

# ARCHAIC MODERNITY

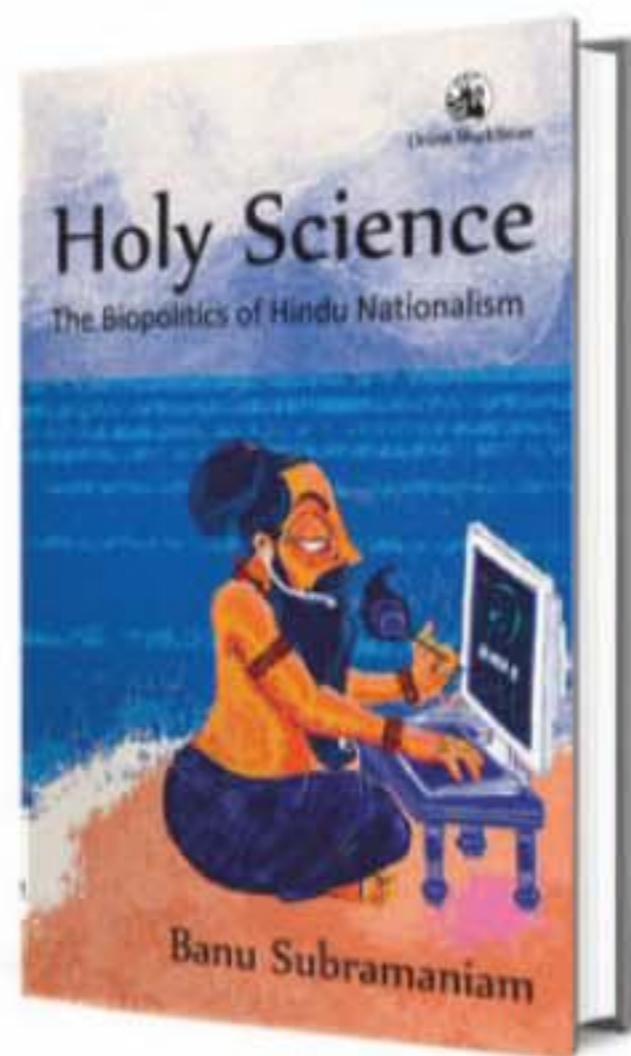
By C.Y. Gopinath

**T**he man in the Mumbai suburban train was carrying the latest iPhone XR but I was completely taken by his home screen. It was a deity I recognised from a childhood in Kerala—Ayyappan, the handsome Hindu god of growth. My uncles used to talk of making the pilgrimage to Sabarimala, where existed the most famous of Ayyapan's temples.

However, the confluence of religion and 4G technology in India did not strike me until I began reading Banu Subramaniam's profound *Holy Science*. In it she systematically probes, prods and unravels the unsettling camaraderie between religion and science that marks modern Indian social and political discourse, revealing sometimes disturbing, always challenging insights into the emerging Hindu bionationalism. I doubt you will discover its hidden gems in your first reading.

Bionationalism is Subramaniam's word. It is the right word to expect from a professor of women, gender and sexuality who originally trained as a plant biologist and writes about the social and cultural aspects of science, work which led to her receiving the Outstanding Academic title in 2015 and the Ludwik Fleck Prize for science and technology studies in 2016.

Subramaniam makes you realise, with a start, that our accepted notions of science and technology are merely the western perspective on science, and that there is room for other narratives. But Hindu nationalists don't create a viable Hindu version of science when they cite tenuous mythological narratives as evidence, but rather create a delusional space where science coexists with holy cows and elephant-headed gods created with the help of plastic surgeons and where flying gods were proof of the existence of Vedic aviation and space technology. The India she describes can launch Mangalyaan, the



**HOLY SCIENCE**  
The Biopolitics of  
Hindu Nationalism  
By Banu Subramaniam  
ORIENT BLACKSWAN  
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Mars orbiter, but not before the chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation has offered prayers to Lord Venkateswara at Tirupati.

In India, the land that gave the world the Kama Sutra, Konarak and the erotic sculptures of Khajuraho, the British Lord Macaulay criminalised same-sex relations for two generations of Indians and legitimised an intolerant and repressive Hindu morality through his crafting of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.

Subramaniam discusses Hindu nationalism without either endorsing or attacking it, calmly pointing out its anomalies. One of them is treating so-called Vedic science as a prequel to western science—but also thus implicitly endorsing western science as the gold standard.

Subramaniam nails the patriarchy, correctly tracing its roots to Vivekananda, who believed women should not be taught science; Dayanand, who believed only education in child-rearing was necessary; and even Gandhi, who thought women's correct role was in bringing up children. 'The redomestication of women through the power of religion and science is at the heart of this archaic modernity,' she says. Iconising women as *shakti* is a thin cover for treating them as vessels for bearing 'good Hindu citizens', and talk of their education is only a pretext for introducing house-keeping classes for girls.

The easy and condescending misuse of scientific language by non-scientists committed to Hindu nationalism to create triumphant fictions of timeless Hindu supremacy is a running theme in the book. It is difficult not to feel a sense of unease about the homeland.

*Holy Science* is not bedtime reading. The flyleaf states: 'This book will be of interest to scholars of science and technology studies, history of science, gender studies, sexuality studies and cultural studies.' As I inched through the book, I had to remind myself that I was neither a scholar nor erudite in any of the themes the book interlinks.

A warning: Subramaniam is a brilliant, complex writer. She will use the exact word, even if it makes you run to the dictionary. In the first chapter itself, *imbrication* and *thigmotropic* had me in a half-Nelson. The former is the overlapping of one material over another. I will let you explore *thigmotropic* yourself. ■