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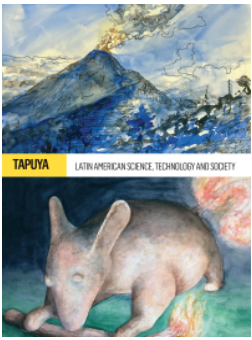
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Three analyses of Banu Subramaniam's *Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism*

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BOOK REVIEWS

Three analyses of Banu Subramaniam's *Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism*

Following are three reviews of this book, the first by Souvik Kar, the second by Misria Shaik Ali, and the third by Nayeli Urquiza-Haas

Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism, by Banu Subramaniam, Hyderabad, Orient Blackswan, 2019, xviii + 290 pp., \$14.03 (hardcover), ISBN 9789352876518

In October 2014, the Prime Minister of the most populous democracy in the world, fresh off his victory in the elections that propelled him to office, made a surprising public declaration about religion and modern science. He claimed that the Hindu mythological depiction of a particular deity as a man with the head of an elephant meant that ancient sages of that religion knew plastic surgery much in advance of its modern iteration. Public response to such a claim was dominated by feelings of cultural pride, spearheaded by a political movement that was, and continues to be, one of the chief driving forces behind the current government of the country. The country in question is India; the Prime Minister in question is Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who won a second term in the general elections of 2019; and the political movement in question is Hindu nationalism, which equates Indian citizen identity exclusively with Hindu identity, ideologically presented through the ethno-religious fundamentalist concept of "Hindutva" (Hinduness). Banu Subramaniam's *Holy Science* examines the anatomy of this relationship between science and Hindu nationalism in India.

The oxymoronic nature of the very title she chooses for her book – "Holy Science" – hints at her argument that unlike other fundamentalisms, postcolonial Hindu fundamentalism does not have an entirely antagonistic relationship with modern science. Rather, she demonstrates that as a response to colonial and postcolonial Western economic and geopolitical dominance based on technological superiority, Hindu nationalists specifically frame Hindu mythology and theology as repositories of indigenous knowledge that had already anticipated modern science. Hence, state-sponsored projects developing technologies and scientific infrastructure, despite proceeding according to neoliberal policies, are couched in the language of restoring that Hindu past to India, as postcolonial recovery after centuries of Islamic and British rule. Subramaniam argues that this legitimizes the erasure or subordination of non-Hindu communities either by framing them as expendable and hence liable to displacement and harassment, or by casting them as irrational luddites obstructing national development. On the other hand, Hindu nationalists then peddle Hindu religious customs and rituals (instituting particular forms of social organization and gender hierarchies) as scientifically valid knowledge. This is calculated to reinforce the idea of Hinduism, or specific interpretations of Hindu theology and mythology, as indistinguishable from modern science and thus deserving of the same order of social legitimacy and authority. Thus, by harnessing the social authority of science in the postcolonial nation, Hindu nationalists aim to transform the secular Indian polity into a nation ruled according to Hindu fundamentalist precepts. This is hardly left uncontested: Subramaniam shows how this hegemony is challenged by postcolonial, feminist, and Dalit

critique, offering a vision of a just Indian society that is an alternative to both Western late capitalism as well as postcolonial Hindu nationalism.

Divided into five chapters with an introduction and an epilogue, Subramaniam examines five important pseudoscientific claims made by Hindu nationalists and their implications for biopolitics in India.

