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Queering the Hindu Rashtra: Hindu Nationalism and Social Media in Contemporary India

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Abstract: *This paper looks at how 'ordinary' citizens make use of social media, notably Twitter, in order to delineate how certain queer communities are either being co-opted or completely erased from the populist language of contemporary Hindutva that increasingly seeks to portray itself as a 'liberal', 'progressive' force. It looks at queerness in terms of both a sexual and a political identity, in order to address how caste, class, religion, and sexuality inform each other, while complicating our understanding of the internal 'Other' of Hindu nationalism, and of contemporary Hindu nationialism itself. Instead of entering the conversation around religion, gender, sexuality and caste in relation to acts of physical violence meted out on those who fall outside of the Hindu nationalist ideological ambit, I use* gaalis *(abuses) and the discourse around cows, as it emerged on social media, as my 'ordinary' analytical framework to understand how women from the marginalised communities (non-Hindu, non-upper caste, non-heteronormative) access and lay claims to Digital India.*

Keywords: Hindutva, Women, Social Media, Internet, Twitter

With the steep fall in the tariffs for data services in India, courtesy the telecom operator Reliance Jio, and cheaper mobile phones becoming increasingly available, the number of people with access to the internet has grown exponentially, with Indians accounting for the second-largest number of internet users in the world, and the highest number of Facebook users (Kemp 2017, n.p.; *The Times of India* 2018, n.p.). When viewed in the privacy of one's home, or during one's daily commute to their workplace, or simply to "time-pass", social media, not quite unlike the television, has come to provide us with a platform which is seemingly both 'public' and 'private' and therefore not quite either. This has helped, as far Hindu nationalism is concerned, to evoke the sense of a golden Hindu past, in the creation of an intimate sense of belonging to an imagined community of (wronged, historically overlooked)

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Hindus, and with an almost ubiquitous "recognition" of this fiction as the *de facto* truth (Rajagopal 2004, 25). In this paper, I look at how social media, specifically Twitter, has emerged as a means to fulfil the twin imperatives of disciplining (via *gaalis*) and mobilising (via espousing seemingly 'liberal' ideas) the masses for the Hindu nationalist project. Moving beyond a leader-centric understanding of "mediated populism" (Chakravartty and Roy 2015, 1-12, Sinha 2017, 4158–4180), I make an attempt towards queering the contemporary Indian political landscape, by engaging with the populist politics of Hindu nationalism, in terms of its relationship with the religious, sexual, and caste 'Other'. I intend to show how certain sexualities are being refashioned to recast India into a Hindu nation (Kapur 2006, 344), while also using the term 'queer' in a much more literary sense, to discuss the 'strangeness' of non-Hindu, non-upper caste women in Digital India. Following Arvind Narrain (2004, 142-164), I expand the term queer to include those identities that lay outside the traditional Hindu nationalist fold, in order to introduce a different rhetoric of violence: one that is incident upon either an almost complete dismissal of struggles of the internal 'Other' or a co-optation of the struggles of a community that the Hindu nationalists don't seem to understand in the first place.

As a cisgender woman belonging to a dominant North Indian caste, any attempts of me writing about *both* Dalit and queer women could be seen as doubly blasphemous, particularly when one takes into account the very valid criticism of the feminist movement in India as articulated by Gopal Guru, in his "Dalit Women Talk Differently" (1995). Guru argues that attempts towards 'women's solidarity' often dismiss the identity of a Dalit woman as Dalit, such that despite their "guest appearances" in a text or a speech of a non-Dalit woman, the former's thoughts, ideas and/or experiences remain far removed from their reality (1995, 2549). I wonder whether my social location will render this exercise of understanding how women from marginalised communities interact with the digital Hindutva, a little superficial, a little inauthentic? Perhaps the reader and I can both find solace in Pushpesh Yadava's question which serves as an answer to my own: why can the theoretical and conceptual tools that emerge from the accounts of people who experience oppression not be utilised by others who can "develop an empathetic understanding of the subjects without *claiming to speak on behalf of the latter*?" (2018, 28).

