

# Beauty Queens and Hindu Militants: Indian Women's Negotiation with Neoliberalism and Hindu Nationalism

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**Abstract** *Through a review of the 2012 documentary film *The World before Her* directed by Nisha Pahuja, this article provides a critical reflection on how neoliberal governmentality appropriates women's bodies and subjectivities in two women's boot camps in India: the Miss India contest and the Hindu militant Durga Vahini camp. Studies on appropriation of women's bodies in the neoliberal ideology of the market and in varied religious ideologies have generated rich feminist insights into the structures of women's oppression across the world. Feminist academic research has traditionally looked at market- and religion-based oppressions separately. In this critical reflection we articulate how women's bodies get incorporated into the service of varied ideologies, namely neoliberal capitalism and religious fundamentalism, through processes of ritualisation, responsabilisation and subjectivation. Drawing on the shared elements of neoliberal (capitalism) and Hindutva (Hindu fundamentalism) ideological projects, this article proposes a renewed analysis of the location of women in various ideological projects and the nature of women's negotiation of these power structures or women's agency within these structures.*

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## Introduction

Both neoliberal and Hindutva projects deploy women strategically to support their ideological projects with ideas such as empowerment and choice on the one hand and protection, honour and culture on the other. In post-colonial India both these projects and their unique visions for the country and its women exist in parallel as encapsulated in the sharp contrasts between the lives of the Miss India contestants and the

participants of the militant Durga Vahini trainees in the 2012 documentary, 'The World Before Her' (**TWBH henceforth**), made by the Indian Canadian film maker Neha Pahuja. The two groups of women as depicted in TWBH experience dominance and agency simultaneously. Women's bodily 'objectification' in beauty and consumer culture has been under scrutiny in Western feminist scholarship since the 1970s (**Killbourne, 1999; Gill, 2008**) and in India since the 1990s, particularly in relation to beauty pageants (**Parameswaran, 2004; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Scott, 1996**). While headscarf and other religious practices that invoke women's bodies have gained attention more recently in the 1980s and 1990s, it is argued that religious practices deny women's independence and rights to their bodies and cannot be reconciled with modern Western gender equality (**Duits and Zoonen, 2006**). Traditionally feminist research has separated consumer culture and religion and debates around the repressive forms of subjugation of both groups of women have been conducted independently from each other, which has ended up flattening the complex nature of young women's negotiation with the objectification of their bodies and their subjective agency.

By deploying the concept of neoliberal governmentality inspired by a Foucauldian model of power, we attempt to put forth an understanding of the gendered regime of bodily discipline imposed on Miss India contestants and trainees of the Durga Vahini camp as part of a single hegemonic discourse of controlling women's bodies. By focusing on two key elements of neoliberal governmentality ritualisation and responsabilisation, this article highlights how women's bodies get incorporated into the service of the ideological projects of Hindu nationalism and neoliberalism in India mainly in the capacity of 'objects' bearing – honour, shame, modernity and so on. Using the idea of subjectivation in relation to the processes of objectification of these women, we problematise the traditional understanding of feminist agency as being enmeshed with ideas of choice and empowerment. Instead we argue that women who get incorporated into the ideological projects of Hindu nationalism and neoliberalism negotiate with these political projects through various parallel and often contradicting strategies such as submission and resistance.

We begin with a brief introduction of the principal characters of the documentary, followed by a review of literature on ritualisation and responsabilisation in neoliberal governmentality and the idea of objectification and subjectivation. This is followed by an analysis of the ways in which Miss India contestants and Durga Vahini trainees get deployed into the ideological projects of Hindu nationalism and neoliberalism through processes of responsabilisation and bodily ritualisation. In the next section we identify how both groups of women

implicit in neoliberal governmentality and Hindu nationalism are able to realise the self, or in other words, attain subjectivation, through both conforming and negotiating with aspects of their objectified status.