In the first chapter, with reference to issues as varied as the 1998 nuclear tests and the recent popularity of Vaastu-shastra (an ancient Hindu theory of interior decoration linked to psychological and physiological well-being) as apparently “scientific knowledge,” Subramaniam argues that Hindu nationalism never fully critiques science as an episteme but rather arranges itself as a supplement that “realizes” the “full potential” of modern science – its social authority, based on which hierarchies may be instituted and society may be reorganized according to Hindu nationalist demands. In the second chapter, discussing the Hindu nationalist opposition (in league with both Muslim and Christian groups) to the 2018 repeal of Indian Penal Code 377 (which criminalized homosexuality as “unnatural”), Subramaniam points out that this understanding of sexuality according to a natural/unnatural binary internalized British colonial neo-Darwinian anxiety of the decreasing fertility of the white race, an anxiety that was presented through the pseudoscientific language of eugenics; this, she demonstrates, is in ironic contradiction to Hinduism’s historical embracing of queerness. In the third chapter, Subramaniam points out how, during the Sethusamudram Project controversy, Hindu nationalists attempted to incorporate ecological protest groups in their movement to argue that their demand for the preservation of a sacred Hindu relic (itself a supposed example of ancient Indian technological genius) was also aligned with an “indigenous” environmental criticism, thereby fetishizing “local” ecological knowledge as per their convenience (something which she demonstrates Hindu nationalists had attacked as irrational and superstitious in other occasions where it was in conflict with their agenda). In the fourth chapter, through an analysis of the Indian Genome Variation Database Project, Subramaniam notes how genomics are operationalized by Hindu nationalists to conflate Hindu identity with Indian citizenship by claiming that it is only the Hindu people that are endogenous to India. Subramaniam points out that paradoxically, Hindu nationalists also support the Aryan Migration Theory (an eighteenth-century colonial theory that the “Aryans” mentioned in ancient Indian texts were Central Asian horse-riding nomadic tribes that migrated into India and Europe) to claim kinship between upper-caste Hindus and Europeans. This, Subramaniam shows, allowed the systemically oppressed lower-caste Dalits (communities belonging to the lowest strata of Hindu caste society, historically marginalized and brutalized as “untouchables,” their very name meaning broke, crushed) to fight back by encoding the casteism entrenched in Indian society as racism and demanding international monitoring. Genomics thus become an important space of contestations about Indian identity and citizenship. In the fifth chapter, Subramaniam examines the debates over the idea of Indian overpopulation. She points out that wombs become a political space for Hindu nationalism, as the latter assigns blame for overpopulation to Muslim families and Muslim wombs, and embodies a murderous, genocidal rage towards them that legitimizes the idea of religious war and forced regulation of reproduction in non-Hindu communities. Prime Minister Narendra Modi takes center stage here, again, in his framing of the Muslim community as “hum paanch, hamara pachees” (we 5, our 25) implying that a Muslim man takes 4 wives and the family is squared up from 5 to 25, thus being the primary villains of Indian overpopulation. Subramaniam demonstrates that in order to combat this, Hindu nationalists deploy the language of eugenics to disseminate dreams of racially superior Hindu children. Such an exercise inevitably colonizes the bodies of Hindu women by imposing social regulations on them and validating those regulations as scientific facts. Subramaniam also traces this to a sinister legacy of Nazism – seen in the

memoirs of pre-independence Hindu nationalist leaders calling for an imitation of the way women in Nazi Germany practiced “Garbh Sanskar” (gestation and birth practices) to reproduce racially superior children. Deploying the pseudoscientific language of eugenics, only certain bodies are standardized for reproducing the next generation of Indians, thereby determining a particular definition of Indian biocitizenship.

An important strength of Subramaniam’s analysis lies in her keen understanding of historical ironies about this conflation of science and religion in India. With reference to independent India’s first Prime Minister and famous secularist Jawaharlal Nehru’s popular assertion of dams being the modern temples of modern India, Subramaniam traces the roots of Hindu nationalist appropriations of science to anticolonial approaches to science during the Indian struggle for independence itself. Here she makes a decisive break with a previous generation of critics such as Shiv Visvanathan (1997) and Gyan Prakash (1999). She disturbs the monolithic idea of “Hindu,” by invoking the sheer diversity of beliefs and faiths (and demonstrating their complicated evolution through the pre-colonial and colonial era) that loosely form the community understood as Hindus. This enables her to challenge the Hindu nationalist formation of a singular Hindu identity; indeed, she highlights pre-colonial belief systems that often run contrary to the rhetoric and ideology of modern Hindu nationalists. Subramaniam thus brings to the fore the orientalist British colonial assumptions and racism that masquerade as the postcolonial Hindu nationalist idea of the “indigenous.” This is a point that communicates the true implications of her work for dissecting the knots in the relationships between modern science and postcolonial authoritarianism in the decolonized world beyond India. Not only does Subramaniam open up the celebration of the “local” as feeding into postcolonial authoritarian fetishization of the “indigenous,” but she also goes on to cast such fetishization itself as a direct descendant of colonial orientalist stereotypes; by doing so, she strips such fetishization of its political appeal of nativism, and successfully interrogates the assimilationist tendencies often inherent in such definitions of the “indigenous.” Refusing to stop here, she moves a step further to instead offer a more just alternative: a revitalized vision of an Indian society that celebrates plurality and respects alterity, reminding not only Indian but global audiences of the constant migrations and flows of international relationships that defy attempts to concretize ideas of racial, ethnic and cultural purity. Another important strength of her study seems to be her innovative inclusion of speculative fiction between the chapters. The stories work as thought experiments about the issues discussed in the chapters and stage the alternative visions that Subramaniam offers in her critique in the chapters. The presence of these thought experiments about possible alternatives, in the guise of speculative fiction, buttress her exposure of Hindu nationalist pseudoscientific claims as actually exercises in speculative fiction calculated to powerfully influence postcolonial social imagination of modern science and cultural politics of identity by posing as truth-claims.