This paper is partly based upon my conversations with thirteen women,[1] across religious, sexual, and caste lines. It could be argued that none of them qualify as 'subaltern' as notwithstanding their caste, religious or sexual exclusions, they are still better off than those who cannot even access the digital sphere to begin with. To that extent, perhaps this work is not about 'the subaltern'. Instead, borrowing from Radhika Gajjala, it is about:

> The privilege of being able to speak, to write. Yet it is also about the silences – the unsaid and the cannot-be-said. Not only is it about what "position[s] of authority we have been given," have taken, or have been enabled, and at whose

> expense we speak, but implicitly it is also a questioning into how we might be able to negotiate from within our speech and our silences in order to transform or disrupt hegemony." For, even if these women (whom we shall turn to later) were to remain silent, it is not, by default, going to make the 'subaltern' heard. (2004, 5)

Throughout this paper, I, therefore, draw upon my conversations with a few women to further problematise the erstwhile neat distinction between the Hindu 'self' versus the (Muslim) 'Other', focussing instead on the internal 'Other', that is, Dalit, queer women and their complicated relationship with contemporary Hindutva. An important limitation of the paper is that I have not extensively addressed the everyday acts of violence faced by Dalit women, nor have I accounted for the long list of atrocities that have been committed on Dalit bodies between 2014-2019, partly because an exhaustive discussion on the subject is outside the scope of this work. I wanted to use a more 'ordinary' category, that of *gaalis*, as a frame of reference to enter the discourse of gender, sexuality, and caste, without reducing the women in question to victims, but to draw attention to certain experiences and stories that remain unknown to upper-caste, upper class Hindus. I want to show how the ideas of nation and nationalism are being mapped via social media, and how a large chunk of our socius is being excluded from Digital India, especially in a world where even *gaalis* have hierarchies.

Hindutva and Queer

"I am what I am, so take me as I am", with these words the five-member Indian Constitution bench, read down Section 377 as a violation of rights and principles enshrined in the Indian Constitution, adding that majoritarian and popular views cannot dictate constitutional rights (*News18* 2018, n.p.). The infamous section of the Indian Penal Court held "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" as a punishable offence, criminalised all non-procreative and non-penetrative sex, and was seen as creating and legitimising the culture of violence, persecution, and harassment of all those whose sexual expressions might qualify as queer (Narrain 2004, 151). Unsurprisingly, the reading down of Section 377 was met with much enthusiasm throughout the nation, with the verdict equating the denial of the right to one's sexual orientation with a denial of their citizenship and a violation of their privacy (Krishnan 2018, n.p.).

In a three-day conclave called the 'Bharat of Future: An RSS perspective', a lecture series/outreach programme held two weeks after the Supreme Court judgement, the RSS' *Sarsanghchalak* (chief) Mohan Bhagwat went on record to say that,

> Now that the times have changed, we need to put in place a different system, a different approach towards them (homosexuals). We should try to solve (the problem of homosexuality) as much as possible, but in case that doesn't work out, we should accept them for what they are so that the entire society can

> progress in a healthy manner, and if there is anyone who suffers from this disease or this otherness, as a society, we should see that it does not get in the way for them to lead a fulfilling life. (*India Today* 2018, n.p.)

In the same breath, not only did Bhagwat call homosexuality an affliction and '*alag-pan*' (queerness), but simultaneously asked for the need to accept them for who they are and to work towards integrating them with the mainstream society. While the idea of tolerating (and not necessarily *accepting*, an important difference, I must add) homosexuals may not seem like much, when understood in the larger historical context of the relationship between Hindutva organisations and queers, it seems to indicate, at the very least, a 'softening of the RSS's stance on homosexuality', or at least that is how the above statement was interpreted by various news outlets (Seth 2018, n.p.; Sharda 2018, n.p.). On social media, on the other hand, perhaps the following tweet (Nisha 2018, n.p.) would best sum up how the digital Hindus perceived the statement:

The above statements assume importance in the light of the historically turbulent relationship between Hindu nationalism and the Indian queers. From protesting the screening of *Fire*, where the Hindu nationalists' outlook towards homosexuality was publicly articulated for the first time, claiming that there were no lesbians in India; to lauding the Supreme Court's decision to overturn

the Delhi High Court's judgement decriminalising gay sex, and also through the editorials of *Organiser,*

