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Racialization and ethnicization: Hindutva hegemony and caste

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ABSTRACT


This paper views Hindutva hegemony in India today as authoritarian populism. Its focus is Hindutva's cultural-ideological work to make "peoples" by "fixing" meanings around socially constructed identities. Dalits and Muslims pose serious challenges to Hindutva's project of a Hindu rashtra (Hindu nation). Whereas Dalit presence questions the existence of a "Hindu", Muslim presence questions the existence of the "Rashtra". Consequently, Hindutva constructs Muslims as an "external" Other (to be excised) and Dalits as an "internal" Other (to be incorporated). It does this through two processes – "racialization" of Muslims and "ethnicization" of Dalits. While the former emphasizes "difference" of Muslims to show them as permanent outsiders to a Hindu Rashtra, the latter represses the radical difference of Dalits to incorporate them within a Hindu multi-caste and patriarchal family. Yet, this "fixing" is unstable, rife with contradictions and tensions, that threaten the discursive suturing of a Hindu Rashtra.

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Introduction: Hindutva hegemony in India

Identifying Thatcherism in the 1970s UK as a "swing to the Right", cultural theorist Stuart Hall argued that it was an ideological *response* to an economic and political crisis (Hall 1978; Hall 1979). In later essays, Hall explained Thatcherism as a version of "authoritarian populism" (AP). He argued that AP is the form of Thatcherism's hegemony-seeking practices wherein the state plays a "central educative role" during a "shift in the balance of social and political forces" toward a "dominative and 'authoritarian' form of democratic class politics" (Hall 1985, 116–117). Key to AP are the actions of a historic bloc seeking hegemony by harnessing popular discontent and demands for its own purposes (1985, 118). Building on Gramsci's insights, Hall's interventions enable a view of Thatcherism as an "incessant and persistent set of efforts" by

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the ruling classes to force a broad-ranging set of authoritarian changes that did not address long-term systemic crisis but rather propped up its own hegemony via *populism* as a political form (see also Hall 1980).

Paralleling Hall's efforts, political theorist Partha Chatterjee constructs a genealogy of populism in India (Chatterjee 2019). Contrasting the recent rise of populism in Western democracies, Chatterjee shows how populism has long been a characteristic of politics in the colony (e.g. India). According to him, the postcolonial Indian state deviates from the "integral state" (a Gramscian term that denotes the exercise of hegemony by the bourgeoisie over both, state and civil society) which characterized the histories of Europe and the US. Instead, Chatterjee argues that the bourgeoisie in India exercises hegemony over the state and civil society (citizen-subjects organized in associational groups), *but not over* "political society" (Chatterjee's term for the overwhelming majority of Indian working-classes in the informal economy who do not enjoy social status and citizenship rights). Thus, the Indian state simply dominates political society. Nonetheless, this domination over political society demands a form of governance that shapes the postcolonial Indian state into what Chatterjee calls a "tactically extended state" since it must "selectively [read tactically] extend benefits, suspend normal legal regulations, and treat these populations as exceptional cases – without, however, jeopardizing the structure of law and property that prevails in civil society" (Chatterjee 2019, 82).

It is in governing thus that the Indian state deploys the logics of authoritarian populism – a view that Chatterjee takes in modified form from the work of Laclau who argued that populism is not a deviation or degradation of politics but rather a central logic of democratic politics that depends on building an "internal frontier" between the "people" and "elites" (Laclau 2005a). Interestingly Chatterjee argues that whereas hegemony typically meant a "pedagogical project" for the bourgeoisie (akin to Hall's "educative role" above), such a pedagogical project was not easy for the tactically extended state in India. That is until the rise of authoritarian populism at the national level in Indian politics, especially with the capture of state power in 2014 by the forces representing Hindutva – a Hindu supremacist movement that has been in formation in India since late nineteenth century and whose project is to build a "Hindu nation" (*Hindu Rashtra*).¹ The onset of Hindutva on the national stage, Chatterjee argues, has renewed the pedagogical mission for hegemony in a serious and powerful way. For Hindutva has had such a pedagogical mission as its core in terms of symbolic, linguistic and educational projects that construct particular political subjects.