Nevertheless, Subramaniam’s critique does possess limitations: while she brilliantly points out the ambivalences lurking inside the Hindu nationalist project of appropriating science for the sake of legitimacy, she does not ask the uncomfortable question of why these incidents of co-option, which should invite popular derision, instead have next to no electoral effect: rather, the regime’s thumping electoral victory in the national polls in 2019 project the impression of widespread tolerance, if not acceptance, of these projects of co-opting science. Subramaniam’s work arguably restricts itself to only policy documents and public utterances by political figures, apart from the existing scholarship she cites. The lack of any ethnographic surveys or statistical indices that could give an idea of the grassroots impressions of the above utterances and policies, is a limitation of the study. Hence, there seems to be little idea of how much ambivalence or resistance these pseudoscientific exercises might spawn, when coupled with inflation, rising unemployment and religious turbulence across the

country. While this probably goes beyond the scope of Subramaniam's argument here, the limitations demonstrate a need to expand and rethink the audience, as well as participants that are presumed or engaged with while writing about postcolonial science in India.


These limitations nonetheless reveal the way Subramaniam's work also churns out potentialities of important new work to be done in the field. It is also an important step forward in an alternative form of critique that weaves together both social criticism and speculative fiction in a seamless argument about alternative, liberatory visions that hold promise for biopolitics in not just India but also the decolonized world. As a nuanced portrait of the complicated folds of the relationship between science and Hindu nationalism in India, Subramaniam's work is an important intervention in the fields of postcolonial studies, feminist and Dalit critique, and science and technology studies in the Global South.

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Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism, by Banu Subramaniam, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2019, Xviii+ 290 pages, \$99.00 (hardcover), \$30.00 (paperback or e-book), ISBN 9780295745596

Now – the moment in time – you are reading this review, three years since the publication of the book reviewed, *Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism* by postcolonial scholar *Banu Subramaniam*, Hindu Nationalism has triumphed in India. Hindu Nationalism is based on the philosophy of *Hindutva* which aspires to make India into a Hindu theocratic majoritarian nation. Every day, Muslim houses are being demolished by state and municipal authorities (Ahmed 2022), Muslim practices are considered non-essential to Islam by the Courts (Prakash 2022), Muslim women are being auctioned on apps and receive rape-threats (Salim 2022; The Wire Staff 2022), Muslim journalists and activists are being jailed and men lynched (Hasan 2022; The Quint Labs 2022), Muslim cultural symbols are demonized (Qazi 2022) and laws that help criminalize Muslims and invalidate their Indian citizenship are being invented (Aaron 2019). Gregory Stanton, the president of *Genocide Watch* and who forewarned about the possibility of Genocide in Rwanda said in January 2022, “Genocide could very well happen in India” (Stanton 2022).

