



Revolution in Pink

When the “Hindu face of the Taliban” began cracking down on the rights of young women in India, technology helped send an unlikely response.

by Meera Subramanian

A week after I arrived in India in late January, a group of self-proclaimed morality police stormed Amnesia, a swank and dimly lit bar in the city of Mangalore. Cameras were rolling as the jean-clad vigilantes of the right-wing Hindu group the Sri Ram Sene, which translates to the “Army of Lord

Ram,” physically attacked the jean-clad women and men who had been, moments before, leisurely sipping drinks. I read about the attack in the paper and then, to see more, logged on and watched the clips on YouTube. The purveyors of Hindu ethics groped and pulled the hair of their declared transgressors and chased them out into the streets, tripping them as they

tried to run away and kicking them while they were sprawled on the sidewalk and scrambling to get up.

I was in the land of my father again, my home away from home, the place I have visited numerous times over the course of my life to connect with an immense and loving and deeply devout extended family. With each arrival, I wit-

ness the culture lines shift, a tug-of-war between what was and what might be.

The pub attack made the Internet buzz and newspaper headlines scream, "The Hindu face of the Taliban." India, the world's largest democracy, is rising, but 83 percent of the officially secular nation is Hindu, and a portion of that population, a small but more-than-vocal portion, supports Hindutva, the Hindu nationalist movement that has little tolerance for either religious minorities or a modernized version of their ancient faith.

As February approached, the Sri Ram Sene, which has strong ties to a conservative political party, the BJP, set their sights on Valentine's Day, that most western and immoral of holidays. At a press conference, their leader Pramod Muthalik incited Sene activists to not just hold protests outside colleges and hotels where Valentine's Day celebrations were being held, but—taking a creative approach—forcibly marry off, as one Indian publication put it, "canoodling couples."

"If we come across couples being together in public and expressing their love," Muthalik proclaimed, "we will take them to the nearest temple and conduct their marriage."

For decades after becoming an independent nation in 1947, India endeavored to take its sovereignty to an extreme. Indians made only their own cars, operated only their own airlines, shut out foreign investors, and remained a conglomeration of villages and cities tenuously united by the sacred Hindu sites scattered across their nation and by their fight to oust the British. Fifteen years ago the economic walls came tumbling down just as

use of the Internet exploded, connecting the exponentially growing (read: young) Indian population to the daily lives of the rest of the world. Yet still, they had just barely stepped out of prohibition. Condom ads were censored from television. There wasn't a single on-screen kiss within the world's largest film industry.

Now, the expressions of a traditional and conservative culture are falling away. Women have begun to have careers, wear jeans, and go to bars. Indians of the new generation are choosing to find their own mates in lieu of arranged marriages. Working lives are becoming too busy to

comeback to such extremist actions, new Indians gathering together in solidarity, going public, and spreading the word through online social networking sites.

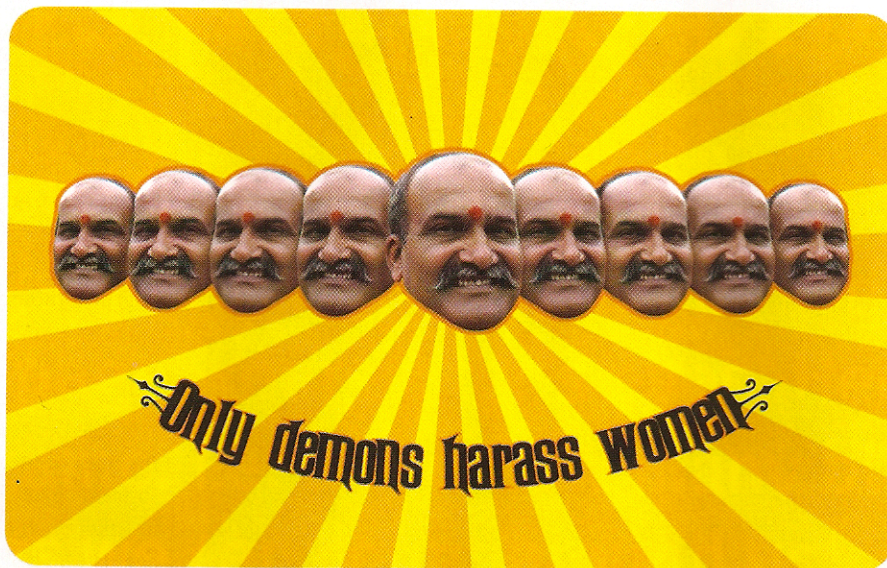
But it wasn't just young Indians. The group had five hundred fans within a day, and fifty thousand in little more than a week. Somewhere in that time frame, online went offline. Phone calls came in from men in Bihar and teenagers in Amritsar, explains Nisha Susan, one of the late-night creators and a journalist for the Delhi-based magazine *Tehelka*. She adds, "We received a photo of five very large aunties, looking very serious and somber

as they all proudly held up their pink chaddis." Muthalik is reported to have received fifteen hundred chaddis, which he threatened to send back, along with lawsuits for indecency.