Hindutva deploys its pedagogical mission effectively as a cultural-ideological project to make a "new history". Central to this mission is the cultural work of construction and negotiation of social identities. This paper argues that Hindu Rashtra is dependent on the construction of two main social identities

– an external Muslim Other, and an internal Dalit² Other. The relation between each of these identities and the Hindu Rashtra is unstable, being rife with tensions that threaten the discursive suturing of a Hindu Rashtra. Hence, Hindutva requires an authoritarianism form of populism as part of its hegemony seeking. The paper locates two processes – the “racialization” of Muslims and the “ethnicization” of Dalits – at work in Hindutva’s hegemony and signalling its limits. They provide the larger context for caste in the conjuncture marked by Hindutva in India. The remainder of this paper is organized into two sections – a discussion of how Hindutva exists as authoritarian populism, followed by an elaboration of how racialization and ethnicization operate within Hindutva.

Hindutva as authoritarian populism: a cultural primer for violence

In September 2017, the Indian Supreme Court issued an order to the government to curb “cow vigilantism” and compensate its victims. The order was in response to the growth of armed vigilante groups calling themselves *gau rakshaks* (or cow-protectors) who attack individuals suspected of eating beef, or killing a cow, or transporting them for slaughter.³ Almost all victims thus far have been Muslims (India’s largest religious minority) and Dalits (India’s “ex-untouchable” caste group). Many of these lynchings and public floggings were communicated virally over social media (Mukherjee 2020). They showed audiences of transfixed spectators, many baying for blood, others mute and refusing to testify to a crime that they all witnessed. Some police stations showed reluctance to register complaints, while others went so far as to file cases against the victims. Although cases have been filed against the vigilantes, there have been no convictions thus far.

Most cow vigilantes belong to organizations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council), or its youth wing, the paramilitary group Bajrang Dal (Strong Squad), or their affiliates. Founded in 1964, the VHP is the *religious and muscular wing* of Hindutva and has been consistent about its core ideology captured in 1998 as a 40-point “Hindu Agenda”. The first point explicates the notion of Hindu Rashtra. It states that

Hindutva is synonymous with nationality, and Hindu society is undisputably the mainstream of Bharat [the name that Hindutva prefers for India]. Hindu interest is the national interest. Hence the honour of Hindutva and Hindu interests should be protected at all costs.⁴

The VHP has the protection of cows as one of its central missions. This is in keeping with what historians have documented about the use of the cow as a symbol to mobilize communitarian (“Hindu” versus “Muslim”) identities (Adcock 2010; Pandey 1981; Yang 1980). Just a couple months before the

Indian Supreme Court ruling, the current head of the VHP goaded cow vigilantes thus: “*Gau rakshaks* should neither fear anyone nor come under pressure from anyone. They should continue their work of saving cows without being concerned with name-calling ... You need to go to every village of this country and awaken Hindus till the time India becomes a Hindu *Rashtra*” (Hindu Nation).⁵

Notably, most cow-vigilante lynchings have occurred since the storming to power in 2014 by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People’s Party) – the *political wing* of Hindutva and the current party in power in India. Its charismatic leader who is India’s current Prime Minister made his first muted comment softly chiding cow vigilantes a full eleven months after the first lynching of a Muslim man suspected of eating beef.⁶ But his election speeches leading up to his victory in 2014 arguably established sociocultural conditions for cow vigilantism. There, he conjured up the spectre of a “pink revolution” (*gulabi kranti*) – pink being the colour of meat and the phrase being a code for the slaughter of cows and the eating of beef. Reminiscent of Arthur Rosenberg’s observation about fascism in the 1930s that “the rage of the patriotic masses has to be manufactured” (2012 [1934], 153), *gulabi kranti* created imageries of a despicable meat-industry, specifically beef industry, established and identified “enemies” (beefeaters, butchers, and traders – mostly Muslims), set objectives and “goals”, articulated values, and motivated and mobilized mass action around the cow including vigilantism. It is thus an example of “symbolic violence” in that it shaped social perception, appreciation, and classification to legitimize violence and domination.

