at a place called Godhra in Gujarat.

Such arguments raise troubling questions about the kind of religion that justifies revenge of this sort and makes heinous acts into righteous defense of Hindus and Hinduism. Equally problematic is the lack of any attention to the fact that all legal and forensic investigation of Godhra have ruled out any possibility of a "mob of Muslims" being responsible for Godhra ([Backgrounder of Legal case, Godhra: The Diabolic Lie](#)). Nevertheless, Modi used Godhra to justify his pogrom and incite "anger" amongst Hindus ([Modi's hate speeches](#)). But the emperor simply has no clothes and neither do his supporters who maintain that the state-sanctioned violence perpetrated against Muslims was justified in light of alleged Muslim "mob violence."

Rather than focus on why Hindus could have allowed the Gujarat pogrom to happen (see the works of Gujarati sociologist [Ghanshyam Shah](#)), this essay will examine the potential for a "progressive Hinduism" to emerge in the aftermath of the 2002 pogrom and 2007 elections. More specifically, can a pluralist, humanist (anti-casteist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-exploitative at the least) and secular democratic form of Hinduism emerge in today's India? Or has *Hindutva* colonized Hinduism so totally as to not leave any space for such a vision? If a progressive Hinduism does not exist, does it have the potential to emerge and have a broad, public impact?

A Crisis for Progressive Hindus

In *Samskāra: A Rite for a Dead Man*, the protagonist Pranesacarya cries out, "not a God, but a guru, is who I wish for." Alas, even gurus may not be enough in contemporary times when the "gurus" of today are regularly charged with crimes such as murder, rape, and corruption. Recently, the Campaign to Stop Funding Hate (CSFH) released a report documenting links between the national office of the Hindu Student Council (HSC) and Sangh organizations in India and the U.S. (www.stopfundinghate.org). Given that many local HSC chapter members are unaware of these links, the evidence presented by CSFH has generated a critical debate across American campuses with many young Hindu-Americans questioning the link between Hinduism and *Hindutva*.

Why should a Hindu care about social justice? The point is that no amount of doing yoga, chanting slokas, waxing eloquent about Hindu philosophy, or proclaiming that all good things or only good things have originated in Hinduism, can answer simple questions posed by history: And what were Hindus doing when blood was being shed in their names during the everyday killings and humiliations against *Dalits*? During the everyday performance of patriarchy, such as the fetish for a son that leads so many Hindus to commit crimes against the girl child while pretending that their religion treated or treats women as equally human? During the increasing militancy of Hindutva that produced the Gujarat pogrom against Muslims in 2002? During the regular assault on academic, cultural and artistic freedoms in the name of a self-styled cultural police?

So what prevents Hindus from being progressive? Like other religions, Hinduism too has had its oppressive institutions, inegalitarian ideas and practices, and half-truths and fabrications about itself, nature, human beings and social relations. Not facing up to these limitations, flaws and even fatal problems within Hinduism only leads one to defend all things Hindu, including the indefensible caste system and patriarchy (see the [attempt to rewrite textbooks in California](#) by glossing over casteism and patriarchy in Hinduism's history). The above attempt was led by Hindutva organizations among which was the Hindu Student Council's pet project, Educator's Society for the Heritage of India (ESHI).

This kind of "offensive defense" has manifested itself among some Hindus who dismiss the idea of a "Hindu crisis" and instead claim that far from suffering an internal crisis, Hindus are "besieged

To the Hindu middle-class: Why "wait and see" won't cut it

**By: Deepa Panchang |
From: Issue 43: Special
Issue: The 2014 Indian
elections (6/18/2014)**

In 2006 and 2007, I spent several months in Ahmedabad while on a fellowship from my university in the US. During my time in Ahmedabad, I interacted with the mostly-Hindu NGO staff where I was based, residents of the largely Hindu shantytown where the NGO was working, and professors at Gujarat University. Less than five years had passed since the city had gone through its nightmare: vicious riots involving saffron-clad men entering urban neighborhoods and brutalizing, gang-raping, and burning other human beings. Some 1,500 Muslims were killed.

