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J. Barton Scott
University of Toronto, barton.scott@utoronto.ca

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Reason (Vivek)

Abstract

This is a film review of *Reason (Vivek)* (2018), directed by Anand Patwardhan.

Keywords

Hinduism, Islam, Rationalism, Right Wing



Reason (Vivek) (2018), dir. Anand Patwardhan

A new film by Anand Patwardhan is a major event. Not only is Patwardhan arguably India's leading documentarian, a multi-award-winning filmmaker of global acclaim. His films are also epic in their scope, ambition—and length. *Reason*, in its TIFF release, clocks in at four hours and twenty minutes long. Watching it is an immersive experience, and one not quickly forgotten.

Patwardhan is best known for tracking the rise of the Hindu right in films such as *Ram ke Naam (In the Name of God)* (1992) and *Father, Son, and Holy War* (1995). With 2011's *Jai Bhim Comrade*, he turned his attention to Dalit activism, especially in western India ("Dalit" is the preferred term for the groups formerly known as "Untouchables"). These two stories converge fully in *Reason*, which offers a survey—and a damning one—of contemporary Indian politics. As the film argues, India's secular democracy is in unprecedented danger, threatened by the neo-fascistic forces of caste-Hindu majoritarianism.

Reason's epic length is divided into eight chapters, each of which explores a discrete episode in India's recent political life (mostly between 2013 and 2016, with one chapter reaching

back to the 2008 attacks on Bombay's Taj Mahal hotel). We learn about the killings of Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, M.M. Kalburgi; the suicide of Rohith Vemula; the sedition charges against Kanhaiya Kumar; and the mob execution of alleged beef-eater Mohammad Ikhlaq. The news stories will be familiar to many viewers, but Patwardhan has an uncanny knack for pushing past what you think you know. The freshness here, as in his other films, comes from the interviews. Patwardhan knows how to get people to talk. Seemingly fearless, he goes straight to the center of trouble and solicits the stories of the people most affected by it, paying particular attention to the voices of the disempowered and showing how these voices get shut out by news media. It takes time to hear these voices—hence the length of the film.

These contemporary flashpoints are, however, only part of what makes *Reason* so interesting. Making good use of archival footage, Patwardhan sets recent events within a longer history of the rise, fall, and second coming of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh). As he presents it, that history runs as follows. By the early twentieth century, the anticolonial movement in India was firmly committed to the values of secular democracy; it sought to oust the British and, at the same time, overturn age-old customs around caste and gender that were just as perniciously anti-democratic as imperialism. Traditional elites (i.e. high-caste Hindu men) saw this progressivism as a threat to their entrenched social power, and they sought to thwart it. By the 1920s, they had established several different groups committed to preserving high-caste Hindu privilege, with the RSS serving as the movement's quasi-military wing. In 1948, RSS-affiliated Nathuram Godse assassinated M. K. Gandhi (a democratizing hero in Patwardhan's narrative), after which the organization was briefly banned; it was later allowed to reestablish itself on the condition that it swear off politics. The forces of Hindu nationalism thus found themselves playing a long game. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, they reconstituted themselves via new

organizations (VHP, BJP, ABVP, etc.) that had the same old aims: to preserve the cultural superiority of high-caste Hindus against Dalits and Muslims. By the early 1990s, this long game had come to fruition. It gained even greater power with the 2014 election that made Narendra Modi prime minister. As Patwardhan clearly indicates, India's current crisis is not a one-man show: Modi is the symptom, not the cause, of rightward trends.

Patwardhan's social analysis (presented largely through voiceover) is, as always, insightful. As he explains, India's growing right-wing consensus has been fueled by economic liberalization, which not only exacerbates the gap between rich and poor, but even valorizes it. By celebrating the super-rich, neoliberal India naturalizes the wealth gap and abandons an earlier era's democratic commitment to equality. It also produces a growing class of undereducated, unemployed men who are easy prey for manipulative political and religious leaders. In the 1930s and 40s, Hindu nationalists publicly expressed their admiration for European fascisms; 21st century ideologues have brought this once-disavowed fascism back to center stage, manipulating neoliberalism's angry underclass to their own advantage.

For North American viewers, the resonances with U.S. history will be striking. Indeed, *Reason* might be profitably viewed alongside Spike Lee's 2018 film *BlacKkKlansman*, which frames its story in arguably similar terms—the rise, fall, and second coming of the Ku Klux Klan. If, in the 1910s, the KKK was respectable enough for *Birth of a Nation* to be screened in Woodrow Wilson's White House, by the 1970s it seemed like a fringe movement that, in Lee's film, is filled with poorly-educated comic bumblers. In the 2010s, however, this fringe— via Donald Trump—reclaimed political power. The rightward swing of the 2010s is, as many have noted, a global phenomenon, and North American viewers would do well to understand the Indian story in global

terms. What role, we might ask, has racialized religion played in creating “ethno-nationalism” in both North America and South Asia?

Anyone interested in contemporary India should see *Reason*. Its commentary is searing, its images haunting. I do, however, want to express reservation about its narrative frame—a reservation that starts with the title. *Reason* is a tendentious translation of the Hindi *Vivek* (which would be more typically translated as “discrimination,” in the sense of “discernment”); the translation, however, tells you a lot about this film. Patwardhan’s opening sequence sets up an age-old contest between reason and religion that stretches from the Reformation and Enlightenment to the present day. As stock images of martyrs being burnt at the stake clearly indicate, this is more a Western narrative than an Indian one. One might well ask what it is doing here.

Much academic ink has, of course, been poured into critiques of this precise Enlightenment metanarrative. *Reason* is not a panacea: secular regimes and rationalized bureaucracies produced much of the most horrific violence of the 20th century. India might seem an outlier here, given the prominence of religious violence there. But, as many scholars have argued, Hindu and Muslim identities in modern India are very much the product of bureaucratic rationality, born of the secular state’s effort to govern and regulate religion. A clichéd narrative of “reason vs. religion” cannot make sense of the complexity of this history.

I suspect that Patwardhan gets his frame narrative from the Maharashtrian activist scene that he documents with such care in the first part of his film. Dabholkar’s “anti-blind faith movement” and Pansare’s Marxism both brought Enlightenment critiques of religion into Marathi, where they comingled with an Ambedkarite critique of caste and a strongly humanist Dalit Buddhism. Patwardhan’s film feels like an organic outgrowth of this intellectual world, with its powerful critique of religion as vehicle of caste and class privilege. As an homage to Dabholkar

and Pansare, the framing of the film makes perfect sense. I just worry that it undercuts the nuanced social analysis that characterizes *Reason* as a whole. But perhaps I'm missing the point of frame stories. Simple stories move people to action, and this is a film that screams for the viewer to act.

Reason is a slow and immersive film. It's often upsetting, with explicit images of death and violence, of angry mobs and khaki-clad armies. As a viewer, you are often worried for Patwardhan's safety, both when he's behind the camera and on the couple of occasions when he appears in front of it. As the film terrifyingly attests, this is a moment in India's history when leftist intellectuals are being assassinated in the streets. Patwardhan's courage in the face of this is astonishing. And, indeed, his courageous presence is integral to the emotional texture of the film. Over its four and half hours, *Reason* moves the viewer to horror, fascination, disgust, alarm, and despair—it is hard to know how anyone could even begin to try to overcome the social forces documented here. Still, some people do. We see them talk. We see them recount the dangers they've faced. We see them press on. Most movingly, perhaps, we see this through Patwardhan's eyes—taking some small hope from his fearless documentation of where India has been, and where it is headed.