On 30 September 2017, merely a month after the Supreme Court directive on cow vigilantes, the supreme leader (*sarsanghchalak*) of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, or National Volunteer Corps), addressed a huge gathering where he opined that “cow-protectors and promoters ... should not worry or get distracted with the well-intentioned statements by highly placed persons in the Government or remarks made by the Supreme Court”.⁷ Founded in 1925, the RSS is the *ideological fountainhead* of Hindutva. Its founding fathers wrote popular approvingly of the ideologies, strategies, and policies of Hitler and Mussolini. Their writings and speeches naturalized “racial” identities and transposed the Jewish Question to the Muslim Question in India. During the 1930s, RSS leaders travelled to Italy to learn from fascist organizations such as Balilla and Avanguardisti, adapting their uniforms and training camp methods. RSS leaders wrote prolifically in vernacular language dailies and weeklies in western India representing fascism in positive ways. When a Hindu militant with known links to the RSS assassinated M.K.Gandhi in 1948, the RSS was banned but only briefly until 1949. Since then the RSS officially claims to do “cultural work” and has grown in its membership.⁸

The RSS, BJP, VHP and their numerous affiliate organizations comprise a well-knit structure known as the *Sangh Parivar* ("Collective Family"). The Sangh is the organizational network for all Hindutva activities. Its subordinate and affiliate organizations serve four major functions for Hindutva – *paramilitary actions* through armed and trained groups of men and women,⁹ *organizing labor and students* through unions,¹⁰ *social service* through NGOs working on humanitarian relief,¹¹ and *cultural transmission* through the establishment of media and publishing houses to propagate Hindutva literature and messaging.¹² Notably, most of these organizations have their branches in the USA and the UK.¹³ Hindutva is thus a popular movement with a well-oiled political, economic, militaristic, and cultural machinery.

Cow-based lynchings are few in numbers as compared to the everyday crimes against Dalits (legally known as caste-based "atrocities") and the riots that target Muslims (popularly known as "communal" riots). Nonetheless, cow vigilantism usefully underscores the symbolic nature of Hindutva violence. Operating through linguistic actions (such as labelling and sign production), cow vigilantism is part of a Hindutva discourse that articulates political subjects. Not surprisingly, just as the terms *gulabi kranti* and *gau rakshak* legitimize cow vigilantism and secure the domination of culturally constructed Others, Hindutva votaries construct other terms that are now part of the public lexicon. Each of these terms demonizes a social group as a cultural and anti-national Other and legitimizes violent actions. A short list would include the following: "love *jihadi*" which refers to Muslim men who have Hindu women partners, a term that legitimizes the actions of Sangh vigilantes who forcibly "rescue" Hindu women by claiming they have been "kidnapped" by Muslim men; "*ghar vapsi*" (or "homecoming") for the forced ritual "reconversion" by Hindutva organizations of non-Hindu religious minority persons, based on the dubious claim that all people in India were originally "Hindu"; "presstitutes" which is a pejorative that legitimizes attacks on independent media persons who dissent or oppose governmental decrees; "sickular" and "libtards" which are pejoratives that legitimize attacks on secular individuals; and "urban-Naxal" which brands secular, Left or anti-Hindutva intellectuals and social activists as "anti-national" and legitimizes the application of draconian anti-terror laws to incarcerate them or even assassinate them.

Anthropologists of violence have reminded us of the ways that language and culture act as a long period of incubation for violence to erupt, and that violence needs "cultural priming". Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues that humans have a capacity "to reduce others to nonpersons, to monsters, or to things that gives structure, meaning, and rationale to everyday practices of violence" (2002, 369), a capacity that abets the "normalization" of violence. By counterposing a variety of acts of violence above, my intention has been to highlight the fact that we are witnessing in India today a violence that has

a long history of “cultural priming”. Hindutva proliferates (in) the symbolic with the popularization and normalization of a language that represents Others, representations that violate norms of historical and sociological knowledge (being usually based on falsified data, partial truths, gross generalizations, and stereotypes). Such “epistemic violence” becomes the breeding ground for physical violence against culturally produced Others. Cow-vigilantism is just the most recent exemplar of this violence, combining the twin pillars of Hindutva’s ideological strategy (communalism¹⁴ and casteism, both built on masculinist assumptions), and yoking them to Hindutva’s political economy (Narayanan 2019).