### **The Key Characters: Prachi and Ruhi**

The two principal characters this film follows are Prachi and Ruhi. Twenty-four-year-old Prachi Trivedi, comes from an upper caste Brahmin family in Nagpur. She is a member of Durga Vahini – the women's wing of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (**VHP**) which is a militant Hindu political party and aimed at carving India into a Hindu nation. Due to her father's prior allegiances with the organisation, she started attending the camps conducted by Durga Vahini since she was three years old and has graduated to a trainer for the younger participants of the camp. She is well trained in various forms of combat and well versed in the organisation's ideological claims about women, nation, and minorities. Most strikingly, Prachi shows a strong distaste, in her own words, for 'girly' things; in other words for normative ideals of femininity including that of marriage and motherhood. At the same time she feels obliged to her father for not going through with the socially sanctioned practice of female feticide and allowing her to live. The film in many ways captures how these two very different emotions pull Prachi in different directions.

Ruhi is the 19 year old Miss India aspirant from the city of Jaipur. She comes to the contest with a background of having participated in several local pageants and is seen to be very confident about going into the national-level competition. She believes that women's education, work and modernity are what will transform India into a developed country. She professes her respect for Indian culture and values, but she considers herself modern and wants freedom from the binds of marriage and children at present. She wants to achieve everything she can achieve for herself now, so in five years' time she can think of marriage and motherhood. Her parents, especially her mother, are depicted as very supportive of her career ambitions, taking a lot of pride in Ruhi's new-found visibility as a Miss India contestant.

### **Understanding Neoliberal Governmentality and Subjectivation**

Foucault (1979) noted that in the sixteenth century Europeans employed a method of training in which physical movements were broken down into parts so that people could be trained with rational efficiency. In such trainings, marching skills were emphasised with its strict regimentation of

movement. He treated such drills as an instrument of oppression as he saw them as a means to inculcate control or a form of disciplinary power. Bell (1992) theorises that rituals like military drills and other rehearsed and regimented movements such as those in 'catwalks' typically serve as an interface between ideology and action, through the manipulation of the emotions of the actors. Burchell's (1996) reading of governmentality suggests that ritualisation transforms individuals into responsible members of community, or to a committed radical, a process of which is called responsabilisation. Ritualised religious practices lead to felt responses that 'proscribe and prescribe specific behaviours and in the process socialize individuals, and in many cases aim at producing responsible citizens' (Ghatak & Abel 2013: 225, emphasis in original). We deploy such an understanding of militarised religious rituals in creating forms of responsabilisation among female participants of the Durga Vahini boot camp. We also extend the understanding of ritualisation to non-religious bodily practices among the participants of the Miss India contest. We view both these types of actors in our study as 'ritualised agents' (Bell, 1992: 107).

Responsibilisation and ritualisation are part of a larger process which shapes citizens into autonomous subjects capable of self-regulation and responsible for their own lives and conduct without active intervention by state (Lemke, 2002; Rose, 1999, 2000; Burchell, 1996; Dean, 1999; Ghatak & Abel, 2013). This, 'create[s] a distance between the decisions of formal political institutions and other social actors, and conceive[s] of these new actors in new ways as subjects of responsibility, autonomy and choice, and seek(s) to act upon them through shaping and utilizing their freedom' (Du Gay, 2000: 168). Dean (1999: 168) refers to these practices reliant on the rhetoric of empowerment and techniques of self-esteem that shape the citizenry of a neoliberal society as 'technologies of self'. Responsibilisation effects the experience of neoliberal governance leading to the concurrent processes of governmentalisation and de-governmentalisation (Sharma, 2006). This unique dynamic of governmentalisation and de-governmentalisation in neoliberal governance hinges on positive ideas of becoming a certain kind of subject with freedom, choice, empowerment and so forth. It appears as though governmentalisation of society propels people towards voluntary choice of self-objectification, willingness to participate in patriarchal heterosexual norms and capitalist commodity culture coded through ritualised action (Budgeon, 2001). Whereas de-governmentalisation of state, implies that responsabilised, and empowered actors are making the choices stated above, raising serious dilemmas for understanding feminist agency within neoliberalism (Hindess, 2004; Cornwell et al, 2008).

