

**OTHERING AS SELF-IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: A RELIGIOUS
CONTEXT FROM INDIA****SHRIKARUNAAKARAN .K**PhD Research Scholar,
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This paper explores the construction of the Hindu identity even as the Muslims are represented as the other. Focus of the time period is confined to the 1990s. The period constitutes a truly ruptural moment in contemporary Indian history. The paper draws on Anand Patwardhan's documentary, Abdul Bismillah's short story, Shahid Amin's essay, and Arvind Narrain's report. Patwardhan's documentary "In the Name of God" ("Ram ke Nam") speaks volumes of the religious tension unleashed. Abdul Bismillah's story "Guest is God" uses sarcasm and irony to depict the prevalent prejudices. Shahid Amin's essay contests the contemporary representation of the Muslims; Arvind Narrain's report reveals the intentions and the disastrous consequences of the religious riots. The paper points up the violent ideological character built into the movement of the Hindu nationalism, and finally makes a case for an impartial representation of the Muslims in correspondence with reality.

Keywords: Identity; Hindu Nationalism; Representation; Other; History; India.

The construction of the new Hindu identity is set on making the non-Hindus, the Muslims in this case, as the other through and through, so much so that they are portrayed as aliens. The distinction is deliberately and vigorously retained to amass/mobilise and strengthen political constituencies, and achieve narrow political ambitions. Othering is defined as a process whereby the members of a subordinate community are labelled as the other. This presupposes the exclusion of the given individual or people from a larger community which is a version of the self. Similarly, the category "other" designates a person or people on the margins of a (larger) community. The paper examines the construction of the new Hindu identity and the simultaneous representation of the Muslims during the 1990s through the lens of this othering process whereby the Muslims are preyed on to strengthen the Hindu ideology. The pivotal incident in question is that which triggers off the controversy of the Ayodhya Rama Janma Bhoomi issue. The religious tension which had been in a dormant state shows up itself abruptly in the Ayodhya Babri Masjid demolition. The documentary by Anand Patwardhan traces the origin of the Ayodhya issue and ascribes it to the rumour maliciously spread by the colonial rulers, and the Indians fall prey easily to the infamous but concealed 'divide and rule' policy. Consequently, the Hindus agitate for a place of worship inside the existent mosque. When a compromise was reached afterwards, and till the year of 1949, life had been easier.



Yet, the renewed enthusiasm does sound uncultivated and fanatical as it is disproportional and excessive. Arvind Narrain contemplates on the origin and nature of Guru Golwalkar's statement that eulogizes hindu culture at the expense of other cultures. Narrain quotes Gowalkar in order to bring out the narcissistic intent that disregards the social harmony:

The foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture... or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment- not even citizen's rights.

The quotation reveals the inner makeup of the fundamentalist stand, and it carries within the remarks that backfire and disturb. The sparks of the religious tension are contained therein. It is an ideological bigotry on the part of the claimant. It is also notable that he draws ideological support from Hitler's stand on racial superiority to further his 'concept'. The problem is that the statement assists only to aggravate the situation, for it helps just to incite/delude himself and disturb the others with reference to the emotionally appealing notion at the expense of disturbance to the entire society. His presumption misleads him to a mistaken conclusion: that the historical Germany's stand and its failure of the races to mingle and live together provides adequate proof of the impossibility of races to be assimilated. Nevertheless, his delusion helps only to stir an undesirable commotion resulting in a nation of people rioting among themselves.

