

# Soldiers of Saffron, Sonal Shah and Secularism

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In our haste to reject the “soldiers of saffron” who live and work outside India, there is a risk that we may be engaging in a politics of personal destruction with tremendous pain for the individuals concerned. There is a fine line between rejection of hate and exploitation of youthful ignorance and folly. If we cross that line we will become vulnerable to charges of McCarthyism.

There must be some underground facility where they clone them, these soldiers of saffron. I used to be disconcerted at their appearance in academic or cultural venues, e.g., talks by academics like Romila Thapar and films on Gujarat’s anti-Muslim riots. I have learnt to anticipate their invasion now. To expect these soldiers with their aggressive questions and a relentless quest to prove that Aryans are the sons of India; Muslims are the invaders and Indian Christians are the exploited children of missionary conquest; and, Gujarat violence against Muslims is overstated while no one seems to recognise the grievances of Hindus during Godhra train burning.

Some deeply aggrieved souls must toil over talking points which get passed down to these soldiers who pester speakers with questions with little regard for answers. They can be annoying but their monotony and lack of sophistication alienate them from the rest of the audience and increasingly most speakers are able to ignore them. Their very presence bespeaks an unspeakable danger out there threatening a secular India; but here in Washington, we can banish the shadows, if not the beast that casts them.

It is the other group that has me flummoxed. The smart, creative, energetic students and high achieving young professionals who grew up in the us, who try hard to claim a heritage whose complexity

they continuously struggle with. I run into them on campuses and at parties. They are concerned that American textbooks give children a biased impression of India by focusing on gender and caste inequality. They worry about an excessive focus on Indian poverty and want to emphasise the modern upwardly mobile India. They want to be sure Diwali is celebrated at the White House and Hinduism is represented on the us Commission for Religious Freedom. They reject the label “South Asian” and want to emphasise their “Indian” identity.

## Search for Identity

I find my encounters with these young people strangely disorienting. The first time one of my students invited me to speak at an Anavil conference in the us, I was stunned. I am sure there are Anavil Brahmin conferences in India, but having been raised by a father who thought religion was the opium of the masses, I never went to one. Why would I want to attend one in the us? I made a polite excuse. A few years later, another student invited me to the same conference. This time I decided to probe a little and discovered that she was extremely active on our campus in a variety of multicultural organisations and belonged to the youth wing of the Anavil Samaj of North America. Given her interest in social justice and strong feminist orientation, I thought she would understand when I tried to talk to her about my personal difficulties with claiming an Anavil identity. Why would one want to glorify a heritage of landlordism blazoned by Jan Breman in his influential work on patronage and exploitation in South Gujarat (Breman 1974) or one made infamous by extremely high dowry demands? She looked at me woefully as if I was snatching candy

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away from a child. That is when it first struck me that having grown up in India, I had a very secure identity that did not need the props of caste, language or religion; pan-Indian ethnicity was all I needed. She was raised in a family which had been thrown out of Uganda, passed through the UK and finally settled in the US. She was still searching for an identity and home and the Anavil Samaj of North America provided a security blanket to her that I never needed.

This event has been followed by many other encounters with younger friends and students. I was once invited to speak to a campus group of Indian Americans about gender in India. I went there armed with my bread and butter statistics. India is among a handful of countries where men outnumber women; women's education level has been rising but the dropout rate among girls is high, particularly at secondary level; women's participation in wage employment is low and wage differentials between men and women remain high. This is vanilla fare for any conference on gender in India. I should have been faulted for being boring rather than misleading. To my surprise, many students found this highly disturbing. One of the students commented, "That is not true, you are talking about traditional India, things are changing now. Most of my female cousins and their friends work and in any case, people have much more respect for women in India than they do in the US. Why don't you emphasise that?". Two aspects of this comment are interesting. First, no amount of statistics would convince her that what she saw among her cousins was not representative of "modern" India. Second, there was something about my attitude that was terribly irritating to her. Perhaps she saw me as someone who was always negative and did not sufficiently appreciate the great heritage we share.

These are the youth who constitute the field from which a variety of benign and not so benign organisations in North America recruit. Some flock to cultural organisations, others to caste organisations and some to the saffron banner. I suspect that when they join the Hindu Education Foundation or Vedic Foundation of the US, they genuinely believe they are fighting prejudice in the US education system

which buys into the liberal "negativity" about Hinduism and emphasises inequality between men and women and between different castes. These youth are attracted to organisations which promote separate-but-equal interpretation of social inequality in ancient India. Perhaps some of these young people remember their own discomfort and sensitivity at unkind or condescending comments from classmates as they grew up in intolerant white suburbs and want to spare others the same indignity. Perhaps some of them want to shine in the reflected light of an ancient civilisation

and find it hard to negotiate the complexity of a glorious heritage tainted by rigid inequalities. Whatever the roots, I have slowly begun to realise that as professors and teachers, we in the academe in the US have lost our connection to these young people, making them vulnerable to the pull of saffron organisations.

