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AAR **BOOK REVIEW**

Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism. By Banu Subramaniam. Orient Blackswan, 2019. xviii + 292 pages. $95.00 (hardcover), $30.00 (paperback or e-book).

The particular cover of Banu Subramaniam's book, *Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism*, is provocatively playful. A "Vedic" pundit sits at what appears to be the shoreline of the beach wearing several garlands of *rudrākṣa* and a sarong-like *luṇgi*. As well, his hair is worn with a typical top knot and a matching long beard. What makes this cover so delightful is that our pundit also wears a microphone/earphone head piece, as if he is in a call center. And, on top of this, he sits at a computer holding a stylus smart pen topped with a peacock feather. The computer screen seems to have the iconic green circles of a radar image tracking aircraft, and in the Devanāgarī script, it says *vimāna* (aircraft). Turning to the back cover, two *vimāna*s appear to be bursting out of the ocean as if they were submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

This book sits at a crossroad that makes it of interest to anyone curious about the history of India in relation to science, technology, neoliberalism, colonialism, gender, globalization, sexuality, and cultural studies. This occurs within the frame of biopolitics, which is a way to understand the coercive influences employed by the state to create docile subjects. It is accessible to someone not familiar with many of these concepts, particularly the sections related to genomics. The dust jacket explains that this book explores the "euphoric narrative of India as an emerging world power" and looks at the "untold story of an evolving relationship between science and religion" toward the co-mingling of worlds that "demonstrates how Hindu nationalism weaves an ideal past into technologies of the present to imagine a future nation that is modern and 'Hindu.'"

However, this is not just a straightforward critique of a multi-fronted hypernationalism. As Banu Subramaniam explains, "It is also an exploration of how the stories are generative and allow new naturecultural possibilities" (40) through an exploration of South Asia's rich tradition of storytelling. In just under 300 pages, the contents of this book include a prologue and epilogue and seven main chapters

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titled Home and the World: The Modern Lives of the Vedic Sciences; Colonial Legacies; Postcolonial Biologies: The Queer Politics of (Un)natural Sex; Return of the Native: Nation, Nature, and Postcolonial Environmentalism; Biocitizenship in Neoliberal Times: on the Making of the "Indian" Genome; Conceiving a Hindu Nation: (Re)Making the Indian Womb; and Avatars for Dreamers: Narrative's Seductive Embrace. Between each chapter is a short story of science fiction that Subramaniam has written. These stories are meant to highlight the ways in which narratives can be used to demonstrate particular issues. Personally, I found them distracting and confusing, but that is probably more to do with my antipathy towards science fiction in general.

I always enjoy flicking back through a book I have read to see which sections/chapters I found the most interesting. There is barely a page in this book that does not have a note in the margin that I scribbled, a paragraph with a new border I added, or the underlining of a sentence or two. The number of dog-eared pages and pencil-marked sections indicate that the third and fourth chapters were the most interesting for me. Below are some of the more memorable portions.

One section in chapter 3 highlights the combination of nativism, nostalgia, and orientalism (131). Subramaniam picks apart the argument that the ills of caste-based oppression are blamed on colonialism, explaining that "[a]t the end, what emerges is a nativist and nostalgic view of ancient India, and an interpretation of caste as a primal, socially innovative, and equitable system of resource partitioning. This nativism mingles with orientalist thinking as caste is valorized abroad" (131). The way in which religion and politics are entangled through neoliberalism generates new formations of "green" and "saffron" environmentalism within modern Hinduism. This nexus is key to understanding how "postcolonial environmentalists find unlikely allies in religious nationalists" (226). This partly occurs through rendering "indigenous" India as a "fetishized object, a benign premodern site of nostalgic return. The social stratification of Hindu nationalism and the increasingly neglected sites of rural life are lost in the nostalgic rhetoric of return to an idyllic past. The nostalgia resides in empty celebrations of the local and indigenous in global circuits, even while these very sites remain embattled within a global and neoliberal India" (137).

Chapter 4 explains that through the "dual processes of globalization of Hinduism by Hindu nationalists in India and the celebration and dissemination by diasporic Indians in their new lands lies the emergence of a global/universal Hinduism" (151), and that these processes reinforce nationalist and religious identities. Of note is the explanation of the various genome projects and how they have been thwarted and usurped across the world, but, at the same time, how marginalized groups also use genetic evidence to subvert nationalist claims of a unique India (152). Various groups deploy genetic studies for different political purposes. This is what is meant by *genetic nationalism*. One example demonstrates the racialization of caste. Based on a 2001 study, upper caste Hindu groups argued they were more European than lower-caste groups. Dalit activists

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then used the upper-caste interpretation of the study to claim a violation of their human rights had occurred. This resulted in an invitation for international monitoring by the United Nations.

In relation to the contours of the biologization of caste (154), *swadeshi*-style genomics (164–77) is discussed along with the Indian Genome Variation Project. This occurs in relation to "Ayurgenomics," which is an "attempt to reframe Ayurveda as a twenty-first-century modern medical system fully compatible with modern genetics." Thus, we learn about this strategy to secure India's modernity through a bionationalistic embrace of genomics (153) and the "pharmaceuticalization of life" and "biopolitical governance" (167). However, it is the sobering statistics relating to 2.5 million people in India dying from pollution in 2015, which, in some cities exceeded the World Health Organization's safety levels by nearly thirty times. Added to the fact that "more than 90 percent of adolescent girls in India are anemic, and 40 percent of Indian mothers are underweight" (170), it is easy to share Subramaniam's dismay regarding why the state funds a "mega genomic project rather than one of public health infrastructure."

The rest of the chapter discusses epistemological issues highlighting the binaries of biomedical vs ethno-medical and epistemic vs gnostic knowing. Even though Ayurveda is considered an indigenous practice, replete with its own epistemology of knowledge, the market focuses on selling gendered health products (beauty for women and power for men) through the neo-orientalist portrayal that Ayurvedic drugs facilitate spirituality (172). This exemplifies what Subramaniam refers to as a type of "archaic modernity" that works through "biomoral consumerism" and the politics of cultural heritage (173).

With all the very interesting arguments put forth in the book, it is in the epilogue that the social justice activism and critical race theoretical frame are finally made explicit. This includes the call for science to have more "grassroots social movements" and for scientists to move "into political landscapes" (227). Although this seems, at first, to be a strong critique against White and Hindu supremacy and the histories and consequences of colonialism, it is also balanced in critiquing the "virulently transnational and diasporic" "purity brigades" that are grounded in nostalgic visions of a "pure and mythical past" (226) with the need to generate "impure politics" to "work against purity" (228).

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