Drawing from Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg's reading of Foucault, we define objectification as 'the ways that others are governed and objectified into subjects through processes of power/knowledge' (**Milchman and Rosenberg 2011: 4**). Again following Foucault, Butler (**1997**) suggests 'no individual becomes a subject without first becoming subjected or undergoing "subjectivation"' (**ibid: 11**). Milchman and Rosenberg (**2011**) conceptualise 'subjectivation' as ways that individuals govern and fashion themselves into subjects on the basis of what they take to be the truth. It is useful, to signpost here the distinction between subjectification and subjectivation in Milchman and Rosenberg's reading of Foucault. For them these two concepts correspond to:

two distinct modes of power... When Foucault speaks of subjectification he links it to *pouvoir*, whereas when he speaks of subjectivation he links it to *puissance*. English makes do with the same word for each, 'power,' but *pouvoir* is power over, while *puissance* is power to; the former is linked to relations of domination and subjection, the latter to capacities for self-creation and de-subjectification (**Milchman and Rosenberg, 2011:po 6**).

Viewed in this way the idea of subjectivation is central to the conception of agency in this article where processes of mastery and submission are tied in ambivalence to subjects under neoliberalism and Hindutva projects. Following Saba Mahmood in this article we problematise the reading of agency primarily as resistance to the regulating impetus of wider structures like Hindutva or neoliberalism. Rather we define agency in subjectivation, thus the variety of ways norms of neoliberal governmentality are 'lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for and consummated' (**Mehmood, 2005: 23**).

### **Incorporating Women into Hindu Nationalism and Neoliberalism: Ritualisation & Responsibilisation**

We start by discussing how the main characters in the documentary are included into processes of bodily ritualisation. The film traces both the key characters Ruhi and Prachi engaged in rigorous processes of physical discipline and training to claim their spaces in these two different ideological projects. Ruhi and other beauty contestants not only endure a ritualised regime of diet and exercise in the Miss India boot camp but also open their bodies up to be surgically re-designed in ways that they can embody the 'new Indian women' :a neoliberal choice making subject and object to be gazed at, simultaneously. To become this sort of a 'ritualised actor' these contestants not only have to look a certain way

but have to adopt a new yet universal disposition through the ritualisation of their bodily movements, most specifically their walk, their postures and so on. These reassembled women then are deemed ready to represent the 'new Indian women' to a global audience.

Similarly, the women participating in the Durga Vahini boot camp also have to submit themselves to ritualised regime's rigorous combat-style physical training that includes learning to use firearms, elements of martial art, yoga as well as collective chanting and slogans. The bodily ritualisation is supplemented with mental ritualisation by constantly invoking ideal Hindu femininity, the ideas of Hindu superiority, threat from Muslims and Christians and rationalising violence against these groups. As one of the younger Durga Vahini trainees say that now that her heart is awakened in Hindu nationalist zeal she is determined to restore Hindu India and fight the Muslims and Christians who are ruining the nation. In other words, the training process in the boot camp creates a highly ritualised and disciplined body which is capable of undertaking violent acts masquerading as self-defence, and also knows exactly at whom to target the violence. Young girls in the film are seen collectively chanting 'Doodh Mangoge Kheer Denge, Kashmir Mangoge Chir Denge' (TWBH, 2012). This is loosely translated as 'If you ask for milk, we will give you pudding (implying Indian generosity), but if you (i.e. Pakistan) ask for Kashmir we will kill you'. In Durga Vahini boot camp, much like the Miss India camp young women are reassembled into bodies and minds that embody the ideological values of each of these ideological projects through different kinds of ritualised disciplinary regimes.

