

Dialogue Example

Two friends, Jeffery and Lane who are both undergrad religious studies students sit down to watch the documentary film, *The World Before Her*. As the movie ends the two friends remained in their respective seats and have a discussion over the film, and in a broader sense, what Hindu Nationalism means.

Jeffrey: So, Durga Vahini is clearly a terrorist organization.

Lane: It certainly gives off that impression. If nothing else, Prachi exhibits internalized misogyny (*The World Before Her*).

Jeffrey: I will agree there, she seems to give off an aura of just going through the motions. But that is neither here nor there. I never would have expected the word Hindu to be followed by the word terrorist. They seem so peaceful.

Lane: I would argue that the word terrorist could follow the name of any religion. It is not so much that the religion preaches these, as you call it, terrorist ideals, but rather radicalization of the practitioners that do. It seems evident to me that this is a small glimpse into a particularly radical group of people who are moving towards Hindutva.

Jeffrey: Hindutva, I have heard that term. That came about in 1923 I believe, after Vinayake Damodar Savarkar published his book *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (Rodrigues, 300). The term Hindutva comes from that book, it means “Hinduness”. It was meant to categorize all the people whom live in the Indian Subcontinent (Rodrigues, 300).

Lane: Yes, 1923 sounds about right. Britain had long colonized India by then. They exploited the caste system to control the people (*The Hindu Caste System*, YouTube). Savarkar is rousing the people to wake up and realize they are losing their culture. Think about it, there was an influx of Christian missionaries that were actively leading social reforms in the country (Rodrigues, 296).

Jeffrey: Sure, there were Christian missionaries, but just like today their theologies never really solidified in the area. And religion challenges aside, whether we like it or not the British improved India. Think of all the telegraph lines, railways and other infrastructure brought by the British (Rodrigues, 296)

Lane: Improved by who’s standards? Your ethnocentrism is showing.

Jeffrey: You got me there. But, really, think of all the teachings in the Vedas that allow for the mistreatment of people and forces some to live in slums with no real opportunity for improvement in their lives. I am not trying to suggest that the British were, “white saviors,” but think of the implications of the Vedic teachings left unaltered.

Lane: It is easy to think of what would happen. All we must do is look at the culture that thrived for literally thousands of years with out the help of anyone else. Again, you are being ethnocentric. Of course, no one wants people to be abused or cast to the side. But we can not force cultures to change, because if we do, we get groups like Durga Vahini. The people feel cornered and feel the need to save themselves.

Jeffrey: Are you suggesting that the oppressive ideals are ok, because they do not affect you?

Lane: Not even a little bit, I am just saying we can not force change in cultures that we are not a part of.

Jeffrey: Alright, so let us go back. The book comes out and the people who swear by it create the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sang. We call them the RSS for short. This group is made up of volunteers who take up this cause, Hindutva. We know that by this point the Congress Party was pushing for India to separate its government from Hinduism. We know that the two were to work independently of each other and that India would call for religious freedom. But what I think you may be too hung up on is the religious notion of Hinduism. Hindutva was much more than that. The RSS wanted everyone to be under the “cultural category” of Hindutva. Buddhist, Muslims, it did not matter. Anyone who lived in the Indian subcontinent were to be referred to as Hindus (Rodrigues, 301).

Lane: You are right. Gandhi himself was pressing for inclusivity yet was against separating the groups people of the continent. He was just as much a backer of the notion of Hindutva as many others. However, his interpretation of Hindutva did not save him from the RSS. He was assassinated by a member for his views on the need for inclusivity. This is what led to the organization being outlawed by the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (Rodrigues, 301).

Jeffrey: Yeah, and I think that is when Hindutva started to become radicalized. With the RSS outlawed, the government is essentially saying, “The people in this organization have illegal ideals.” They did not say, murder is illegal and then just punish the murderer, they punished the whole group. Thereby they made all the people who held the ideals, “illegal”. Sure, we hope they did not advocate for murder, but it would not matter at this point because their thoughts were now illegal. It’s a perfect storm for radicalization.

Lane: Of course! And the people who hold these ideals feel that their religion is distinctively tied to the ground they walk on. Like Shinto, is to Japan. The geography is created in the religion’s stories.

Jeffrey: Exactly!

Lane: The Hindu Goddess Sati, she’s dismembered right? And her body becomes part of the land. Their religion is telling them the land beneath their feet was created specifically for them by their god (Rodrigues, 302).

Jeffrey: And then the country almost chooses a national anthem that calls India the Divine Mother yet recants after it was too “Hindu”. Nothing like saying someone’s identity is “too much” (Rodrigues 302).

Lane: Who is that goddess? Maybe it is Bharat Mata, who nurtures Mother Earth?

Jeffrey: Yep! That is her, our textbook not only said she was the “embodiment of sacred geography” but the “personification of Hindu society” (Rodrigues, 303)

Lane (Sarcastically): Strong words to describe just some “fleeting” religious character.