Following Hall, I take Hindutva’s propensity for violence as part of its “formative response” to a systemic “crisis” in economy, politics and ideology. Since the late nineteenth century, Hindutva shaped itself first as a response to (and against) the secular nationalist anti-colonial struggle symbolized by the Indian National Congress embodied in the persona of M.K.Gandhi, and then, post-independence to the Nehruvian forms of socialistic development and secular democracy. Subsequently, it also shaped itself in response to the crisis of Indira Gandhi’s imposed Emergency (1970s), then to the ideological and political rise of non-Dalit subaltern castes (1980s), and then to the onset of neoliberalism (1990s) which produced high rates of growth with employment. But it is the last two decades (2001- present) which have enabled Hindutva to shape its response into a stranglehold on Indian public culture and political life. The context for this is the sluggish or declining growth rates, decline in the formal sector manufacturing jobs with growth only in the precarious informal economy (where “political society” lives), an increase in the proportion of the young and working-age populations over the last two decades, and most recently, the pandemic – all of which has led to a phenomenal increase in economic inequality (Basole et al. 2019; Gudavarthy and Vijay 2020). The electoral decimation of the only national-level “centrist” party (the Indian National Congress), and the lack of a regional “Third force” enabled Hindutva to electorally capture the “centre” (now moved Right). This political-economic crisis has been productively harvested by Hindutva through the cultural priming of violence discussed above. Hindutva has now carved itself into Indian cultural life. No longer a fringe or marginal force in India, it has become the “common-sense” of cultural life.

As a mainstream ideology, Hindutva is therefore much larger than its electoral victories or losses. This requires us to explore Hindutva’s durability, a task that is at least partly about characterizations. While a dominant view of Hindutva is that it is a form of “ethno-nationalism” (Jaffrelot 1996), it is worth considering that Hindutva is a form of *ultranationalism*. Whereas “patriotism” and “sacrifice” are emblematic demands of nationalism, the construction of “enemies” (of the nation) and demands for “identity-proofs”¹⁵ are the *sine-qua-non* of ultranationalism. Hindutva is arguably *not* as interested in

nation-building as much as in (re)defining who is the “nation”, who belongs (and hence who needs to be excised) and forcing its own citizens to produce proofs. The lens of ultranationalism shows Hindutva politics to be inherently *authoritarian* since it makes continual demands on citizenry backed by threats and punitive actions. Hindutva is thus better viewed as *authoritarian populism*, part of the longer history of *populism* in India as noted above by Chatterjee.¹⁶ What appears as informal and quotidian violence is systemic and endemic to Hindutva. It *needs violence* to exist.

Viewing Hindutva as authoritarian populism makes visible the social process of “making peoples” or identities. Here, Laclau’s work on populism is exemplary.¹⁷ Populism is a form of politics, “one way of constituting the very unity of the group” through recognizing “demands” from society (Laclau 2005a, 73). This requires a continual “suturing” of identities and the creation of social and political subjects. Laclau captures this work of “suturing” through his concept of “discourse” as an articulatory practice that forms social relations, a material reality. While society is produced by discourse, this suturing can never be complete (i.e. identities are never self-contained meaningful entities but always refer to an “exterior” which is a source of tensions). Hence, dominant classes attempt to “fix meanings” of social identities and relations, or exercise “hegemony” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). This striving for hegemony which is at the core of populism is characterized by the “building up of an *internal frontier* dividing this social space between two camps” – “the People” and its “Enemies” (Laclau 2005b, 43, *my italics*). Indeed, there is “no populism without the discursive construction of an enemy” (2005b, 39). Consequently, populism needs to continually manage this internal frontier, and it is in this kind of action that we can see Hindutva at work. Ultrnationalism demands the continual construction of “enemies” of the “people”. This, admittedly shorthand version of Laclau’s elaboration of populism will have to suffice for the present task in this paper.

As authoritarian populism, Hindutva continually constructs internal frontiers to articulate political subjects. The various neologisms listed in the previous section are part of its power and purposive actions. They authoritatively construct political subjects, social demands, group membership, and criteria for belonging to either the “People” (Us) or its “Enemies” (Them). Hindutva constructs these subjects in authoritarian ways through a logic of difference or more precisely, a logic of differentiating. Whereas some identities are constructed to be particularly *despised* by Hindutva, and hence ultimately *disposable*, some others are tolerated but sought to be *disciplined* and *domesticated*. Yet others remain ambiguous. But, no social identity in India is outside the purview of Hindutva. Within this differentiating logic, Hindutva attempts to fix the meanings of Muslim and Dalit identities – the main focus of this paper.

