

The past as future

Hindutva mixes science and religion to concoct potent myths of archaic modernity.

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The world over, we are witnessing a rise in ethnic nationalism, rampant xenophobia that targets refugees and long-term immigrants, chasmic inequality between the rich and the poor and a powerful majority that has been rendered into a wounded majority that claims victimhood. These developments have come alongside dizzying volleys of contrasting and conflicting claims news, fake news, counter news. Along with these, we have seen a blurring of the boundaries between truth and falsity, real and fake and science and pseudoscience. In the guise of challenging science and the elite and powerful, fake news' has been mobilised by authoritarian leaders to claim unlimited political powers. Every day, we seem to hear politicians use the famous lines from the Marx Brothers' movie Duck Soup, Well, who ya gonna believe? Me or your own eyes? Yet, something more is afoot in recent Indian politics. Science and religion, always potent forces within Indian politics and culture, have been re-mobilised for a modern India. Unlike other fundamentalisms, Hindu nationalism brings together a melding of science and religion, the

ancient and the modern, the past and the present into a powerful brand of nationalism, a vision of India as an archaic modernity'. Secularism has been reimagined as tolerance, and democracy as majoritarianism. Rather than characterise Hinduism as ancient, non-modern, or traditional, Hindu nationalists have embraced capitalism, western science and technology as key elements of a modern, Hindu nation.



The porous boundary between modern Hinduism and science is striking. The Hindu nationalists' vision of a religionised science and a scientised religion is grounded not only in a mythological corpus, but also in a mythoscientific' one. Much has been written about Prime Minister Narendra Modi claiming that the existence of Lord Ganesha suggests the existence of plastic surgery at that time! Perhaps he was being humorous or ironic. But Ganesha is an elephant-headed god; he is divine. Modi could have claimed that a god could, through divine powers, connect the bodies of an elephant and a human, or that a god does not need circulating blood or a central nervous system! Rather, he invented a plastic surgeon to perform an operation to connect the two interspecies body parts. This is precisely the imagination of Hindu nationalism that I find fascinating and significant science and technology and their practitioners mediate mythological and divine worlds. Even gods need doctors!

Indeed, mythological stories have been offered as conclusive evidence to claim a pre-Vedic existence for an astonishing array of sciences and discoveries gods in flying chariots as evidence

of ancient Hindu civilisation's flying machines, Karna as evidence of ancient genetic technologies, Sanjaya's accounts in the Mahabharata as evidence of ancient internet and satellite technology. Similarly, it was well publicised that before the launch of the first Mars Orbiter, Mangalyaan, the head of ISRO offered puja at the Tirupati temple. Repeatedly, we see the easy comfort with which science and religion blend together in the Indian context.

It is critical to recognise that these are not fringe political ideas, but ideologies that are thoroughly revamping the scientific infrastructure in India. From papers on Vedic science as modern science in the Indian Science Congress to recent government initiatives offering funding for the scientific validation for ancient knowledge', we see a repeated focus on reclaiming Vedic science as modern science. This seems less about producing new and innovative science for a future India, but rather on appropriating the vast power of modern science as India's ancient Vedic Science. These claims belie a deep-seated belief in the lost greatness of an ancient India, a greatness that the movement means to reclaim. Science and religion here are not oppositional forces but syncretic collaborators.

To fabulate is to create fables or stories filled with fantasy. Gods, mythologies and historical memories collude at our present time to recreate for us a fabulous Hindu past and future. Indeed, our present' is a critical political moment where religious nationalists are trying to suture their visions of the past' and future'. It may seem anachronistic, confused and ahistorical, but it has proved to be a powerful ideology that has renewed Hindu nationalism as a potent force in Indian politics.

I find myself in a unique position. I am trained as a biologist and was drawn to the history and philosophy of science in part through postcolonial scholarship work that traced the colonial and patriarchal roots of modern science and, indeed, all academic, disciplinary and knowledge systems. Postcolonial scholarship has systematically critiqued claims of the superiority of the western' knowledge edifice both because it has appropriated knowledge from across the world through colonialism and because it has systematically made invisible the vast histories of conquered civilisations. Indeed, the histories of South Asia and religious traditions in the region have so much to offer us. Yet the solution cannot be that the fabrications of empire are replaced with those of Hindutva! We need to exorcise the colonial roots of both to reimagine new futures. Hindutva is not Hinduism.

I have been revising this essay in the midst of the recent protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). It is heartening to those of us who mourn the idea of India as a multi-religious, plural, inclusive and secular society. After five years of uncontested policies and politics, there seems to be an upswelling of national anger. Yet, the country elected Hindu nationalists to power, not once but twice, and the second time even more convincingly. The BJP won with an agenda and a first term firmly grounded in the ideologies of Hindu nationalism. While the rapidity of recent news may be surprising abrogating provisions of Article 370 and removing Article 35A from the Constitution, the Supreme Court verdict on Ayodhya and the passing of the CAA the politics behind it was clearly in view before the elections. How deep and enduring the current moment will be remains to be seen.

As I write this, we appear at a critical crossroad. The success and rejuvenation of Hindutva seem unmistakable. There are calls for purity of India as a Hindu rashtra fanned by the gentle and righteous winds of a Rama rajya and the flows of the river Saraswati. Despite recent events, I have been struck by the deep resonance of Hindu nationalism and the potency of the ideology of Hindutva amongst friends and family. It has been a lesson and a reminder of the divisive and communal politics that have always lurked below the ghosts of empire, afterlives of colonialism, the perverse politics of sectarianism and the power of supremacist movements such as casteism, elitism, patriarchy and classism that fan majoritarianism while scapegoating minorities. The strong and violent police response to recent events is sobering. Hindu nationalists have completely embraced modern technology. India now leads the world in digital authoritarianism. We think we know our neighbours, our relatives, indeed, ourselves. The past decade has been a profound reminder of how little we do. It would seem that 72 years after Independence, we face a new tryst with destiny. The future of India is emerging through a reinvigorated imagination of India's fabulous and fantastical Hindu past we are quite literally marching back into the future.

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