The significance about the period of the 1990s is that the above stated ideas appeal the masses in a greater scale and the masses take to violence which was witnessed in reality. The assertion of the superior Hindu identity goes to the point of an attempt to identify the nation with Hindu ideology whereas the nation has been admitted to be secular in the constitution. The self-assertion celebrates a sect at the cost of the despair and destruction of the others. The endeavor to historically connect the location of the mosque with the very same spot of Ram's birth naturally invites the trouble. Ascribing places to religious sentiments arbitrarily and asserting it in a blindfolding manner do not seem to follow any logic or religious ethics. This will not resolve the current crises either. Such claims will just delay the process of finding a viable solution to the burning issue. Besides, the assertion does not seem to limit itself to the problematic of the location of Ram's birth, or Ayodhya. The mobs shout that the "mission" will proceed to places like Kasi and Madura which hints that an agenda of national scale is at work, and the issue might ignite the surroundings as mobs, by default, may want to fish in troubled waters. These attempts deliberately lead to perpetuation of tension and violence. Such rationally inexplicable and arbitrary attribution disrupt the amicably organized life of the society, and a peace-loving environment.

The scale of violence and damage to lives and property makes Arvind Narrain to see the Gujarat violence against the globally recognized category 'genocide'. He even questions the inability of the existing Indian legal framework to deal with the orchestrated violence against a minority body of people. The new Hindu identity works on the historically cherished or prejudicially inlaid pent up impressions, sentiments and of the Hindus that had been entrenched due to historical animosity down the centuries. Thus, it amasses the popular



support among the common by making a sacred impression and appeal when incited with an ideology. The history of Muslim conquest is seemingly in a seething condition and appears to seek vendetta. The baser instincts which are historically dormant are thus revived to settle score. Attracted by the ideology mobs take to violence. Once violence is embarked upon, it is uncontrollable in a country with massive population. Violence viciously turns to itself. Opportunists champion the fundamentalist Hindu ideology to exploit the situation, and attain political mileage. Political awareness in that sense has not yet made its inroads into the common public. Caution and patience in this have to be exercised so as not to be made scapegoats. Patwardhan's *Ram Ke Naam* documentary exposes the narrow agenda in operation, and registers riotous consequences of the religious bigotry and the violence unleashed. Even Shahid Amin sums up the Hindu nationalism as,

an aggressive ideological tool aimed at redrawing the basic contours of an avowedly secular nation-state. Its logic is to enforce the majoritarian idea of the singularity of national history, such that the enactment of historical vendetta against Muslim conquest of pre-colonial India become simultaneously the condition for the realization of Indian history and for demarcating the natural citizens of India. In this view, Indian citizens have at the very least, to give assent to the forging of a new Hindu identity'- the continual journey of a Hindu past... (Amin 1)

The regressive trend is evident in how fanaticism is not just tolerated, but promoted as well. Aravind Narrain remarks that Mamdani employs the category 'race' in place of ethnicity to evoke the high seriousness of the Gujarat violence and to depict the gravity of collapse of the law and order situation. He signifies the political nature of violence by choice of word 'genocide'. It denotes wiping out of a race. The category 'race' smacks of a foreign presence. In the general public thought, alien/foreign element is not to be trusted or tolerated; it needs to be cleansed of; purged of at once, owing to lurking historical antagonism given the humiliation consequent upon invasions down the centuries. But, that is not the issue at all at present when communities are supposed to cohabit harmoniously in a secular nation. However, in accordance with the politically motivated above stated ideology, the non-Hindus are understood, remembered, associated with alien presence through the simultaneous propagation of the Hindu ideology and nationalism. Nevertheless, the other people, the non-Hindus, especially the Muslims, are being stripped of the civilian rights they have had access to as fellow citizens to live peacefully as fellow citizens. In addition to understand the intentional nature to eliminate a totality of a group, Arvind Narrain points out the fact that there is no provision in the legal imagination to deal with the collective nature of the violence staged. This makes one wonder whether there are not any assurances at all in the constitution to ensure the safe life to other minority communities. Such anxieties lead one to wonder whether such consequences are really fortuitous.