> […] a milestone in preserving the values of the country […] it (homosexuality) gives rise to a dangerous disease like AIDS and is an antithesis of family institution which in fact is the genesis of civilisation, and has produced great men like Buddha, Mahavira, Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and many other noble persons around the world. Is this possible in a homosexual society? Hence it is obligatory to put a stop in further expansion of homosexuality. It is astonishing that 400 institutions are engaged in removing Article 377 but none is interested in eradicating drinking, smoking, prostitution etc. because this is an age of exuberant freedom of sex which is against the Hindu way of life in which self-restraint is the aim of life giving permanent happiness and bliss […] People like LGBTQ and others, who want to have that sexual enjoyment facility in India, are working towards that end (gaining more sexual freedom) with the result that dirty sex like rape is playing around in the country, with increasing rapidity" (Pandya 2014); to launching bumper stickers, asking, "*Kisey Chunenge? Gau Rakhsa Ya Gay Rakhsa?*" (Who will you choose? Cow Protection or Gay Protection?), during the 2014 elections (S. Singh 2014, n.p.), harping back to Paola Bacchetta's "xenophobic homophobia" and "homophobic xenophobia" formulation (2013, 121-140), making it clear that the choice in the next election was to be between those who could protect the traditional Indian values of the society as opposed to those who side with the degenerate, 'un-Indian' homosexuals. Apparently, the fabled *Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas* was meant for cows and not sexual minorities!

When understood within this historical context, the following tweet by Karnika Kohli (2018, n.p.), while covering the Delhi Pride Parade in 2018, doesn't seem incongruous, "*Sanghi gunde hoshiyar, tera samna karega pyaar!*" (Beware, you Sanghi goons, for love is coming to get you). It reminded me of Jyotsna Kapur's observation that it is in allying with gay and women's rights activists, in expanding our understanding of sexuality as a fundamental form of human expression that we may fashion a language that could counter the hate-filled rhetoric of the Sangh, for, "to speak of love in the midst of fascism is to imagine an alternative and also a means of imagining it" (2006, 336-337). I would, however, like to examine this tweet by focusing on the comments that it engendered instead. Amidst the slew of degrading jibes and abuses that are a part of this thread, I wish to draw attention to the following comments:

> BJP did not go for review against the verdict, or pass an ordinance though the clergies and the Mullahs pressurised the Govt.. isnt that enough? Congress for 70 years did not repeal the law even with brute majority in both the houses, apna political jalwa kahin aur dikha, bhag [sic, go, and display your political showmanship elsewhere] (Chief Security Officer Glenn Quagmire).

> SICKENING!!! I'm a Sanghi [member of the RSS] , and I'm a Pansexual, trans person. A proud Hindu too! If I'm open and accepting of everyone else, it's because I'm Hindu! (sic) (Trilokam).

> *Are pagal aurat* [crazy woman]. We Mandir [temple] going people are open minded ones. Go and ask topi dhari [sic, skull-cap wearers] n rice bags to accept LGBTs (sic) (Durga).
>
> *Sanghi gunde SC mein 377 ke repeal ke khilaaf nahi gaye the. Zyadatar opposition Muslim aur Christian ne kiya tha Thoda bkchodi se time mile to newspaper padh le jiye. Par nautanki poori dikhaani hain* [It was largely Muslims and Christians and not the Sanghi goons who moved the Supreme Court to protest the repeal of Section 377. Maybe read a newspaper, instead of wasting your time in all these shenanigans]. Patriarchy can be Brahmanical but Terrorism can't be Islamic. #GodofHypocrisy (sic) (Srajan Dixit).