In terms of responsabilisation, the Miss India contestants like Ruhi constantly claim to be 'modern' women of India who represent the country to the rest of the world. They consider the beauty pageant as a platform that gives them an 'identity and voice' to become a person of 'importance', a part of the world and not just India. They are identified as urban middle-class women who are liberal and practice 'choice' which according to them majority of the girls from small towns are unable to practice. They view themselves as active agents of 'changing' the country into a modern and global one. Within the framework of neoliberal governmentality this can be seen as a process of responsabilisation adopted by Miss India contestants as technology of the self, to construct the 'modern Indian femininity' or the 'new Indian women' representing the 'New' India to a global audience. At a micro-level, they also forge a pathway towards upward economic mobility and greater social acceptance of the rare freedoms such as physical mobility, Westernised dressing and pursuit of a career in the modelling industry being granted to them by their families. Indian state is displaced from its role in the provisioning of education, employment and measures of well-being of

the populace, and is relegated to the role of the guarantor of the 'market' that offers young women like the Miss India contestants the possibility of a career in the global fashion industry through platforms like beauty contests. This form of neoliberal governance encourages individuals "to willingly and freely choose to follow the path most conducive to their self-interest- the path which often turns out to be the normative one" (Chen, 2014: 443). For instance, despite the freedoms negotiated from her family Ruhi still opts for deeply gender normative (feminine) path of beauty contest. Similarly other participants of the Miss India contest remind us frequently of the fact that, in spite of their visibly Westernised exteriors, they are after all 'good Indian girls'.

Durga Vahini camp trainer Prachi and a trainee, Chinmayee, emphasise the greatness of India as a nation by highlighting the 'national order of things' (Malkki, 1995: 25) through a deeply territorialised, rigid conception of identity narrated using metaphors like 'our roots', 'our country', 'our culture'. These narratives also emphasise the need to protect the 'national order of things' from internal and external threats. The external threats are perceived to be cultural (Westernisation) and economic (consumerism) whereas the internal threats are the threats from the contact with non-Hindus within India such as Christians and Muslims. Both types of perceived threats to the national order of things are deeply gendered given the disproportionate focus upon the corruption of Hindu girls through Western dressing, the pursuit of careers, delay in marriage and reproduction, sexual liaisons outside marriage and even outside caste and religious affiliations. Similarly, Hindu girls are also cautioned against Western consumerism embedded specially in the beauty and personal industry targeted at women. Prachi, along with her father, is depicted as being keen to restore the 'national order of things' by any means necessary including killing of those who pose a threat to this order. In defence of her stance, Prachi argues that 'this is not murder, this is self-defence, or the defence of the "national order of things"' (TWBH, 2012). This process can be seen as responsabilisation of the ritualised and disciplined individual participants of Durga Vahini towards the protection of a Hindu 'national order of things' from the Muslim (invaders) and Christian (missionaries). Such processes of responsabilisation are rationalised through arguments around the state's inability to perform its role as the protector of the Dharma/Hindu religion and its adherents. By de-governmentalising the state and governmentalising the self, Prachi's narrative then challenges the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force by the state and in fact transfers this legitimacy to the individual ethical Hindus, like herself. In doing so, Prachi attempts to rationalise the rare 'freedoms', in terms of her political participation, being granted to her especially by her father,

who she says 'allowed me to live' in a setting of normalised female foeticide and infanticide in the country. Prachi's father says 'what can be more honourable than dying for your nation... I will be happiest person on earth, if she sacrifices her life in the service of the nation' (TWBH, 2012). Seen in the light of her father's strong masculine Hindutwa views, it is not surprising to see Prachi's responsabilisation towards maintaining a Hindu male national order of things. Additionally, Prachi wants to choose a relatively less gender normative life path than Miss India contestant Ruhi, shunning conjugal life and wants to dedicate herself to the political cause of Hindutwa through her participation in activities of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.

### **Becoming Subjects: Objectification to Subjectivation of the Women in the Two Camps**

'If I were a women and I had a gown, my boobs will be out and my butt will be out.'