Policing Sex

**By: The SAMAR Collective
| From: Issue 42: Policing
Sex (3/24/2014)**

This issue on Policing Sex explores the wider context of the criminalization of homosexuality in India, as well as visions put forth to challenge heterosexism, the police state, and misogyny.

insh'allah & airport ode #1

**By: Leah Lakshmi
Piepzna-Samarasinha |
From: Issue 42: Policing
Sex (3/24/2014)**

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's poems evoke borders of bodies and nation.

from the outside." They have even coined a term for it, *Hinduphobia*, which constructs the specter of a large-scale "fear psychosis against Hindus and Hinduism." According to this school of thought, the chief culprits are scholars of Hinduism in the US American academy, especially those who engage in particular historical, cultural, semiotic and psychoanalytic interpretations of "sacred" Hindu myths, icons and historiography.

Many faculty at American universities have tremendous respect for those parts of Hinduism that demonstrate wisdom and diversity of thought. Nevertheless, along with their counterparts in Indian universities, scholars have not hesitated to write about the many provocative themes that exist within Hinduism. Would the cultural critic and folklorist A.K.Ramanujan, who taught at the University of Chicago be charged with *Hinduphobia* since he documents numerous Puranic stories and Hindu myths in which *incest* is an explicit and even desirable theme? Alas, this has already begun to happen in the recent Delhi University incident over the inclusion of Ramanujan's masterful piece on the multiple readings of Ramayana ([read Delhi university response to the Sangh](#)).

Will the Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar now be termed *Hinduphobic* because he quotes a passage from the Yogatattva Upanisad that is quite explicit about the sexual desires of a son towards his mother? It is indeed true that Hindus face racism in America, including what may be called "cultural racism." Witness the xenophobia of the recent protests in the U.S. Senate when some Christians protested the chanting of Hindu mantras in the Senate on grounds that Hinduism is outside the pale of Judeo-Christian beliefs upon which the U.S. is supposedly built.

However, what can we say about the many who also protested the chanting of Vedic hymns in the U.S. Senate since this legitimized caste-based thinking contained in the Rig Veda (see [atrocious news](#))? Are we to consider protests against Hinduism's caste oppression as *Hinduphobic*? Similarly, should protests against Hinduism's patriarchal oppression also be termed *Hinduphobic*? The pseudo-concept of *Hinduphobia* is developed in a book *Invading the Sacred* which does not distinguish between critical questioning or heterodox interpretations of Hinduism on the one hand, and racist and xenophobic attacks on Hindus on the other. Interestingly, the last appendix in this book is a petition by the Hindu Student Council (mentioned above as having links to the Sangh Parivar) to ban a book that analyzed the Ganesha myth using Freudian Oedipal theories and structural analysis.

Next Steps

How then can we develop a socially progressive vision for Hinduism? In 1936, an intense exchange took place between Ambedkar and Gandhi - two of Hinduism's best students. The context was Ambedkar's critique of Hinduism's retrogressive nature, especially the institution of caste as being detrimental to *all* Hindus. Ambedkar's erudite and humanist critique of Hinduism was an *internal* critique since he was speaking from within the fold when he was still a Hindu. It was nevertheless unacceptable to Gandhi and to most Hindu leaders who rejected it as an attack on Hinduism's roots. Tragically, it was forgotten that Ambedkar made distinctions between a *religion of rules* that he wished to destroy (which was how he saw Hinduism being practiced), and a *religion of principles* which he wished to bring into existence in its place. Thus, he exhorted:

...you [Hindus] must give a new doctrinal basis to your Religion—a basis that will be in consonance with Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, in short with Democracy... This means a complete change in the fundamental notions of life. It means a complete change in the values of life. It means a complete change in outlook and in attitude towards men [sic] and things. It means conversion; but if you do not like the word, I will say, it means new life. But a new life cannot enter a body that is dead. New life can enter only in a new body
—from *Annihilation of Caste With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi*, 1936

Pride: There is no going back

By: [Sabelo Narasimhan](#) |
From: [Issue 42: Policing Sex \(3/24/2014\)](#)

Sabelo Narasimhan reflects on this year's Gay Pride parade in Bombay, India. In the wake of the recent judgement criminalizing homosexuality, the images in this photoessay reveal the unbounded spirit of rebellion and resistance of the community.