These responses are meant to underscore the popular understanding of the relationship between Hindutva and homosexuality. The first comment, for instance, is a classic instance of the trope of 'whatbouttery' which is increasingly employed online to refute any claims that question 'liberal' Hindutva. For the commenter, the ideology of Hindutva is supportive of homosexuality, precisely because it was under a 'saffron regime' that Section 377 was outlawed, a feat that the Congress failed to achieve despite being in power for 70 years. Such comments allow the online ideological warriors of Hindutva to build a populist narrative that centres on establishing Hindutva organisations as being supportive of homosexuality. They argue that at least, the BJP did not protest the petition, while also downplaying the wildly homophobic statements of its several prominent leaders. Upon being asked about what she thought of Dr Subramaniam Swamy, a Member of Parliament in the Rajya Sabha, who she claims to hold in high regard and who condemned homosexuality as a disorder, Ankita Bhullar categorically stated that she does not endorse his ideas on the subject. Instead, she chose to highlight his statement asserting that it is their personal affair and none of his business (telephonic conversation, 13 September 2018). More pertinent to our discussion, however, is Bhullar's response to Kohli's tweet, in which she shared a link to an article titled, "*Next-gen RSS-BJP leaders want Section 377 scrapped*" (Anand 2018, n.p.), emphasising that younger members of the party consider Section 377 to be in violation of one's rights to privacy, and wanted it scrapped. Similarly, Ashmita Borthakur, cited her stance regarding homosexuality (amongst other things), to question my very labelling of her as a 'right-wing' woman, arguing that her views on the subject are contrary to the traditional 'Western' concept of the right-wing (personal email, 20 August 2018).

One can well see the process of what Sahana Udupa refers to as "online archiving" (2014, 1-30) at work here. Despite its historically strained relationship with queer communities, the dismissal of instances of clear homophobia amongst its senior party leaders as 'one-off' and the increasing emphasis on its' younger members as pro-queer rights, allow for a (successful?)

projection of a more 'liberal' and 'inclusive' image of Hindutva, one which is open to change, as opposed to orthodox Islam and Christianity.

Meanwhile, the second comment in Kohli's Twitter thread, reinforces the commenter's identity as a proud Hindu, asserting that it was his religious identity that helped him be open towards plural sexualities. That the commenter deemed it necessary to point out the inherent inclusivity of his own religion (as opposed to the 'Other' religions), is important as it illustrates the conflation of Hinduism and Hindutva, at least in the popular parlance.

Homonationalism

The reiteration of his identity as a pansexual, trans, Hindu, also brings us back to our earlier question: how does one make sense of this relationship between urbane queers and contemporary Hindutva? In this context, I find Jasbir Puar's concept of "homonationalism" to be particularly relevant. In her stimulating analysis on the subject, Puar uses the term "homonationalism" to point out that some homosexual subjects are complicit with heterosexual nationalist formulations, rather than being inherently or automatically excluded from or opposed to them. She juxtaposes the U.S. homosexualities vis-à-vis the Orientalist constructions of 'Muslim sexuality', to critique the US imperialist project. In the process, she also highlights the (white) secular norms by which queerness must abide to be accepted/tolerated, hereby contributing to (racist) Islamo- and homophobic representations of terrorists, and "terrorist look-alike populations" (2007, 2).

> While one must be careful with extrapolating Puar's conceptual framework, I would like to argue that to the extent the concept of homonationalism centres on the creation and sustenance of a divide between queers and Muslims, such that an individual can only be one and not the other, it could be applied to the Indian context as well. In the third comment, for instance, it is the mandir-going Hindus who approve of homosexuals and the topi-dharis (skull-cap wearers) and the 'rice bag converts' (a pejorative term berating members of non-dominant castes for converting to Christianity for a literal bag of rice) are the ones said to oppose the decriminalisation of Section 377.

In this context, I would like to mention Rohit K. Dasgupta's analysis of a particular image of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, who is the founder of India's first *Hijra Akhara* and a renowned face of trans activism in India. He ingeniously points out that her call to remove Pakistan from the world map, the assorted Hindu paraphernalia she surrounds herself with, the viral circulation of this image on digital platforms, are all *reflective of her excessive desire for a Hindu nation that can now flow freely in the deterritorialised sphere of the Internet.* In her desire of a Swacch and productive India, the microcosm of which was supposed to be Varanasi (a place of immense cultural-spiritual significance for Hindu pilgrims, and also the seat from where Narendra Modi contested the 2014 and 2019

elections), meant to stand in direct opposition to Pakistan (read Muslims), one could see how certain queer bodies have aligned themselves to the Hindutva cause (2018, 12-13). Elsewhere, on the Ram Mandir issue, Tripathi opined, "Where my Lord Ram was born, there the temple has to come, the Mughals brought (the temple) down and then they enslaved us all", hereby further endearing herself to the Hindutva cause. When such endorsement of the Hindutva project that effectively alienates Muslims (queers or otherwise) is juxtaposed against a rallying cry of the Sangh, "*jis Hindu ka khoon na khole who Hindu nahin who hijra hai*" (The Hindu whose blood does not boil is not Hindu but a eunuch) (Kapur 2006, 344) the changes in contemporary Hindutva from its historical roots are rendered palpable.