(A trainer in the Miss India contest  
in TWBH, 2012)

'I always had this imagination of putting girls into cloaks so we can only see their legs...I just want to see beautiful hot legs.'

(Marc Robinson, trainer and mentor of Miss India contestants  
in TWBH, 2012)

'It is (referring to Prachi) my product; I have to ensure that it is a perfect product.'

(Mr Trivedi, Prachi's Father  
in TWBH, 2012)

As the quotations above highlight, both the Miss India contestants and members of Durga Vahini, are constructed as objects in the documentary. In the case of Miss India contestants, this is done through their bodily objectification by the breaking down of their body into individual 'governable' parts that determine their success in the contest. In fact, referring to bodily reconfigurations done to the twenty participants in the course of their one month training for the contest, one of the organisers of the contest, Sabira Merchant (Diction Expert), refers to the Miss India contest as a 'factory' and a 'manufacturing unit' producing the 'modern Indian women'. Interestingly, when one of the participants of the contest, Ankita, is asked to walk on stage covering her

upper body in a white cloak showing only her legs in spite of her cluster phobia, she questions 'we want to achieve our dreams at what cost?...the cost of our dignity and the cost of our moral values...sometimes I think is it really worth it' (TWBH, 2012). Such commodified display of women as non-speaking objects covered in cloaks and exhibition of their partially clothed body has come to signify the nation's willingness to discard 'regressive tradition' and creation of modern women through the factory of beauty contests.

Responding to such objectification of women, Ankita discusses how 'wrong and right' is subjective. What is right for her success in the Miss India contest is wrong for her family. But she thinks her family must understand that she is a woman of the twenty-first century; keeping her values and principles intact, she must adapt herself to the world. She also says that eighty percent of Indian women give in to other people's decisions about their lives and have no choice and thus no identity of their own. But, the Miss India contestants, even those from small towns, are setting an example for other women about the change in society. We identify signs of agency in Miss India contestants' voluntary submission to the rigours of military style training that leads to long-term economic success even while leading to their bodily objectification. The agency of the beauty queens is embedded in their gendered and classed subjectivation whereby they are positioned within discursive politico-economic power that nevertheless allows for the active presence of subjects. Thus the Miss India contestants in TWBH are willingly designing their own lives as 'new Indian women' by conforming to behaviours, lifestyles and opinions of their trainers and establishing themselves as a transnational class in neoliberal India.

In the case of Prachi, a member of Durga Vahini, her objectification occurs through her family's construction of her virtuous Hindu femininity, or the ability to reproduce biologically and culturally the Hindu nation. Prachi's father frequently deploys the metaphor of 'Humara product' or 'our product' to reinforce her biological and cultural commitment to the birth family and by association to the country of birth (motherland). In using the metaphor of a product, he also highlights how his own ideological commitments to the militant Hindutwa ideology have been transferred to Prachi both at home and through participation in twenty one Durga Vahini camps in her life of twenty four years. In other words, he highlights the ideological and biological continuity between himself and his daughter, in the process of objectifying her as a 'product' or a 'commodity' with hetero-normative Hindu feminine qualities.

However, Prachi strongly states that 'I am different from girls... I am different from boys... while making me God was in a different mood so he