Jeffrey: No kidding, but that is what happens when governments attempt to separate themselves from the dominate religions of their countries. The geographical and cultural significance of deities gets watered down or in some cases made more palatable and demythicized.

Lane: Then the people feel thrown away.

Jeffrey: What do people who feel tossed out do? Take up a form of defiance. And that, is how we get the people like the ones in *The World Before Her*.

Lane: Exactly, both girls, Ruhi and Prachi feel that their very identities are at stake.

Jeffrey: I can see why you would think Prachi would feel that way, but why Ruhi?

Lane: Seriously?! It was right there in the documentary. Ruhi is threatened just by being a woman. Remember the other girl in the pageant whose mother fled with her because her father wanted her to be killed, just for being a girl? Ruhi and the other women are advocating for the exposure, idolatry and sexuality of women. In a greater sense, they are advocating for the appearance of women in general. In a country where girl fetuses are disproportionately aborted due to cultural beliefs, mainstreaming women is a problem. Hindutva wants the country to project only Hindu ideals, these images are not cohesive with the religious teachings. (The World Before Her).

Jeffrey: Ok yeah, I see what you are saying. But Prachi? She is fighting against both. She is a woman, who let's face it her father clearly did not want. Not to make assumptions but to me, it is obvious. And, she comes from a family who at the very least adheres to the RSS ideals. Her father physically abuses her. On top of that, she is emotionally abused by not only him but that school. She is a woman who has anger just simmering behind her eyes. You know what I mean? She says she would kill for the Hindu Nationalist cause, that is a terroristic threat, and I believe her. With all that said I return to my first point, Durga Vahini is a terrorist organization (The World Before Her).

Lane: I mean, she did say that they were linked to that bombing. Which was led by Hindu Nationalists.

Jeffrey: Right? And! The girls are parading down the street chanting about how much they hate and are willing to kill Muslims (The World Before Her).

Lane: Wasn't that hard to watch? Those girls are so young. The one even mentioned how she had Muslim friends before but now would never even entertain the idea of having a Muslim friend (The World Before Her).

Jeffrey: The very existence of Muslims is a threat to Hindutva is what they are being taught so it is no surprise that she felt that way (The World Before Her).

Lane: Ok, but I cannot help but wonder this. Considering how unfavorable women are viewed in Hindu culture, why on earth would there be a whole school dedicated to the indoctrination of Hindutva to preteen girls? You think they would want brave, admirable "Arjuna" type boys.

Jeffrey: Well, I have an idea and it will be controversial.

Lane: Yeah? What is your idea

Jeffrey: Well, think of the age most of the girls in the school are. They appear to be mostly early teens. They are now likely menstruating, and you know what that means. They are a burden on their families. No viable husband for your now burdensome daughter? Send her off to school. But they are not sending them off to just any school. Durga Vahini is actively radicalizing these girls. They hope that the girls are willing to die for Hindutva. I think they chose the girls because they do not have value.

Lane: Are you suggesting that the organization is picking young girls because they are expendable? Plenty of women are valued in Hindu tradition. In fact, in the 1980s, The Hindutva motivated group The Bharatiya Janata Party backed the religious symbol of aegis, linked to Rama of the *Ramayana*. Every Sunday they would show the series Ramayana on Indian National television. We all know how highly Sita is regarded in that story. I think that women have purpose and value in Hinduism and Hindutva (Rodrigues 301-302).

Jeffrey: Well I do not know their exact reason for why they pick girls or how many organizations that are similar in nature only teach boys. But I do think that it is entirely possible that those girls who go to school there have fathers like Prachi's. Prachi's father appears to be practicing some form of orthodox Hinduism, which is common among the people striving for Hindutva (Rodrigues, 302). I think those girls are sent there to relieve a family burden and if they die, that lessens the burden that much more.

Lane: That is sad to think of, but you know it holds some water. Sure, we should not assume that they think their girls are useless, but Prachi's father does almost say that exactly.

Jeffrey: I mean we both know that women can sometimes get themselves in terrible predicaments just by being women that adhere to Hindu practices. I think we would find those customs strictly enforced in this kind of Hindutva.

Lane: Yeah and the debate about women could go on for several more hours. You may have convinced me that Durga Vahini is a terrorist organization. I guess we cannot argue against the notion that they are significantly radicalized. It is unfortunate that Hindutva could easily be a wonderful thing for the nation of India. The idea is great right? Our god created India and if you are in India you are a Hindu. I could get behind the notion of Hindutva; I suppose from that perspective. But the senseless murders and terrorism I cannot.

Jeffrey: It is one of those things you know, it sounds good on paper. "We are all one together". But we cannot define people's identities for them. We must allow them to do that for themselves. That, in my opinion, is where the opposition to Hindutva is probably rooted. The, "Don't tell me what to do and who to be" sentiment.

Lane: Exactly. Hindutva has tremendous potential for good. Unfortunately, equally, a tremendous potential for bad. I wonder what Prachi is up to now. Think we can find her on google?

Works Cited

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