Therefore, within the larger legal discourse around trans citizenship (Kothar 2018, n.p.; Banerjie 2018, n.p.) Jennifer Ung Loh's contention that the Indian state has created compliant subjects whose inclusion is justified by promoting narratives of their historic legitimacy, through their 'traditional' socio-religious role wherein the transgenders perform a "labour of cultural authenticity" in a way that other 'Western' queer subjectivities do not, holds some merit (2018, 39-55). I would, however, also like to problematise this argument by highlighting certain parallels between the support extended to Hindutva by a "dominant-caste brahmin trans woman" (Trans-Gender Nonconforming & Intersex Collectives 2018, n.p.), the "proud Hindu" commenter, and those cis-Hindu upper class, upper-caste, gay men who will not, "have people demonising Hindus all the time" (Ashok Row Kavi, cited in N. Singh and Rampal 2018, n.p.), hereby complicating the clean lines of demarcation between the (western) LGB and the (Indian) T, so to speak. Both have rallied behind the Hindutva cause, effectively alienating minority queer sexualities, though regarding urbane, gay men, it is difficult to pin-point the exact reason behind their support. As for Tripathi, I cannot help but wonder if 'allowing' oneself to be recast as a Hindu(tva) trans icon comes at a price of emulating the same ideals that Hindu nationalism expects of its pious, chaste, albeit asexual Hindu (cis-)women?

"Azad Kashmir" as Queer Desire

At the other end of the spectrum we have Inshah Malik, who makes a powerful case for the need to look at the bodies of Kashmiri activists and the desire for "Azad Kashmir" as a queer desire. Arguing that the sexuality of a Kashmiri subject is deemed feminine, and therefore weak, by the Indian nation-state, Malik asks, "Is Kashmiri heterosexuality between men and women of Kashmir or against queer bodies truly heterosexual?" (2018, 189). He looks at the popular uprisings and media blackouts that engulfed the valley in 2010 to analyse the role of the internet and social media in engendering a consciousness that the Kashmiri body is dispensable and that Kashmiri consciousness is informed by violence, of which sexuality is an essential part. If all citizenship is

essentially sexualised, the body of a Kashmiri protestor which resists sharing this citizenship is transformed into a "'queer' site of contesting narratives, and is subsequently cast off as non-existent" (192).

I wish to draw upon Malik's arguments to discuss the following events. The image below is of Farooq Ahmad Dar, an alleged stone-pelter who was tied to a jeep of the Indian army in Budgam (Jammu and Kashmir) in April 2017, beaten and paraded across a few villages, simultaneously as a "human shield" of the army to escape stone-pelters and as a warning to others, but was later revealed to have stepped outside his home to vote in the ongoing election. (Kaur Sandhu 2017, n.p.; *The Hindu* 2018, n.p.).

Farooq Ahmad Dar tied to an army jeep on April 9. (Wahab 2018, n.p.).

Widely circulated on social media, the image (un)surprisingly, drew polarised reactions. While the former chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, along with several ex-army personnel condemned the act, others lauding the "presence of mind of the officer-in-charge, who saved the election officials and security men from "certain lynching by the mob", by "adopting a comparatively non-violent method to combat violence" (M. Singh 2017, n.p.). Similarly, R. Jagannathan, the editor of *Swarajya*, tweeted, "How is this morally wrong when stone-pelters use children to shield themselves (sic)", whereas for Sunil Jain, from the *Financial Express,* it could be a "low-cost" way to prevent the Army from being stone-pelted (Jagannathan, quoted in Venkataramakrishnan 2017, n.p.). On the other hand, in the week following the Pulwama attacks, one could see the vitriol directed against Kashmiri students in full swing, with several states witnessing attacks on the former (*The Indian Express* 2019, n.p.)