On the day I submitted this review to *Tapuya*, the Government of Karnataka, led by the right-wing Hindu Nationalist party, Bharatiya Janata Party, submitted a position paper for the new “National Education Policy” that claimed the Pythagoras theorem as “fake news” (Raj 2022). It called for “incorporating mathematical concepts from ancient Bharat [a Hindu-centric name for India] while drawing a contrast to the mathematical concepts which have their origins in Europe.” Like this one, Hindu Nationalism stories define the postcolonial condition of Hindus in India as one that bears the wounds of so-called Islamic colonization, and the European Colonization. The “colonizations,” they claim, desecrated Hindu bodies and their ancient

knowledge systems that were “many centuries ahead of the times in every branch of science and art” (Golwalkar 2015, 166). These narratives claim ancient Hindu science or Vedic science as superior and truer than modern rationalist science. Confronted by these narratives, much of the academic response has simply refuted Vedic science as “silly,” “irrational,” “untrue,” and “unscientific” (Nanda 2005). It has led to academic discussions where Hindu mythologies are read through modernist dichotomies of the rational vs the irrational, the objective vs the subjective, truth vs myth, nature vs culture and religion vs science.

Banu Subramaniam clearly displeased with the epistemological treatment of “Indian mythologies” that imbue the vedic sciences as “irrational,” “anti-science” and so “untrue” in scholarship, ventured onto the project *Holy Science*. The book seeks to explicate the mythologies as “progressive possibilities of science and religion” (70) that embrace impurity to “create nonbinary imaginations of naturecultural, human/nonhuman, and spiritual scientific worlds” and also, religion/science (204). The author is “fiercely critical of the current configuration of political Hinduism [Hindutva] that dominates India, but rather than reject India or Hinduism,” the author wishes to embrace “them in their more progressive and imaginative possibilities” (8). The book is crafted to visualize this stance of the author – seven chapters on the biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism interspersed with Avatar stories (science fictions/speculative fabulations (SF)). The stories take the reader on a journey to “elsewhere” where science and religion are playfully engaged towards progressive and imaginative possibilities.

The chapters gracefully weave the threads of the epistemological, the ontological and the naturecultural politics of Hindu nationalism into the political tapestry of modernities, vedic sciences, feminism, nativism, environmentalism, womb/body, gender/sexuality, nationalism, neoliberalism, indigeneity, globalization, among others. The observations arrived at are sewn into other threads of myth, scientific stories, developmental projects, modernist dichotomies, using the needle of Hinduism, to make observations on Hindutva as an epistemic practice. In exploring the above dimensions using feminist and anti-racist scholarship in science studies and elsewhere, literature on postcolonialism, casteism, genomics and studies in and of India, the author adds the notions of “bionationalism” and “archaic modernities” to these rich vocabularies. Rather than separating archaic modernities into the regular secular template of the archaic vs the modern and the religious vs the secular, Subramaniam’s inquiry into Hindutva’s bionationalism brings them both together through “braided sciences, helical stories, thigmotrophic knowledges” (34). In this sense, *Holy Science* disrupts the alignment of “secularism” along modernist dichotomies in theory, practice and social movements in and outside of scholarship, in both the Western and Indian contexts.

The book is then a treasure for budding STS scholars figuring out their politics through and beyond modernist dichotomies, but also for humanities scholars exploring the intricate ways biology is mobilized for developmental politics, nationalism and environmentalism. The book also offers a plethora of cases on biopolitics and nationalism assembled from the standpoint of the author, for enthusiasts of studies in/of India and Hinduism. Such cases assembled include Vaastushastra (an ancient Hindu material science), the making of Hindu masculinity through developmental projects and the A-bomb, homosexuality and sexualities of India and the peculiar case of Indian Penal Code 377 on “sodomy” in India, surrogacy practice and law in India, genomic and racial construction of Indianness through the Aryan Migration Theory and the Indian Genome Project, Setusamudram Shipping Canal Project and the casteist politics of Saffron/Hindu Environmentalism, among others.

Literary critic Lauren Berlant reminds us that a carefully chosen “case” bears “the weight of an explanation worthy of attending to and taking a lesson from” (2007, 666). Subramaniam discusses each case as described in existing literature and conceptualized by other scholars researching the case. They artfully reread the cases to render visible the politics of

bionationalism and archaic modernity, that are worth attending to right now – the political moment of Hindu nationalism, using secondary materials like newspapers and scholarly literature on environmentalism, feminism, gender/sexuality, and postcolonial studies. Far from offering finalized conclusions on the concepts and cases discussed, the book positions the reader in the unsettling “in-betweens” and, in this way, is an experiment in thinking.