A final point. In its attempt at hegemony (i.e. fixing identities), Hindutva constructs a political subject as having only a unitary identity. This means that anyone who is marked as a “Muslim” has every other part of their complex identity elided in the process of being marked; the fact that a Muslim person may also be woman, a worker, an atheist, or a computer professional – all become invisible in the process of bringing the “Muslim-ness” into relief. Additionally, the fact that most Muslims are also Dalits, especially in South India (see Ranganathan, [this volume](#)), and that Dalits and Muslims occupy varying positions the political spectrum are potential threats to the Hindutva project of fixing unitary identities. The internal frontier separating Muslims from Dalits, and both from a *savarna* Hindu, is “antagonistic” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 122–127). That is, the presence of the “Them” makes it impossible for the “Us” to exist since it questions the latter’s objectivity. Antagonism potentially destabilizes illusory wholes such as “the People” or “the nation” or any identity that resists or represses the heterogeneity within. It is in how Hindutva seeks to “manage” these tensions within its constructed identities that we can discern two processes that are needed to maintain the illusion of a Hindu *Rashtra*.

Muslims and Dalits: racialization, ethnicization and Hindu *Rashtra*

The presence of both Muslims and Dalits raises problems for both terms in *Hindu Rashtra*. Whereas Dalit presence questions the existence of a “Hindu”, Muslim presence questions the existence of the “*Rashtra*”. Because of the radical critique of Hindu upon which Dalit identities are historically constructed, Dalits are a reminder of the impossibility of the construction of a *Hindu Rashtra*. It poses a fundamental problem for Hindutva: how to show that Dalits are not a stigmatized and dominated Other of Hindus, but “just another” part of a variegated Hindu nation? Similarly, Muslims within the territory (geophysical and social) of Hindutva is a reminder of the impossibility of the construction of a *Hindu Rashtra*. It poses another problem for Hindutva: how to show that Muslims are *not* part of the Hindu nation, despite the historical presence and participation of Muslim labour and creativity in the constitution of India? In unpacking how Hindutva approaches these two problems of “difference” we are able to see Hindutva entanglements with notions of “race”, “caste” and ethnicity.

Hindutva simultaneously emphasizes and represses “difference”. It emphasizes “difference” of Muslims to show them as permanent outsiders to a Hindu *Rashtra*. This is attempted through practices of “racialization” of the Muslim (as radically and “unmixably” different from Hindu). Interestingly, Hindutva racializes yet others. For instance, *Adivasis* (India’s indigenous populations) have historically been “racialized” and primitivized (Bates 1995; Skaria

1997), as are “northeasterners” – a reference to people from the northeastern states of India where a very heterogeneous ethnic mix of peoples are homogeneously viewed as “racialized” Others (McDuie-Ra 2015; Saikia and Baishya 2017). While this paper focuses on the racialization of Muslims, it notes that adivasis are sought to be incorporated into Hindu Rashtra, while northeasterners remain ambiguous – racialized and stigmatized like Muslims, but contingently tolerated by Hindutva for geopolitical and electoral reasons. Neither of these options is available to Muslims. Further, Hindutva *represses* other “differences”. Key here are Dalits who Hindutva needs to show as *not* radically different (at least as much as Muslims are) *despite* their stigmatized and dominated status within the Hindu caste system, and hence oppositional identity to “Hindu”. This is attempted through practices of “ethnicization” of caste – wherein caste is viewed as a system of benign differences of culture rather than as ascribed ranking – a process that represents and incorporates Dalits simply as benign “difference” within Hindus rather than its stigmatized and excluded subalterns. Figure 1 captures this dynamic.