In both the instances highlighted above, one can see the conflation of political desires that reduced the religio-territorially charged 'issue' of Kashmir to a monolithic identification with those wanting to secede from the Indian state and a particular religious identity, such that being a Kashmiri became equal to being a Muslim, which, in turn, became equal to being anti-India. The sexual identities of these Kashmiris ceased to matter because they were all queer to those that are deemed appropriate by the state. For, as Malik rightly puts it, "Heterosexuality is not merely a sexual orientation but a sovereign power that resides in bodies that align the most with that power" (2018, 189).

On Caste

If certain queer identities are risking having their struggles co-opted by Hindutva, others are looking at a complete erasure of their very existence. Here, I would like to draw attention to the unanimity and the urgency with which the 'Indian internet' seeks to erase caste from its online discourses. Of the four comments on Kohli's thread discussed earlier, the last one was chosen to highlight how caste is understood by the digital Hindus. The fourth comment, "Patriarchy can be Brahmanical but Terrorism can't be Islamic", for instance, is meant to point out the hypocrisy of the 'libtards', who argue for the need to dissociate from equating all terrorists with Muslims, while simultaneously arguing for the need to recognise the caste of patriarchy. I was repeatedly told during my conversations with the Hindutva women that while patriarchy is evil and must be dismantled, the qualifier 'Brahmanical' would dilute the fight, and is therefore unnecessary. In the same breath, not only does Deepa Mehra, for instance, acknowledge the lack of Dalit representation in the leftist Politburo or in the Editor's Guild, but also argues that the "abuses online are hurled at those belonging to the 'upper castes'". She mentions a Twitter handle called *Ambedkar's Caravan* that:

> tweets abusive stuff on a regular basis, but people do not respond in the same casteist language probably on account of the SC/ST Act that makes it (casteist slurs) a non-bailable offence, and because of that there are more casteist abuses towards the upper-castes. There are a lot of these Dalit activists on Twitter, as soon as someone abuses them, immediately they play that, 'You are abusing a Dalit woman'. I am not trying to justify online abuse here but maybe they abused her because people are terrible people, and they abused her irrespective of her caste, maybe they just wanted to abuse someone and she was just an easy target, maybe I come from a place of privilege, having lived in Gujarat all my life, never really facing caste bias so much that I have noticed being talked about on Twitter in past few years (sic). Even growing up I never really noticed the caste bias that was so deep, but the more you see the more you realise that it is the people who are not letting it end. (personal interview, November 23, 2018)

Whereas Mahima Mittal was furious at how the law cannot protect upper-caste women from rampant sexism online. She talked about how a meme showing a kaju katli placed suggestively on two fingers, captioned, 'When you finger an Aggarwal girl', a play on the stereotype of the Aggarwal community being traditionally associated with making and selling sweets, made her livid. She responded to the handle with the filthiest abuse that she could think of, because,

> an upper-caste woman has no law today to protect herself from such sexist, casteist adult joke in a public forum, if you have to make such filthy jokes, make them on Sunni/Dalit/Christian women, then face the consequences as you get hounded by the media. I was so upset…I even tried to file a complaint with the cyber cell, I tried to write about it on the website that I was working with, but nothing came of it. (personal interview, September 2, 2018)

On the other hand, Jennifer Timothy Padmaraj pointed out that as a Christian Dalit woman, the online abuse that she receives is "very Christian-specific, Dalit-specific, and woman-specific":

> Nobody is going to look at my tweets, or my article, or my story, and think we are going to abuse her not because she is a Christian or a Dalit or a woman, but because of something else, because of what she wrote or what she is doing or because I am a dark-skinned woman or any other aspect of my identity. Whatever abuse that they are throwing against me is by virtue of these identities that I have. Probably a more pointed answer to that question would be that it is intersecting with the identities of people who are not of the mainstream identities, it is intersecting in the lives and the worldviews and the social media of the people who do not belong to the mainstream, who are not upper-caste, who are outsiders. (telephonic interview, September 1, 2018).

