The avenging angel and the nurturing mother: women and Hindu nationalism

Geetika Raman

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GEETIKA RAMAN, *University of Edinburgh*

Hindu nationalism presents Indian women with a variety of challenges and opportunities. This essay begins by looking at the historical origins of Hindu nationalism in the colonial period, particularly with respect to the role of women in this period of nationalism. It also considers the role of masculinity in *Hindutva* politics, and the idea of the 'defilement' of Mother India by Muslim invaders, as well as the perceived virility of Muslim and Hindu men contested in the female body, through sexual violence. It also looks at women's empowerment in the context of right-wing nationalism and militancy and the public role of women in the Sangh Parivar. The essay then focuses on the view of the Shiv Sena on women, especially in the Bombay riots of 1993. The essay concludes that *Hindutva* politics attempt to marry two visions of the woman: one as a nurturing mother, the other as a warrior goddess. Women's empowerment in this framework is limited to roles that conservative leaders link to 'tradition' and purity.

Jayawardena and de Alwis make the point that the ideological base of identity politics and exclusivism is not new; it goes back a century or so to a period of nationalist upsurge against both British rule and the foreign religion (Christianity). During colonial rule, religious revivalism became a powerful opposition movement. This revivalism involved an assertion of a national identity and a cultural/linguistic consciousness in opposition to the identity/culture imposed on the colonised by their European rulers. This revivalism of the majority communities had adverse effects on minorities and women. For example, as many feminists have pointed out, women were constructed as 'Mothers of the Nation' to carry out the revivalist project and their biological role as reproducers of the nation was highlighted, instrumentalising women's 'reproductive functions and their bodies in the

interests of the State' (de Alwis and Jayawardena 1996: 162). The nationalist project drew women out of the home into the anti-imperialist struggle (addressing public meetings, running schools for girls, fighting for the right to vote, et cetera), while simultaneously imposing a new agenda for women as carriers of tradition.

Manisha Sethi argues that in the 20th century women were seen as 'breeders' and their bodies seen as vessels of future Hindu warriors (2002). The thematic of Hindu impotence was beginning to be employed not as defeatist resignation but as a clarion call for action. The charge of Hindu effeminacy was countered by rhetoric of decline and degeneration from an Aryan past inhabited by fierce and vigorous men and spiritual and learned women. People such as the Marathas, Sikhs and Rajputs, with their recent history of combat with the Muslim rulers, were extolled for their valour and worked into a single collective Hindu identity. The virility of the Hindu male was recuperated for the present by conjoining textual Brahmanism with 'true kshatriyahood'. If centuries of 'Muslim oppression' and British rule had emasculated Hindus, their virility would be retrieved now by fighting and defeating the British but most importantly the Muslim (Sethi 2002: 1547). Women were not to appear merely as 'tropes', symbols of collective honour and shame, eternal victims – weak and suffering. They were to be empowered for self-defence (atmaraksha) by manifesting valour (virya). A new image of woman embellished by arms and preying on the 'predatory Muslims' began to be cultivated (Ibid.).

A significant feature of Hindu nationalism and inter-religious violence in India is 'communalism'. Communalism in the Indian context refers to an exclusive attachment to one's own community and active hostility towards other communities that co-exist in the same geographical region. Hindu communalism in India is primarily organised through Hindu nationalism (Hindutva), embodied within various political and cultural organisations (Anand 2007: 257).

Particular stereotypical representations of Muslims in Hindu nationalist rhetoric help foster an identity based on the intersecting ideas of masculinity, nationalism, violence, and sexuality (Ibid: 258). Hindutva narratives often start out with pious views of 'tolerant Hindus', peaceful and peace-loving, killed and persecuted by Muslims throughout history. There is also a notable discourse of defilement, linked to the defilement of the mother (in the sense of 'Mother India'), which suggests that Muslims have 'raped' or are intent on 'raping' India (Ibid: 259).

Dibyesh Anand argues that an 'anxious masculinity' lies at the heart of most right-wing nationalism, including Hindu nationalism in India. He also says that the ingredient of anxious nationality acquires lethality when combined with the complicity of the state. He says that the state is an 'embodied institution reproduced through discourses of masculinity and nationalism and through practices of violence and control' (Ibid: 257).