Subramaniam unswervingly cites “opinion” pieces by scholars, political observers, and reporters in newspapers like *The Wire*, *Firstpost* and *Scroll.in* to substantiate their own scholarly and empirical explanations. This serves as a testament to the scholarly relevance of public intellectualism in the Indian context that is otherwise questioned for their methodological rigor and empirical validity in academia (Murphy and Costa 2019). The citational politics is a stand-in case for how the book makes “writing a site of epistemological challenge” to the vocabularies of colonizers and “neat categories of the Western academy,” successfully and unsuccessfully (30). As for Subramaniam, STS needs “to move out of the laboratories and into political landscapes” (227). But also, the citational politics stands in-case for the need to let go of our quest for universal truth and exemplifies how “peeling the layers of truth” (179) and “tracing the arcs of power tells us more about the past, the present, and the future” (211).

The concluding *Notes on the Mythopoeia* offers some respite from the science wars and post-truth hangover experienced by the field of STS namely, truth vs non-truth and the question, “if we are to deconstruct science to show it as a belief system, then who has the claim to truth?” It adds to the tradition of feminist postmodern thinking that calls for a politics of both/and, here religion and science (Rose 1994; Haraway 1988; and Harding 1993). Subramaniam says that we have to “let go of our quest for universal truth” (214) in order to think about how “circuits of power” marginalize the oppressed “others” who inhabit nonnormative spaces namely those familiar to the Western STS academe, “feminists, people of color, the colonized, those from the third world, queer people, those with disabilities” (210–211). In such ways, *Holy Science* makes the politics of Hindu Nationalism legible to western audiences using the oppressed subjects of Hindu Nationalism whom the western academe is familiar with.

I have reviewed the book and its multitentacled endeavors. The reader of this review might be surprised that “the Muslim” – although invoked every tenth word in my introductory background to the subject of the book, Hindu nationalism – has been absent from the rest of my review of the book. (*Genocide has structures and ten stages they say.*) I too was surprised, or even despicably shocked, to not see “a case” on the Muslim Indian whom Hindu Nationalism profoundly abjects, destroys, persecutes, assaults, and marginalizes through technosciences day in and day out. Lauren Berlant also reminds scholars that the case is “always pedagogical” and “itself an agent” (2007, 665). It decides who becomes expert of what in the manner in which the expert refines the “surplus” of an event into a “singularity” (but this, in the field of STS, would rather be “multiplicities”) to provide explanation worthy of attention (2007, 664). The cases carefully assembled by Banu Subramaniam are pedagogical – written to a broader audience (West and outside) about India’s developmentalism, Indian nationalism, Hindu Nationalism, and mainly on whose bodies India is becoming a Hindu Nation. So, it’s a pedagogical experiment on India, Indian and Indianess.

India is ontologically and so epistemologically multiple – more than Hindu less than its other many religions (Mol 2002). What is the “India” as expressed by Banu Subramaniam in their book? The site of speculative fabulations or avatar stories in the book responds to this question succinctly. Banu Subramaniam uses the speculative power of Hindu Mythologies in these stories to unsettle western and modernist dichotomies. Subramaniam has no critical qualms in characterizing this Hindu Mythological imagination as “multireligious” “Indian mythological imagination” (my emphasis, 4). Subramaniam states that “for many of us who grew up going to Catholic and Christian schools, multiple religious stories flowed seamlessly”

and that these multiple religious stories are “largely from the Hindu mythologies of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata” (my emphasis, 4). Are these Hindu mythological stories multi-religious? Readers, please ask! In this way, Subramaniam’s writing conflates Indian with the “Hindu” without critical thought – “Indian/Hindu” (50; see also Asif 2016 as quoted on page 239). I too went to Christian schools, I recited “Thou father in Heaven” every morning and compulsorily had to do Yoga (a Hindu exercise practice) on Wednesday mornings. But every time I would offer Namaz in a hidden corner of the school, I received such piercing stares that perturbed my spiritual dwelling in oneness with Allah.