Cheekily remarking that I should expand my question to include another minority, that is "the secular", noted human rights activist Shabana Hasan, added that,

> If you are a secular, Dalit, and/or a Muslim, then the sexist, sexual abuse that you receive greatly increases. I keep receiving direct threats, we'll rape you, all kinds of name-calling, all kinds of four-lettered words, abuses, all that happens, sometimes privately in my inbox on Facebook, but on Twitter, they write all of this very openly. I, however, react by making fun of them, instead of engaging them with anger, these people are pitiable, having been surrounded by hatred, and if you make fun of them, they run away. (personal interview, September 8, 2018)

Shruti Sen too concurred that while her identity as a queer woman makes her vulnerable to a set of *gaalis* otherwise reserved for queer people, her dominant caste shields her from the barrage of abuses that Dalit women are subjected to every day (personal interview, August 11, 2018). Evidently, in addition to

gender and political ideologies, other markers of one's identity continue to impact one's access to the digital sphere.

By juxtaposing the perspectives of both pro- and non-Hindutva women, I would like to contend that social media is creating a queer space between the attempts of the state to appropriate and saffronise Ambedkar to appease Dalits (and other marginalised communities) vis-à-vis the horrors that are unleashed on Dalit communities every day. It is a space that witnesses an arguably different violence where the very existence of caste as a means of systemic and systematic oppression and marginalisation is obliterated from the online Hindutva discourse.

Gaalis aside, another means to look at how caste and religion continue to inform each other online is through the myth of the holy cow. It is fascinating to note how the arguments made in the late 19th century colonial India to ban cow-slaughter (Gupta 2001, 4291-4299) continue to find relevance today. For, the demands to ban the sale and consumption of beef continue to be rooted as much in the emotional appeals to look at cows as a benevolent mother of the Hindu nation, as in economics. Nowadays, however, the rhetoric that called for the economic boycott of Muslims (the prime targets of such appeals by *gau-rakshaks*) has been replaced with physical acts of violence (Sharma 2018, n.p.; Abraham and Rao 2017, n.p.).

It seems preposterous to even suggest that educated, urbane people with access to the internet, could justify, and/or celebrate people being murdered on account of what they eat, or even care about a (Muslim) cattle trader in a remote village in Rajasthan. Although both Borthakur and Bhullar condemn lynchings, the former also added that the media reportage around the issue is dishonest and misbalanced, whereas the latter argued that the beef industry may not be the most eco-friendly and must be regulated. Mittal (2018) who claims to have been involved in *gau-seva* since her childhood, however, opines:

> I have always seen *gau-sevaks* die, be it in 2010 or 2011, there was no news on the subject then, and now when the frustrated Hindu has picked up arms in retaliation, you are calling it 'lynching'? Lynchings have been on both the sides, you can find statistics on *gau-hatya*, on love-jihad on my blog, but the national media will not show you that, they are picking up isolated instances of attacks, like Junaid or Akhlaq as per their biases […] *Gau-rakshaks* could no longer stand the smuggling and the halal of cows, which is why they built and used their networks of local *panwallahs* and STD-PCO/photocopy-wallah to ascertain areas, if they were Muslim-dominated or if there was any illegal meat supply […] Buying a cow is expensive, now if someone steals your cow, or kills or eats her calf, will the poor farmer family not be angry? It is this pent up anger at the cruelty towards the poor animal, who is starved, blinded, brutally tied up, an animal that holds such sentimental and religious value for Hindus that is being unleashed […] lynchings should not happen, yes, but it happens from both the sides, you (the government, the judiciary, the English-speaking elite media) have been suppressing this issue for so long, the leftist-liberals have ensured that (urban) people have become anti-Hindu, such that the rural populace has no

> other choice left but to take matter in their own hands, they carry arms because all these smugglers carry *desi* arms, and then they (*gau-rakshaks*) shoot only in retaliation, as far as I know […] In the case of Junaid and Akhlaq, they both had cut the calf of the family's cow, if someone steals your child, or if they chop up your pet, will you not be angry?!