The perceived fertility and virility of Hindus and Muslims also plays out in right-wing nationalism in India. Islam is seen as backward in its attitudes towards reproduction: the Koran exhorts adherents to produce more children, there is a prohibition on contra-

ceptives, and Muslim men are allowed to have four wives. Muslim reproduction is also seen as a calculated move to exert demographic dominance over Hindus. The Hindutva narrative also sees irresponsible sexuality as contributing to the 'overpopulating Muslim body'. In this narrative, the virility of the Muslim male is assumed, as is the fertility of the passive Muslim female (Anand 2007: 257). Anand also cites Tanya Sarkar in saying that there is a perpetual fear of a more virile male Muslim body 'luring' away Hindu girls. The docile and virtuous Hindu male (exemplified by the Buddh a and by Gandhi) is contrasted with a 'dangerously virile' Muslim masculinity. Hindutva thus calls for the Hindu body to be 're-masculinised', jointly and severally (Ibid: 261).

Conservative politics naturalise and sanctify the family and sexuality and seclude women from the public sphere. They use women's bodies as a battlefield in the struggle to appropriate institutional power (de Alwis and Jayawardena 1996: 162). The Gujarat riots of 2002 were marked by the killing of and sexual violence against Muslim women for 'public consumption'. The 'audience' was comprised of the 'awakened' Hindu community and the 'victimised' Muslim community. Sexual assaults against Muslim women serve two purposes: first, brutalising Muslim women, and, second, denigrating Muslim men for 'failing to protect their women' (Anand 2007: 264).

As early liberal nationalists understood the importance of drawing women into the anti-imperialist struggle and the modernising process, so post-colonial nationalists are trying to incorporate women into their movements, based on a mythic religious and ethnic identity. There is a phenomenon of right wing 'fanaticism' highlighting women 'leaders' and giving them roles to propagate certain religious and social messages (de Alwis and Jayawardena 1996: 162). Nationalist movements have used women as cultural representatives. Women are the carriers of 'authenticity', putting them in a difficult position vis-à-vis their gender and religious identities (Ibid: 163).

Paola Bacchetta, who has spent several years studying the rhetoric and practices of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), discusses in depth the 'notion of women's "empowerment" when articulated in the cadences of racism and violence, and its wider implications of making female subordination tolerable and more durable' (Ibid: 165). Policing of borders by the Sangh extends to the geographical and feminised borders of Bharat Mata (Mother India), with militant calls for its c leansing through the demolition of mosques, which represent Muslim male sexual and communal aggression (Ibid.).

Manisha Sethi confronts the issue of women's militancy in the Hindu Right. She contends that gender identity does not exist as primordially ordained but is invented, created, resisted and subverted at the junction of multiple identities. The entire practice, both discursive and material – the imagery of Bharat Mata, the valiant historical figures and subservient mythical wives – all allow women to become avenging angels in moments of crisis. When these moments ebb away, they return to the mode of nurturing mothers and obedient wives (Sethi 2002: 1545).

No society constructs a single, monolithic gender system. Gender discourses are internally differentiated such that different gender positions are available to individuals in the multiple discourses and practices that they inform. All the major axes of difference (race, class, ethnicity, religion, caste, et cetera) intersect with gender in ways that suggest a multiplicity of subject positions within any discourse. So 'while we can speak of a variety of ways of being a man and equally rich ways of being a woman, we can also speak of gender enmeshed in other differences such that one form of difference can be invoked for another' (Ibid.). For instance, nation and community may be symbolised in the sexual honour of the figure of the mother. The sexualisation of race and caste, amongst others, more than anything emphasises that identities, more often than not, are about questions of power, and gender exists as a signifier in these power relations (Ibid.). Like most other concepts, agency is also a gendered concept. Discourses about sexuality and gender frequently construct men and women - the gendered persons - as inhabiting different domains of 'agential capacities' (Ibid.). There can be explicit associations between men, virility, activity and aggressiveness on the one hand and identification of women with utter passivity, servility and receptivity on the other. Sherry Ortner attributes women's supposed lack of agency to the prevalence of the notion widespread across the cultures that women are closer to nature while men reside in the realm of culture (in Sethi 2002: 1546). So women are associated with the 'domestic' or 'private' rather than the 'public' domain of social, political and economic life, which only men animate and transform.