I am Tamil Muslim, and Banu Subramaniam is Tamil Hindu as expressed in the book. The play of classical Tamil words which are rendered as mythopoeic actors in the speculative fabulations or *avatar stories* like *neram* (temporality), *arul* (graceful enlightenment), *amudha* (chemical), *uruvam* (form) was truly fascinating and joyful. However, the constant metamorphosis in the avatar stories made it difficult for me to comprehend, although I went to a catholic school. This made me realize I am not the “many of us” that Subramaniam is referring to. It reinforced the increasing sense of alienation I am being subjected to, *now*, as India becomes a Hindu State. I was exposed to the significance of metamorphosis in mythologies not in Christian schools, but when Hindu mythologies were aired as daily series in many Indian television channels – a project allegedly started by Hindu Nationalists to familiarize (non-Hindu) Indians about Hindu mythologies (Khan 2019). I also went to upper caste Hindu households for special tuition because as first generation learner I needed “educated adults” to teach me math, science and social sciences. Yet, I never heard of these mythologies outside of the Hindu Nationalist television series project.

Subramaniam’s classification of Indian Nationalism, Hindu Nationalism and Hindu-centric Nationalism, is very key to future scholarship on Hindu Nationalism. The othering of Muslims, or Muslim alterity, is significant for historiographies of Hindu nationalism and of India, yet accounts of how these nations know themselves and enact their politics by othering religious differences is “deleted” in Subramaniam accounts of Hindu Nationalism. Banu Subramaniam speaks of *Ramayana* (the tale of Hindu Lord Rama) but *ignores* that Lord Rama’s name is also invoked by those Hindus who lynch Muslims while uttering the slogan “Jai Sri Ram” (Hail Lord Ram!). Sometimes, they lynch Muslims for not uttering “Jai Sri Ram.” Is it ethical to speak about *Ramayana*, let alone analyze in progressive scholarship on Hindu Nationalism, without discussing the politics of *Jai Sri Ram*? This might as well be not my STS – I am faced with a crisis of belonging to a field I chose to be a part of!

Agnotology, and particularly feminist works on Agnotology, shows how ignorance is not the absence of knowledge, but it actively produces knowledges (Tuana 2006). *Ramayana* wherein the trees talk back to the human is useful to think with for more-than-human worlding, Subramaniam implies (204). It doesn’t help to understand however the way that under Hindu Nationalism, laboratories are enrolled in the process of rationalizing the lynching of Muslims and lower caste Hindus when they have allegedly slaughtered Hinduism’s holy animal cow. The process looks something like this – (mostly) a Muslim man carrying meat is first ganged around by a Hindu Nationalist group, mobilized through Whatsapp networks, second, lynched for carrying “beef” and third, when the police appears on the scene, the culprits are not “immediately” arrested but, instead, the meat carried by the Muslim is sent to labs to test if it was indeed “cow meat” (India Today Web Desk 2016). This is a more-than-human biopolitics “case” of Hindu Nationalism. What is the politics of ignoring the technoscientific process of lynching in a book on technoscience of Hindu Nationalism? Would a theorization of Hindu nationalism without the technoscientific process of lynching yield progressive possibilities? I implore the readers to ask!

This book provides, though indirectly, a critical response to Hindu postcolonial studies which gain their mileage from Hindu postcoloniality – constructing Hindus as indigenous to India and so victims of so-called Islamic colonization and British colonization (Shaik Ali 2020). They beat the trumpets of Hindu pride and supremacy and assert the temporal precedence of Hindu sciences to western sciences, of “Hindu” genetic presence in the subcontinent and so, of Hindu nativity to India. However, both the author who is against Hindu supremacy, and the “theorists” of Hindu Postcolonial studies construct Hindus and philosophies of Hinduism as indigenous to India (Chapter 3). This is even as tribal people of India, indigenous to the land, argue for their religions to be recognized, and not be clubbed under the religion of Hinduism (Markam 2019). For tribal people who worship nature, Hinduism is not indigenous to India.

While the book would be such a pleasure for postcolonial theorists, scholars of Hinduism, neoliberalism and modernities, and in that sense to STS scholars, reading the book, searching desperately for the few tens of lines that hand waves at Muslim alterity – a fulcrum of Hindutva’s biopolitics – was a painful experience for a Muslim environmentalist and feminist scholar like myself. Even writing this review was not cathartic. As much as I searched hard for moments in the book that spoke of Muslim alterity, I searched for those places where an independent understanding of Hindu nationalism is worked outside of the author’s desperate rubric created to redeem Hinduism from Hindu Nationalism. I couldn’t muster the ability to be generous with the review as the inattentiveness to Muslim alterity had to be addressed.