More than 70 years later, are Hindus prepared to consider Ambedkar's exhortations to Hindus? Or will, Ambedkar be rejected as a *Hinduphobe*? Progressive Hindus have much to do. If philosophers have interpreted the world, our work is not only to change it, but to effect such a change precisely by re-interpreting this world. Building "a progressive, tolerant, secular humanistic" space for Hindus means genuine self-criticism and creative reform of Hinduism and its organizations. This is a tough task but it needs to proceed immediately among Hindus in the U.S. since, as we see above, Hindu NRIs are relied upon heavily by the Sangh in India to further its hateful agenda. Can progressive Hindus be Hindus who boldly and publicly differentiate Hinduism from Hindutva? Hindus who take up hard battles for progressive ideas in the most intimate of spaces of family and community? In the *non-dramatic everyday world of being a Hindu*?

Examples would include being vigilant about the background of *priests and priesthood* including ending the hereditary caste-based Brahmin entitlement and ensuring the entry of women priests; questioning caste reproducing practices such as the requirement of stating one's *gotra* or claimed patrilineage for propitiating a deity, thus reproducing the value placed on one's birth group which is the basis of caste; pushing for cross-caste marriages in those temples that act as forums for arranging marriage alliances; expunging sexist and casteist marriage rituals and creating secular progressive and more humanist Hindu marriage guides; rewriting web pages of temples and Hindu organizations that contain communal renderings of history of India and Hindus.

Can progressive Hindus question authority and not merely regurgitate "authoritative" interpretations of Hindu scriptures? Here, Hindus can learn from the *Navayana* movement of Dalit neo-Buddhists in India who have boldly charted out their own version of Buddhism suited to progressive political projects of dignity to all humans. Can we develop progressive reinterpretations of key Hindu concepts such as *maya*, *karma*, *dharmā*, *seva* and *moksa* in order to construct a Hindu liberation theology that radicalizes Gandhi's idea of *Daridra Narayana* or a God who was with, for and by the poor and oppressed, by de-linking it totally from the *varnasrama* concept which prevented the transformation of Gandhi's insight that "poverty is the worst form of violence" into a plan of action based on sociopolitical and class analysis as the causes of poverty?

Can we be bold enough to reinterpret or reject many verses and even entire scriptural texts as not suitable for progressive Hindus? An example could be verses 3.22-3.24 from the Gita wherein Krishna, the God who plays the part of a guru, tries to convince Arjuna to do his "duty" on grounds that failure to do so would result in *sankarasya* or the intermingling or mixture of castes. For, no amount of intellectual camouflaging will be able to answer the question that a progressive Hindu will ask: So, what is wrong if people intermingle (or if *sankarasya* happens)? Who is bothered with this and why? Why does the Gita dwell so much on not doing another person's "duty"? Who defines this "duty"? What, in other words, is the Gita upholding as a social order?

Coming back to *Samskara*, we see that not surprisingly, humanist teachings in Hinduism arise not from our host of gods and goddesses whose life stories are many times filled with outrageous kinds of deceit, manipulations, selfishness and greed. Instead, all humanist Hindu teachings are from its human and humane gurus, not gods. And the best gurus teach to serve humanity and to not observe distinctions of caste, creed, and even gender in ways that create and reproduce hierarchies or inequalities. Indeed, when one such God tried to play the role of a guru as seen above in the Gita, the teachings are quite clearly non-humanistic. Not a god, perhaps neither a guru, only ourselves reawakened is what I wish for...

Authors Note: This article was written while watching the growing support for Modi in the Gujarat elections and in the context of the release of the Campaign to Stop Funding Hate's new report on the Hindu Students Council and their links to the Sangh parivar (See www.stopfundinghate.org for the CSFH report and Press Release).

Comments

Submitted by AUTOZTRADER.com on Wed, 2012-11-07 06:40.

Nice picture. [AUTOZTRADER.com](#)

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Submitted by Missed Fortune on Sat, 2012-10-20 08:11.

I just hope that this will not go out of proportion. Peace and stability on that region is very fragile and sensitive. -

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