To consider the public role of women in the Hindu Right, we may look at the Mumbai riots of 1993, which followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Madhu Kishwar suggests that one of the most disturbing features of this riot was the large-scale, enthusiastic participation of women and young girls in the acts of violence (1995). She argues that the fascination of women for Sangh Parivar politics is especially noteworthy considering that their politics is 'brazenly macho'. So far, women in India have mostly entered politics as the wives, mothers and daughters of powerful male politicians. During the riots, many Hindu women in Bombay were openly justifying the rape of Muslim women. They argued, 'Why not? What is wrong with it? For hundreds and thousands of years, Muslims have done the same to Hindus. We are settling those old scores because now we are powerful and united. They have invited it on themselves' (Kishwar 1995).

Sikata Banerjee points out that violent feminine action, although not unheard of, is not very common in India. Indian feminists have sought to highlight female strength and assertiveness by embracing the goddess Kali as a model of womanhood rather than the passive and obedient Sita, wife of Lord Ram (Banerjee 1996: 1214). In the past, reports of female involvement in violent situations in India have tended to emphasize the peace-making role of women, linking the nurturing aspect of the wife and mother role with the 'natural' feminine predilection for peace.

Concentrating on Hindu, Maharashtrian, lower class, and lower caste women, the Shiv Sena (the right wing party in Mumbai that led the 1993 riots) is able to focus on a community with shared norms and values and can maximise the appeal of its vision of woman and minimise the possibility of dissent. In contrast, feminists have found that their respect for diversity and the presence of diverse vo ices make consent on an efficient strategy difficult to obtain (Banerjee 1996: 1221). The Shiv Sena leaders live and work in the slums of the city, interacting daily with the women of their area. In contrast, feminist leaders in Mumbai are mostly middle class, do not live in the slums, and have not cultivated the same relations of trust with these women. Thus, the Shiv Sena succeeds by fostering an identity that brings Hindu women together. There are no women in the upper echelons of the Shiv Sena, and women city council members from the party are elected from female-designated municipal wards and firmly follow the lead of male advisors. It is true that the male and female leaders share offices and seem to be equal, but the male leaders are in a dominant position. Therefore, the entry of women into the public arena under the banner of Hindu nationalism has not resulted in an actual female voice in political decision-making. It can be argued from a feminist perspective that the Sena's strategy is dangerous because it creates an 'illusion of emancipatory change while keeping patriarchal institutions in place' (Banerjee 1996: 1222).

Madhu Kishwar also claims that many Hindu women who were mobilized by the Shiv Sena joined out of fear rather than conviction (1995). Some women were told that if they did not join the riots the police would begin to arrest Hindu men, and their families would be at risk. She says that a few courageous women, some from women's organisations and some grassroots level political workers of other political parties, dared to go against the tide and intervened openly and sometimes even effectively in saving precious lives. These efforts were sporadic and/or isolated, but did sometimes succeed. However, on the whole, women's enthusiastic endorsement of and participation in the riots shattered the popular stereotype of women being innately more peace-loving and compassionate (Kishwar 1995).

Kishwar, like Dibyesh Anand, also suggests that in 'communal' or Hindu-Muslim riots, attempts are made to inflict humiliation and to destroy the sense of self-worth both of the women and of the entire community, to make the men feel helpless and unable to defend women from being publicly raped and mauled. Seema Hakim' s experience of the Bombay riots of 1993, recounted in Kishwar's article, is typical of the experience of women who fall into the hands of right-wing mobs. Seema saw her husband beaten to death in front of her eyes, and her house was looted and destroyed. She herself was gang-raped after being stripped and paraded in front of her entire neighbourhood (Kishwar 1995).

Hindutva politics attempt to marry two visions of the woman: one as a nurturing mother, the other as a warrior goddess. Women's empowerment in this framework is limited to roles that conservative leaders link to 'tradition' and purity. The image of the

woman as mother sanctifies her, secluding her from the public sphere, excluding her from political leadership. The Hindu Right provides opportunities for women (and then only Hindu women) only in the sphere of the home, or, rarely, in the streets as an 'avenging angel'. The challenges it creates for women are numerous. Some women are coerced into joining its activities out of fear of harm to their male family members, or due to a lack of any other form of liberation from the domestic sphere. The Hindu Right also creates numerous challenges for non-Hindu minority women. As seen in the Mumbai riots, the bodies of women become a battleground for a patriarchal war, and violating the body of a woman of the 'other' community becomes a way to humiliate and denigrate the 'other' male. Justification for these activities is drawn from discourses on male sexuality and virility, and the female voices of both majority and minority communities remain unheard.

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