"It's all about trying to recapture the rhetoric," Susan said. "The right wing is super organized and the Pink Chaddi campaign is a satirical effort to counter people who are uncomfortable with the idea of women

having control. I find it all quite energetic, really."

But not everyone knows that such defiance is possible. Take for example, a story on the front page of the national newspaper *The Hindu*: A fifteen-year-old schoolgirl and her friend riding a midday bus in Mangalore early in February. A casual conversation with a male friend as all three disembark at the edge of town. It is implied that the girls are Hindu and that the boy's name is—in India, names can mean everything—Abdul Salim. They pass a group of young Hindu extremists who rebuke the girls for associating with a Muslim, and then, to be sure they've



Pramod Muthalik, leader of the right-wing Sri Ram Sene ("Army of the Lord Ram") has found a following by appealing to traditional Hindu values. He's found equal disfavor for denouncing young Indians, especially women, as seen in this anti-Sri Ram Sene image.

fit in the daily rituals that define a religion. The new technology of the information age is playing a role in transforming what is, by default, a Hindu nation.

In response to the Sri Ram Sene's harsh tactics of traditionalism, a group of women one late night launched the Pink Chaddi Campaign. It was a joke, really, as they set up a Facebook page for the "Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose, and Forward Women." They requested that anyone who supported not beating up women in order to preserve traditional Indian culture send pink underpants to Muthalik and be visible on Valentine's Day. This is the young, in-your-face

made their point, proceed to beat up all three youngsters. The story ends with the victims, not the vigilantes, at the police station. There are allusions to the girl and her family being "humiliated by a mob," and Salim was forced to write a letter of apology.

The next morning, the girl committed suicide.

As an elemental tenet of human societies, religion fosters social cohesion and a sense of continuity while giving meaning to people's lives. Yet its continuity depends on conformity, on each new generation following the precedents set by their parents. In a place like India, where Hinduism is so thoroughly intertwined with the culture and, despite its official secularity, with politics as well, community pressure to conform can be immense. There can be little space allowed for doubt, for crossing lines, for religious evolution. For those with their own private reservations, a bus stand in south India with roaming thugs can be a lonely place.

So the question is this: Can the rebellious actions of assertive people, often working from within empowered urban circles, seep beyond their limited spheres of influence? What about in a place like India, where the divides caused by caste, class, access to education, and the chasm between rural and urban life play out across a billion individual lives? Can the tentacles of technology, carrying information from an alternative universe, break through the walls of tradition developed over centuries, serving as tiny roots that can slip between cracks, wind above religious obstacles, sneak stealthily below cultural barriers? In a word, yes. The knowledge carried by stories of how other people live, and how those narratives travel further in an information age, can reach minds previously isolated within their small world of experience.

Of course it is not so simple. The fundamentalists have the same tools at their disposal. They are recruiting their own

Consortium of Temple-Going, Strict, and Backward Hindutvas, feeding a hunger to maintain a place of power and patriarchy in a rapidly changing landscape of shifting values and priorities. They are, as the journalist Susan admitted, highly organized. And power, as Frederick Douglass once observed, concedes nothing without a demand.

On a more positive note, the invisible Internet is also serving to preserve some religious traditions otherwise fractured

with a teacher in Karnataka via Skype, devotional *bhajans* wafting through cyberspace.

Whether connecting those who are deviating from tradition or those clinging to it, the Internet does do this one thing: It tells you you're not alone. And isn't this, really, one of the main roles that religion first served? A belief in God or gods gives a reassuringly eternal context to a solitary life. And so religion morphs, like Vishnu transforming from man to woman and back again.

Will the change be quick in India? I was in Rajasthan recently, at Ranthambhore National Park, where, at the top of a hill in the center of the reserve, is a Ganesh Temple built in the eighth century CE. The day I entered was Bhadrapad Sudi Chaturthi, the fourth day of the bright half of the month of Bhadra in the Hindu calendar. I passed through the gates along with a steady flow of pilgrims, thousands of them walking barefoot beside the safari jeeps. There were men in business casual, old men with walking sticks and green turbans swaddled over faces creased with the lines of life, and young men with shiny sunglasses. There were women in brightly colored saris, flames against the beige backdrop of the dry forest and dirt road. There were small children, not one of whom was crying or complaining. They carried no water bottles as they entered the tiger reserve to walk the four-mile trail that circumnavigated the temple perched atop the hill above them. If they carried cell phones, they were not using them. I doubt that one of them has a Facebook page. Tradition is carrying on, in some places exactly as it has for centuries, but like the tiger reserve they walked within, down the same path I had seen a female

tiger just two days before, collared and monitored and boxed in by vehicles, one can't help but wonder what lies in wait for the Hinduism of the next generation, connected by invisible threads to a world beyond the gates of the forest. **S**



Despite (or because) of the western holiday's popularity in India, the Sri Ram Sena detests Valentine's Day. In response, a group of women started a Facebook group that encouraged people to send the Sri Ram Sena thousands of pairs of pink underwear, known as chaddis.

by modern society. It allows those who carry their faiths with them as they fan out into the world to stay connected through Yahoo! groups, chat rooms, and, yes, Facebook. A young man in Columbus can now study traditional Carnatic music