Mittal is not an 'armed woman of the Hindu right'; she is educated and articulate enough to be contributing to right-leaning websites, and assumed the responsibility of sustaining her family after her husband had a stroke. In our meeting, she insisted to pay for our food because it is customary in Indian culture to not let 'kids' pay when adults are around. This is not to downplay how disturbing her words are, but to amplify them. Here are women who speak the same language as do I, whose social locations are closest to my own, yet qualified their condemnation of lynchings. Their words highlight how the 'liberal' face of Hindutva is full of contradictions, is messy and fragile, and would have us believe that the beef with beef strictly revolves around the dichotomy of (vegetarian) 'Hindu' versus (beef-eating) 'Muslims', once again, completely excluding a crucial aspect, that of caste.

Conclusion

This paper began with a simple question – "When the nation itself is defined in heteronormative terms, where do the queers and Dalits fit in?" – and will end with a few more questions, rather than answers. If certain kinds of queers, upper-caste, upper class, mostly (Hindu) men but also, as we saw, trans women, seem to have gained some visibility, some acceptance within the Hindu nationalist fold, how does one read their relationship with Hindu nationalism, and what are the caveats implicit in such a relationship? If the traditional vote bank of the RSS-BJP is the upper-caste, upper class Hindu man, if the heterosexual family is of pivotal importance to the nation imagined by the Hindutvavadis, Bhagwat's support for homosexuals, for instance, however trite, could not simply be dismissed as a politically expedient statement? Given that the (sexual) queer community in India is yet to assert itself as a formidable voting power numerically (as little official data is available on the subject), the question that remains unanswered is whether the historically fraught relationship between Hindu nationalism and queers has been transformed, and if so, to what extent? Thus far, I hope to have shed some light on how the various struggles of marginalised communities, divided within and without along the lines of gender, caste, class, and religion, have been either co-opted, or completely erased by the Hindu nationalism. It is almost as if the Hindutva project that sought to bring back all its prodigal sons and daughters into its fold, through *ghar vapasi*, stands complete. For those with socio-economic privileges as well as the sense of security that comes precisely with belonging to an urbane, dominant caste would have us believe that caste is no longer an issue in

contemporary India. By commenting, tagging, (re)tweeting, and posting in ways that resonate with people's constructions of the past, appeal to their fears and insecurities in the present, these articulations acquire a certain normativity. Not only do they help project the movement and its leaders as the protectors of the nation and its narrowly-defined 'patriotic' citizens, they also serve as the space where the popular manoeuvrings of the ideology and the compromises that the movement has had to make to popularise its mass base are rendered visible.

Notes

[1] From July, 2018 to April, 2019, I scoured Facebook and Twitter to find participants for my research. The primary criteria involved was that they had to identify themselves as women and had to express their opinions about Hindu nationalism on social media. Given that Modi has earned a few accolades by being the second major leader in the world to 'follow' ordinary people online, I sifted through his Twitter profile as a starting point to locate the online ideological women warriors of Hindutva. Moreover, I also looked at the women writers who contribute towards popular right-leaning websites to get them to speak with me. I also looked at the accounts of women who have been subjected to varying degrees of abuses and threats online as a starting point to locate 'anti-Hindutva' women, as it has been argued that women whose opinions do not line with those of the 'Internet Hindus' were prone to far more frequent, and arguably far more horrific threats. Out of nearly 100 women I thus identified and wrote to across the political spectrum, few reverted to my requests for an interview, out of those thirteen (Ashmita Borthakur, associated with the social media team of the present ruling party since 2014; Deepa Mehra, the Co-Editor of a right-leaning website; Ankita Bhullar, Spokesperson for a regional Youth Morcha of the current ruling party ; Shruti Sen, associate at an NGO in Delhi; Deeksha Sinha, journalist; Neha Gul, journalist; Camilla Philp, journalist and researcher; Seema Iyer, Barrister and political essayist; Aditri Aggarwal, stand-up comedian; Shabana Hasan, human rights activist; Mahima Mittal, homemaker and blogger; Jennifer Timothy Padmaraj, co-founder of an organisation that seeks to make Dalit histories accessible; Mumtaz Shiraz, co-founder of an Indian Muslim women's organisation) consented to speak and/or meet with me. I rely upon my conversations with these middle class, urbane women, scattered across Indian metropolises, to serve as a lens through which 'ordinary' women participate in existing political discourses, how they experience and compose the ideological space of Hindutva in their everyday lives using social media.

The names of individuals as well as organisations in this essay have been changed to protect privacy.

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