

***In Whose Name?* Filmmaker Nandini Sikand's Meditation on the Redefining of Hindu Icons in India**

By Sophia Purekal

How do right-wing agendas manage to co-opt patriotism? Why does cultural pride necessarily result in a rhetoric of divisiveness? These are two focal questions of *In Whose Name?*, an audio-visual monologue by award-winning writer/director, Nandini Sikand. It is a short, yet poignant work of film, with exquisite images and a somber, moving narration by Sikand, herself. The conversation I had with her at her Manhattan apartment turned into a discussion about the manifestation and momentum of the Hindutva movement in Indian politics, but she was quick to point out that the piece is not so much about the politics, itself, as about the means by which political parties, whatever their agenda, win power. In India, it has been the Bharatiya Janata Party that has usurped icons of Hindu culture – particularly imagery of Hindu gods and goddesses – to win popularity and allegiance from their constituents. These were symbols that inspired freedom fighters decades ago. They empowered India to oust the British, but they are now being used to turn Hindus against Muslims and other minorities, at times to the point of killing them. Similar remarks can be made about the American flag.

And indeed they have been made. One of the most charged screenings of *In Whose Name?* was earlier this year at the Tupelo Film Festival in Tupelo, Mississippi, where it also won the Best Documentary Short Film Award. Most people know Mississippi as a die-hard red state. Sikand, herself, was surprised with Tupelo's warm reception and incisive commentary on the similarity between politicking in India and in the US. One audience member even expressed that she was inspired by Sikand's film to want to make a similar one about the American flag or the Confederate flag, one of the highest praises Sikand could have asked for.

Could the positive response the film has enjoyed in the many American cities where it has screened – as well as in Lahore, Pakistan and New Delhi, India – taken with the fact that the BJP lost control of the federal government in the 2004 Indian elections, be, themselves, signs of hope? Could it be that the events at Ayodhya in 1992 and in Gujarat in 2002 are behind us? Time will tell, but Sikand points out that, as fortunate as was the defeat of the BJP, the party is still active and influential. They have a strong grass roots movement that has done especially well reaching out to Adivasis and Dalits in rural areas, to whom they preach a message of uplift at the expense of non-Hindus; again, not unlike the success of the Republican Party in reaching out to poor, rural Americans. The divisiveness in India occurs also on a more subtle level, however. When Sikand returns to her hometown of Delhi, she notices that public writing – be it street signs or news headlines – have been Sanskritized – a move away from the past prevalence of mixed Hindi/Urdu Hindustani. This is distinct from the Delhi she remembers from her childhood, where her family and friends were all mixed, and she never had a thought of one being one and another being the other. She has been told, however, that a similar rewriting of public language is afoot in Pakistan, where Arabic is replacing Urdu.

The answer that *In Whose Name?* makes to these trends comes from a personal place. Sikand talks about her own childhood and her own engagement with the brilliant, ever present Hindu icons. She talks of her own father's career in the Indian Army. Such a personal story is one way that this member of India's "silent majority" speaks up to

make a stand for her multifaceted Bharatmata. The hauntingly beautiful song that opens the film warns those who would turn India into a home for only one culture, and do so by violent means: “A battle goes on for only a few days, but you can spend a lifetime regretting it.”

In Whose Name? will screen at Seattle’s Second Independent South Asian Film Festival, September 14-18 at the Broadway Performance Hall in Seattle. For more information, please visit www.tasveer.org.

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