combined these two things together and sent me down... my life is not for getting married... or to produce children... I have a feeling I have not been made by God for these things... I am for parishad... vishwa hindu parishad (The Hindu movement)... that is what life is for me' (TWBH, 2012). Prachi's father announces that Prachi must get married at some point as it is her social, moral and religious duty. Marriage and motherhood are perceived to complete Prachi's femininity, at the same time relieving her father of a financial burden. Prachi's response to her father is narrated in the language of personal choice. She also assures her father that he does not have to worry about looking after her, implying she is able to do that herself through earning her own living. Towards the end of the documentary however, Prachi again acknowledges that her individual beliefs around marriage and children are opposed to the ideology of movement she politically subscribes to. So in keeping with her larger alignment with the Durga Vahini's cultural ideology, she says that she will continue to advise young girls to get married and have children, reproducing the nation culturally and biologically. Yet, in her own construction of her self-identity she is both accepting her objectification as an ideal Hindu woman devoted to the Hindutwa cause and subjectively denying her feminine duties by arguing with her parents about a life outside marriage and motherhood. Thus Prachi follows her normative role of sacrificing the female body in the service of the nation, but not through reproducing the nation biologically (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1989). Her militant religious pursuit subjected her to a delicate conundrum between the feminine moral codes that could be transgressed and those that are mandatory. Although the choices of Prachi appear limited from a feminist perspective, we want to underscore the scrutiny of young women like Prachi is applied to her daily actions to shape their lives according to a particular model of behavior. Although she is implicit in the wider project of training young girls to live a certain gendered religious life within her Hindutwa ideology through marriage and motherhood, for herself she is seeking an alternative femininity. With attention to these kinds of specificities we can begin to grasp the different modalities of agency and subjectivation in enacting and the desire of transgressing religio-national moral principles at individual level for women like Prachi.

## Conclusion

Through the processes of ritualisation and responsabilisation neoliberal governmentality shifts responsibility from state to individuals through self-regulation and ritualised bodily processes that takes responsibility of their own lives. However, this responsibility is often complicit to

nationalist and neoliberal control over women's body, soul, thoughts and conduct. Sandra Bartky's (1988) appropriation of Foucault reminds us that the subjection of the female body to ritualised disciplinary practices such as dieting, exercise and beauty subjugate women, not by taking power away from them, but by generating skills and competencies that depend on the maintenance of a stereotypical form of feminine identity. Thus constructing responsabilised feminine subjects who are hard-working, meritorious and transnational subjects, rationalising the neoliberal ideological project as a whole. The same logic when applied to the members of Durga Vahini shows that participation in militant Hindu nationalism through ritualised bodily functions such as combat training and fire-arms training equips these women with certain skills that depend on their acceptance of the Hindu nationalist imagination including the role of Hindu women in it. As a result, individual agency is not resistant to power but may also be expressed in conforming to processes of power. To better their lives, individuals can practice agency through endurance and persistence of subordinate forms of femininity.

Additionally, we find that the women participating in the Miss India contest as well as the women attending the Durga Vahini camp achieve subjectivation both through self-objectification and through practice in resistance to prevailing apparatuses of power/knowledge. From a feminist perspective for instance, the Miss India contestants and the participants of the Durga Vahini camp depicted in the TWBH can be seen as making gender normative choices in relation to accepting commodification of women's bodies and sacrifice of the female body; both subject to fierce bodily discipline and surveillance in their respective camps. Such practices of objectification of women's bodies have been noted in relation to Indian beauty queens acting as elitist heroes of the country who renegotiate India's marginal position in global economy (Parameswaran, 2004) or as right-wing reactions against the beauty pageants for women's sexual exploitation and Westernization (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Similarly the goddess Durga's example is invoked as a representation of her power, fertility and sexuality in Durga Vahini camps. Her power is appropriated and domesticated; thus both the goddess and her followers, the women of Durga Vahini group, are reduced to dutiful and humble servants dedicating their bodies and souls to the Hindu nationalist project by training in military combat and reproducing the nation biologically (Kovacs, 2004).

However, following Mahmood (2005), we remain sensitive to the processes through which subordinated and marginalised groups and individuals create alternative forms of agency in the face of dominant power and discourses. We argue that the trajectories through which these two groups of women discussed in our paper arrive at seemingly

normative choices may not necessarily be normative and may offer the possibility of subjectivation and exercise of agency. Through self-creation and subjectivation, both neoliberalism embedded in the beauty industry and Hindutva embedded in organisations like the Durga Vahini create alternative scripts of agency.

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