Holy Science speaks about Hindu mythologies, “not in the supremacist mode that Modi often invoked” namely Hindutva, but to embrace Hinduism for its speculative and epistemological power, rightfully so (40; 203). It is a project that redeems Hinduism from Hindutva. The author critiques Brahmin scholars for redeeming caste system for its ecological values. Aren’t Banu Subramaniam themselves, redeeming Hinduism from Hindutva – the religion from the political project (Chapter 3)? To make a difference between Hinduism and Hindutva, Subramaniam states that “unlike other religious fundamentalism, modern Hinduism has produced not a scriptural fundamentalism but a political nationalism that brings together a melding of science and religion ...” (41; 205). The Hindu scripture is very important to Subramaniam but Muslim alterity is not and so can be ignored. As a postmodern feminist, I want to assert it is not either/or but both/and (Rose 1994) – both Muslim alterity and bionationalism. The omission of accounts of Muslim alterity from Hindu bionationalism raises a larger concern over the epistemological, ideological, and pedagogical praxis of the book. The author states that “it seems fitting to end” the book “at the [Hindu] temples door,” but I ask Subramaniam to visit the roads of India that is today a Hindu Nation where Muslim and bodies of other minorities are lynched, murdered, charred, and dehumanized (223). Even if you are at the temple’s door, in 2017, how did you not see the 8-year-old Muslim Tribal girl who was raped inside the temple by five Hindu men including a Hindu priest? *They don’t see us ...*

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Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism, By Banu Subramaniam.

Seattle, University Washington Press, 2019. pp xviii + 290, \$30.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780295745596

Banu Subramaniam explores the biopolitics of Hindu nationalism in contemporary India, threading together case studies that examine the encounters between global capitalism, Western techno-sciences, and nature cultures in India. Subramaniam's account of biopower, a term coined originally by Michel Foucault, threads together a unique and incisive argument about the ambivalences and contradictions in contemporary exercises of biopower in India and identifies the fractures within the fabric of Hindu bionationalism. A central point in this analysis is that biopolitics represents a critical framework to understand the imbrications of science and religion among state and non-state actors, and how these particular institutional formations "shore up India as a 'wounded civilization', and Hindu nationalism as its biopolitical power and saviour" (44). Colonial laws and histories of oppression form part of this context, animating and justifying the need to restore an imagined pre-colonial past but also to reconstitute the Indian state into a strong (masculinist) and technologically assertive global power. Drawing on the canon of feminist and postcolonial Science and Technology Studies, Subramaniam highlights how contemporary Hindu nationalism has harnessed the confluences of science and religion to project an "archaic" modernity into the most intimate sites of life, such as people's sexuality and reproduction, their physical home and environment, and the genetic foundations of their bodies. One of the key characteristics of archaic modernity narratives is that they rely on science and technology to legitimize mythological stories, and in that sense, the past is re-imagined as having already been modern. This particular use of grammar, which essentially rewrites and reorganizes how people inhabit time, is not unique to Narendra Modi's government. Instead, there have been many iterations of archaic modernities throughout India's postcolonial history and many actors who partake in these stories. Western societies themselves have their own archaic modernities but they have been blinded by their own stories of purification.

I couldn't help but notice the absence of a "typical" monograph structure, where each of the chapters is almost equal in length. Instead, the book's structure reminded me of an old Banyan tree. When you encounter a Banyan tree, it is hard to distinguish the roots growing from below from the ones that are growing from above, all the while the trunk is a wide and layered accumulation of branches/roots. In the prologue, the author's voice feeds on the warm soil and landscapes in the memory: place, sound, and smells drive the author's intellectual passion but also a concern for the emergence of a distinct biopower in India. The introduction is lengthy but best understood if visualized as the trunk of the Banyan tree: wide, textured, and layered. Here, Subramaniam makes clear that her analysis aims to capture multiple narrative threads to grasp the entanglement of different scales: personal, local, and global, pre-natural, natural, and supernatural. Western biological sciences and notions of life in India form the thread running through these messy and overlapping roots, shaping into a conglomerate of postcolonial science stories that are multiple and locally inflected. This means that the genealogies with European biopolitics matter but there are also processes of translation, mistranslations, and mis-encounters. To understand biopolitics in India, it is also necessary to explore the "polyvocal imbrications of science and religion" (42) and how

“alter” modernities reflect not only the absence of clear boundaries between science and religion, but also their incorporation into global capitalism.