This prelude reflects the lens through which I view the recent controversy surrounding Sonal Shah. She of many talents and exemplary achievements co-founded Indicorps, an organisation which allows young Americans and Indian Americans

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to gain grass roots experience in India by participating in service activities. She also led relief activities following Gujarat earthquake with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) of America and her parents are believed to have long VHP ties. Sonal Shah herself migrated to the US at age four and has been deeply involved in the US policy discourse. She was selected by President Barack Obama to participate in his transition team, one of the few Indian Americans to be so chosen. Her choice generated a concern among secular academics – an impressive group of American and South Asian scholars – regarding the dangers of legitimising Hindu nationalism. A letter to the then president-elect Barack Obama, signed by a large number of noted academics, notes (Open Letter 2008):

Sonal Shah has many qualifications that make her well-suited for the transition team. Her work at Google, Goldman Sachs, and the Center for American Progress, and her record at the Treasury department during the Clinton Administration are impressive and valuable. We feel strongly that no one should be tarnished with frivolous guilt-by-association claims. We are, however, troubled by the fact that in 1998 Ms Shah was an active member of the Governing Council and Chapter Presidents/Coordinators of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHP-A), the sister organisation of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a Hindu nationalist organisation involved in extensive and ongoing violence against Indian Christians and Muslims. Every annual report of the US Committee on International Religious Freedom since 2001 has included mention of VHP violence in India and its violation of religious freedoms as an increasing threat to India's secular democracy. In 2001, Ms Shah was also a National Coordinator of Earthquake Relief of the VHP-A. Ms Shah was thus in positions of national leadership and responsibility in an organisation which has not once repudiated the violence of its sister organisations in India. The request that a national-level leader of an organisation be held accountable for its actions is not a charge of guilt by association.

Sonal Shah contends:

As an Indian-American who has lived in this country since the age of four, serving on the Obama-Biden transition team is a unique privilege for me. A presidential transition is always a time of excitement and, in some cases, of rumours and unfounded gossip. I'd like to set to rest a few baseless and silly reports that have been circulating on the Internet. First, my personal politics have nothing in common with the views espoused by the

Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), or any such organisation. I've never been involved in Indian politics, and never intend to do so. Second, I've always condemned any politics of division, of ethnic or religious hatred, of violence and intimidation as a political tool. Some factually inaccurate internet rumours have attempted to link me to Hindu Nationalist groups through a variety of tenuous connections: Relief work I'm proud to have helped coordinate following the Gujarati earthquake of 2001, or cultural and religious affiliations of some of my family members, or apolitical humanitarian work I've been privileged to do as a founder of the NGO Indiacorps and as the Director of Global Development for Google.org. Finally, I do not subscribe to the views of such Hindu nationalist groups, and never have. Ridiculous tactics of guilt by association have been decisively repudiated by the American people. I am delighted with what the victory on November 4 says about my country, and about our place in the world. I look forward to serving our President-elect in this time of transition...

In a later statement she elaborated:

In 2002, Gujarat suffered one of the most profound tragedies in its long history, when extremist political leaders, including some associated with the VHP, incited riots that resulted in the deaths of thousands. Had I been able to foresee the role of the VHP in India in these heinous events, or anticipate that the VHP of America could possibly stand by silently in the face of its Indian counterpart's complicity in the events of Gujarat in 2002 – thereby undermining the American group's cultural and humanitarian efforts with which I was involved – I would not have associated with the VHP of America.

Critics are far from satisfied. If Sonal Shah is innocent of religious bigotry and intolerance, what would prompt her to join VHP-A? Can we really accept her claims of naiveté? I have met Sonal Shah only twice and know little about her personal politics. But based on my experiences with my students, I am quite willing to take her at her word that she does not share the values of VHP and RSS. I do not find it inconceivable that it was a quest for identity rather than bigotry that drew her to VHP-A. What I find more troubling is the glee with which the saffron brigade lays claims to her soul and the ease with which secular forces cede it. Should we make a distinction between the soldiers of saffron and young second generation Indian Americans searching for a community?

Frankly I am even troubled by my own starting paragraph about the soldiers of saffron – it drips of elitism and incomprehension. Someone with greater insight and empathy will someday provide us with a key to unlocking their impenetrable exterior and disarming them. I must reluctantly acknowledge that there is little in my background that has prepared me to do so. However, I have seen enough young Indian Americans to recognise the folly of assuming that their participation in organisations draped in various shades of saffron is synonymous with sinister bigotry. If instead of winning the hearts and minds of some of these bright young Indian Americans, we end up rejecting and tarnishing them, forces of secularism will be the greatest losers.

I also worry that in our haste to reject soldiers of saffron we are engaging in a politics of personal destruction with tremendous personal pain for the individuals concerned. I can understand the temptation. Sonal Shah appears to provide a teachable moment where a new administration can be recruited to the cause of fighting bigotry. However, there is a fine line between rejection of hate and exploitation of youthful ignorance and folly. If we cross that line we will become vulnerable to charges of McCarthyism. Joseph McCarthy's attempts at exposing a young lawyer in his pursuit of a vendetta against the army precipitated the question from Boston lawyer Joseph Welch, "Have you no sense of decency, Sir?" – a question widely attributable as the beginning of the end for McCarthy.

#### REFERENCES

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