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## EDIT/OP-ED

### What being Hindu means to me

Writing about a Muslim miniaturist triggered an intense self-inquiry in acclaimed writer, **Kunal Basu**. Here, he probes the many faces of being Hindu and Muslim

'You are a Hindu, so why have you written a Muslim novel?'

It was a question I wasn't expecting. Lulled by a Delhi winter, during the mandatory round with journalists following publication of *The Miniaturist*, it left me at a loss for words. Trying to make up an answer quickly, I was reminded of a compliment from a Pakistani reviewer: 'For a Hindu, Basu writes brilliantly about an Islamic world.' Suddenly, I began to read more into what had seemed innocent praise. And the question sounded more than a question—an accusation.

Yet in writing a fictitious tale about a miniature artist in Akbar's court, I had planned neither betrayal, nor an incursion across sensitive borders. The Emperor, I had safely assumed, was mine just as the fifty paise stamp that bore his image to lick and paste. It was to be a novel about art, about success and failure, not an elaborate exercise in cross-dressing, or a masquerade of identities. The author's religion was inconsequential, I had thought, not worth a mention in the blurb.

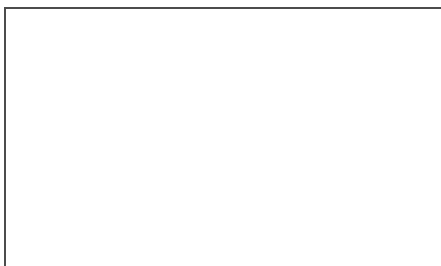
It was possible to deflect the question quite easily. Fiction, after all, is about imagination; it is more than thinly-veiled autobiography, a risky but courageous act by the writer to inhabit a skin other than his/her own. If a male Tolstoy could paint such a convincing Karenina, why couldn't I...? I own the Mughal court by my pen not my religion! I could've sunk the Delhi man lavishly. But somehow, despite its utter irrelevance, the question nagged me even after the interview had ended, seeming to demand not simply an aesthetic answer but a personal one.

'Look, I am not a Hindu, not in the strict sense at least...' I caught myself talking to the mirror. Raised by communist parents in the turbulent seventies, there was no Lakshmi or Kali on our altar but books, and religion, I had learnt early, to be the opium of the masses, with little to choose between its two major and available varieties. A mild riot in staunchly secular Calcutta had alerted me to the divide, but it was minor compared to the greater divide—between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Yet, personal history aside, I had been raised undeniably within the vast crucible of the majority faith—a Hindu by osmosis and by contamination; Hindu by the mere fact of having largely Hindu friends, flashing new clothes during Durga Puja, and lighting funeral pyres for fallen comrades. It was an invisible crucible that didn't require approval to splash and swim. Unlike a poisoned chalice, there was no guilt or secret lust involved. It was simply there.

Despite our atheism, I don't ever recall feeling embarrassed over the status of an 'Implied Hindu.' It was difficult to be fiercely opposed to something so ambiguously amorphous, so full of contradictions that one didn't have the pleasure of victory in slicing off any one of the million-headed hydra. A haven for anarchists, it provided the most bewildering choice. One could be anti-caste, anti-sati, anti-'head-shaving', and yet legitimately be a Hindu. You could be pro-Vivekananda (the critic), pro-Charbak (the atheist), pro-Shankaracharya (the sceptic) and raise no eyebrow. You could worship a blue Rama, a black Kali, or a wild boar with human limbs. You could eat beef and be a Hindu. You could believe in any one of the hundred-odd creation myths of the Upanishads. You could shun priests, and be seduced by the earth-goddess. You could be suspicious of the imponderable algebra of Karma, yet admire the Rig Veda's cosmic insights. You could be a tantric or a celibate, it didn't matter. There didn't appear to be anything strict about being or not being a Hindu, nothing more ominous than a simple tick in the matriculation form.

Its boon, the real advantage, was the cultural montage, a panorama covering vast territories, with no hostile intensions for the parts left untouched. High festivals, such as Pongal and Navarathri, coexisted with earth festivals—Charak and Chhat, the high art of temple carvings with rustic patachitras, devotional ragas with folk chants, defiant symbols (the trishul) with endearing ones (Lakshmi's feet painted with rice paste on earthen floors). It was a veritable smorgasbord, and despite the local rivalries, it afforded sumptuous luxury to the dilettante.