Taking our eyes off the construction of Hindu identity, let's throw some light over the representation of the Muslims in the 1990s. The redefinition of the nation by the majoritarian as aforesaid in the earlier quotations strips the Muslims of their right to live in the country as fellow citizens. It subjects their civil rights into question and brands them as aliens. That the ideologue in Amin's essay thinks along the Nazi Germany, does reveal the embarkation of an extreme and threatening stand that is terribly disastrous to humanity. Diversity and pluralism



are resisted. Historical Muslim conquest has been still seen as an irking pain in the Hindus' memory. Such a scenario is exploited by opportunistic politicians. Political ideology that is tantamount to narcissism is driven to attain political mileage as any other motives could not be deciphered for such an action. Whipping up the religious sentiments may reap constitutionally overwhelming vote bank. Since India is a democracy and where Muslims cannot produce a strong vote bank, politics driven by parochial objectives take up the religious sentiments to establish groupism, and thus the politicians want to ensure their political career. Where the members of the general public are yet to be informed and educated of the culture of democracy fully to reap the benefits of a new order of life promised by democracy, the politics along the divisive lines play out their pranks to invest politically. It is notable that Abdul Bismillah's short story 'Guest is God' instantiates prejudice and bigotry dormant in social fabric. The story depicts the entrenched attitude and the ensuing prejudicial behavior that have been in practice in an ironical and sarcastic manner. The courtesy and hospitality of the woman makes the visitor admire the openness of the people, yet soon the admiration is threatened by the revelation of the religious identity. This is the general ethos entrenched deep in the hindu consciousness with reference to other cultures, especially that of the Muslims.

While this is the situation at the level of the urban society, the general attitude on the national level is appalling. Sahid Amin pulls apart the way Muslims have been represented in the national forum in his "On Representing Musalman". He expresses his concern in "Extant histories of the Indian landmass...don't answer to our present needs" (2). He further says that the so-called social critics keep mum on the issue of the Muslims being stereotypically represented. He feels that those writers are content with what they have done and do not want to stir a 'disturbance'. When the minorities seek succour in secularism, the "academics" are bent on shaking them out of this modernist secularist trance. He also comes out with a practical wisdom, namely, political democracy and secular society are incompatible in contemporary India. He further identifies the majoritarian attitude working in full swing: "The westernized *neelkanth* Indian is therefore advised to gulp this bitter truth for the greater health of the body politic" (4). Then the implication is that the other is not to be allowed to fuse with the self. The minority, the other, has to be tolerant and should play the subordinate role. The move questions the very being of the other. This attitude will have many a repercussions on several levels of life in the country. Besides, those Muslims have been born and been living in India for generations. Ideas unbecoming of the times try to take over the reins of the power in the country. In this backdrop, comes the Turkish *topi* (cap) issue. The author feels that that does not represent the reality as no Muslim wears it in India. Sahid Amin asserts his way out trying to transform ineffective, unreal representation in the national billboard. He deals with the issue in relation to memory. People ascribe Turkish *topi* with foreign presence and it is being reproduced in the billboard. Yet, no Muslim wears it in public. The pictorial representation does not go with the reality: "The face on the poster does not match the man on the street" (8). There is then a conflict in the memory and the impression does not assist in embracing the other. Rather it shows them as aliens. Donning it in public would also provoke the Hindus, he feels. They would mistake it for unnecessarily flaunting off their uncalled for distinction. This would produce a grudge on the majority churning a disgusting impression, he fears (unlike the colonial times when the Turkish *topi*



served as an anti-colonial symbol.) Amin is upset over the history books' refraining from creating veneration for it. Amin thus is sensitive to the issues related with memory and imagination, and he relates them to the imagining/imputing the Muslims as the other; not as part of the nation. He traces the improper representation to be the root cause: 'Stereotypical images by which we recognize the Musalman are elements of a larger process of "fabrications" of the past' (9).

The Othering as a ploy is thus employed at several levels to construct a religious self-identity at the expense of an other that gets an outright rejection. Indian Muslims being not a race apart, there is nothing wrong in calling for a proper representation in correspondence with the reality.

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