The first chapter explores one of the first frames of belonging: the notion and location of home. Independence propelled the search of belonging, extracted first from the twin desires to decolonize and become a “modern” developed nation. However, in the turn of the century, Hindu nationalism has grown strong, turning religious nationalism into an anchor for identity. In this case, there are two seemingly contradictory forces shaping the architectures of belonging: the harmonization of the domestic space through Vaastushastra, or Vedic Science of Architecture, and the fortification of the nation, through the atomic bomb. Both stories symbolize how techno-science remodeled by religion, capitalism, and violence have been used almost like medicines, reconstituting the imagined body politic, injured, and bewildered after British and French colonial rule. Subsequent chapters unravel similar stories about the encounters between postcolonialism, techno-science and religious nationalism. Chapter 2 revisits the restrictive frames imported by colonial rulers and their effects on postcolonial biology. It examines how Western science and Judeo-Christianism shaped what counted as “natural” or “unnatural” sexuality, and the re-inscription of these genealogies of sexual regulation under Hindu bionationalism. In Chapter 3, nation and nature overlap in contemporary environmental struggles marked by unlikely unofficial alliances between secular environmentalism and conservative religious groups. In this case, centered on the legality of the shipping canal, science and religion merge as facts to be adjudicated by the courts. The key to understand how this happens, and the alliances between incompatible actors, is the power of the “politics of injury” in which nativism is orientalized and conceived as the cure to the original harm of cultural erasure. The problem is that by asserting the sacredness of geographies, cultures, locations, etc., the effect is the strengthening of logics of possession, as land ownership claims are silently smuggled into narratives about the protection of nature. At the heart of the argument is a call to abandon the knee-jerk impulse to possess nature and find alternative forms of relationship. Chapter 4 unravels the debates linking genetics and genomics to pre-histories of belonging, yet in doing so they revive the ghosts of racism and casteism. By turning to DNA, scientific narratives infuse new life into global Hinduism linking identity beyond national borders, shaping the contours of a global Hindu citizen. The growing multibillion dollar companies developing “Ayurgenomic” products – a blend of traditional medicine and genomic sciences – and Prime Minister Modi’s attempts to internationalize Yoga among Indian diasporas are a case in point. Finally, chapter 5 traces the rise of the regulation of surrogacy regulations and the construction of women’s reproductive agency. Subramaniam explores how theories of overpopulation, reproductive sciences, and the Hindu gestational science of *garbh sanskar* have fed into the multiple and contradictory visions of Indian women’s womb as a hyper-fertile ground to be regulated, managed, or sacralized against exploitation.

While the book develops a strong and rigorous critique of Hindu bionationalism, Subramaniam seeks to harness within the pages some hope for more “progressive and imaginative possibilities” (8) in the encounters between science and Hindu mythologies. To that end, each chapter contains interstitial stories about avatars that allegorize the entanglements between postcolonial science and mythology. These speculative fiction stories express the multiverse of life that reverberates in Indian mythologies, and represent transversal histories charged with emotional attachments, a view of “prescribing an ‘elsewhere,’” namely sites where science and religion in India shed their hypernationalist modes and, instead, blossom into “alternative cadences of Indian storytelling” (40). Ultimately, her approximation to postcolonial science in these stories emphasizes the sensorial and speculative capabilities imagined


and mediated by “thigmotropism,” a concept borrowed from biology which refers to the sensitivity response of an organism, particularly “plants with tendrils that scale large surfaces” (30).

The book’s emphasis on imagination and storytelling is an inspiring approach to encounter disturbed temporalities of postcolonialism, where the past is a contested space, and the future is absorbed by a political machinery that abhors its own vulnerability. The book is an outstanding addition to STS literature but also a significant contribution to the social sciences and political theory scholarship on biopolitics. On a more personal level, it also invites reflection about the positionality of postcolonial researchers and the different methodologies that we can use to capture our life in-between worlds. By that I mean, the possibilities to inhabit and develop a vocabulary to express the spaces that do not fit either in the center or the periphery of science.

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