It is precisely this sanctioned promiscuity that had disarmed our full frontal combat. Like a crafty parent it offered the no-win option: You can be against me but not without me. By offering less than a formal religion—a high-resolution blueprint for salvation—rather a basket of alluring possibilities with strands of alternative theologies, a language to speak about the unknowables (death, afterlife, prelife), and a range of cultural mascots, it kept its pull among us—the motley lot of contemporary Indians through ups and downs. It helped to



mark seasons, distracted from grief, gave reasons to celebrate in the absence of personal triumph.

The 'Implied Hindu' didn't mind the vast degrees of freedom to pick and choose and create a designer creed of sorts, engaging with faith in the spirit of hedonism rather than that of submission. Around me, I found Semi-Hindus, Closet-Hindus, Just-Trying-Hindus, engaged in such journeys, wilfully declaring personal contraband in self-chosen green channels. Whatever it was, it wasn't an instrument to whip the un-believer to shape. The 'Implied Hindu' certainly didn't mind the Muslim.

And then the apocalypse arrived. You couldn't be a hedonistic, bohemian, dharma bum in the name of religion, the 'Official Hindu' thundered. To be legitimate you must pay heed to Ram and rath, masjid and mandir. Overnight the basket turned bare, the cultural boons faded, the theological mysteries were replaced by mechanical mantras. It made me suspicious of the very word, 'Hindu.' Suddenly it stood for demented sadhus, cynical politicians, and the henchmen of Gujarat. It hurt to be called a Hindu, as if my own loins were tainted with the blood of rape. The argument, 'all Hindus are not like that' seemed utterly false. Any identification, however accidental, made me recoil, just as it had frozen my tongue at the Delhi interview. What did he mean, I kept asking myself. That I, the Hindu, have betrayed myself and other Hindus by writing so intimately about Muslims? That artistic territory must remain as tightly guarded as by rival gangs? If a Hindu, I couldn't be anything but a Hindu fanatic? If not an 'Official Hindu' then forever a 'Pseudo Hindu'?

Yet a 'Pseudo Hindu' does perhaps describe best what I and many of us have been all along. Experimentalists and explorers in faith, eclectic and romantic, captivated by magic and mystery, smitten with devotion, wanderers open to surprise, drawn to the intoxicating pretender rather than the suffocating real. Pseudo and proud.

And indeed as 'Pseudo Hindus', Muslims have been indispensable in informing our emotional hardware. The constant trespassing has blurred the exact sources, but left bare the raw sensations. Love and jealousy, seduction and betrayal, mourning and hope, tinged by intertwined fables, by song, and images that remain forever indelible. A drunk Salim romancing the svelte Madhubala, the voice of Rafi singing the incomparable Madhuban me Radhika nache re... Even if I tried, would I ever succeed in separating the Hindu and the Muslim from the deep crevices of fantasy and sensation? Without Rumi and Kalidas how barren a viraha, how destitute a Laila without a touch of Shakuntala, how ordinary the stupa if not framed by the Persian arch, how trivial a morality without the counsel of The Panchatantra and The Tutanama. Could I imagine the crescent moon without the rising sun? The 'mixture' is my palette and my offer to my readers, and I couldn't remove a part without destroying the whole. It is both a Hindu and a Muslim that has written The Miniaturist, I should've snapped back in Delhi.

Such unashamed conjugality, of course, means that the 'other' has become second nature. The Muslim doesn't require painstaking research, the ink flows smoothly in describing his face, his home, his meals, his play, the laughter of his children. When he removes his cap to kneel, I can see him clearly. When he breaks bread. When he kisses. When he picks up a brush to paint. 'How are you going to write dialogue for them?' a friend had asked as I confided in her the story before I had started to write it. 'Who?' 'You know...' 'You mean for the Mughals? The emperor, the courtiers, the artists, the soldiers...?' 'Yes.' By trying not too hard, I had said. I hope to enjoy the gift of my inheritance, I had boasted. As a cultural descendant of the Mughals, I had hoped that the words would flow.

And then at Fatehpur Sikri, my elderly Muslim guide had given me the imperial blessings for mixing religion with writing. At the end of the tour, he showed interest in my note-taking, and inquired if Akbar was the topic of my research. I told him I was writing a story about the emperor. It seemed to please him. Akbar was a great storyteller, he said, although he couldn't even read or write. What made him such a good storyteller then? I asked. Because he cared most for the story not the name or fame of the writer, the man said with a glint in his eyes.

Kunal Basu is the author of The Miniaturist and teaches in Oxford

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