As we see, there are “Outsiders” to the Hindu Rashtra – despised and considered disposable. These include “racialized” Muslims and northeasterners, and those who are constructed as the “political Other” of Hindutva, namely the politically identified Left, secular and rationalist individuals. The latter are frequently identified by Hindutva as “anti-national” which makes them vulnerable to being incarcerated under anti-terror and sedition laws. Of course, the label of being a “terrorist” is also applied to Muslims. In contrast, Hindu Rashtra constructs its own membership in three broad categories. Those constructed as “Internal Other” include “Dalits” and “Adivasis” who are to be tolerated but sought to be disciplined, domesticated, and incorporated as subordinate citizens. Here, despite their “racialization”, adivasis are sought to be incorporated as primordial albeit primitivized Hindus. On the other hand, Dalits are contrasted with the *savarna* Hindu¹⁸ through a process of ethnicization. This allows for Dalits to continue to be stigmatized

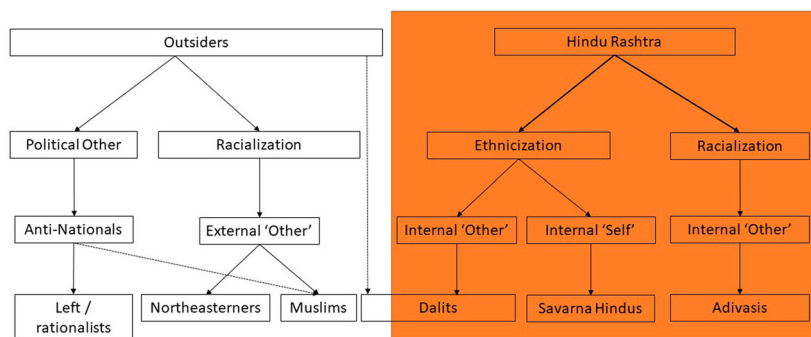


Figure 1. Hindutva’s populist logic.

(by the caste system) but incorporated as Hindus within Hindu Rashtra. It also makes the savarna Hindu stand-in for all “Hindus” and the Indian. To be clear, this figure is a visual heuristic for Hindutva’s hegemonic process of identity “fixing”. In reality, Hindu Rashtra struggles to “fix” these identities, and hence continually engages in authoritarian populist violence.

Racialization of Muslims

Racialization of Muslims is not a new phenomenon in Hindutva discourse (Jaffrelot 1996; Waikar 2018) and hence this section will be brief. Recently, sociologist Zaheer Baber has argued for viewing the “Hindu-Muslim” conflicts as *not* “communal” or religious in nature as is usually understood, but as a process of “racialization” (Baber 2004). For Baber, religious doctrine and symbols do not make the boundaries of the social groups – Muslim and Hindu – as much as attribution of “racial” differences. However, since Muslims and Hindus are not easily phenotypically distinguishable in South Asia, Baber reminds us that Hindutva “racialization” does not require a stable set of phenotypical (biological) differences, but only the positing of insurmountable cultural differences, a form of racism that Balibar has called “cultural racism” (2004:711–712; Balibar 1991; see also Natrajan 2012 in the context of caste). While Baber’s intervention is salutary in that it shows how “racialization” is salient in understanding the economic, political and cultural exclusions of Muslims in India, it needs two further elaborations for our purpose.

Racialization has been shown to be a symbolic attribution of significance to purported “differences” (be it in phenotype, ancestry, or culture) and the misrecognition of the same as “natural” (see also Desmond and Emirbayer 2009). This is why linguistic terms within Hindutva discourse (discussed in the earlier section) acquire importance. They construct particular “differences” in everyday life, impute meaning to them (i.e. make them into indexical or other kinds of signs), actively “naturalize” the same, and most importantly, continually “police” the newly “fixed” identitarian boundaries. A “racialized” Hindu Self then emerges discursively from a misrecognized “racialized” Muslim Other, with both of them sought to be kept apart through what Taguieff (2001) has called mixophobic actions (as in the surveillance and redressing of any acts of transgression of boundaries such as Hindu-Muslim love or marital relations through the practice of “love jihad” mentioned earlier). Racialization thus unleashes a set of practices that attempt to keep Hindu Rashtra discursively “sutured”.

The pair ‘naturalization-misrecognition’ allows us to make one further point that segues into the Dalit question below. Jaffrelot has shown that the “notion of racial *purity* is absent from Savarkar’s ideology” (1996, 28) despite the latter’s fascination with fascism. In other words, the quest to “bound” Hindu racial identity as different from Muslim does not, at least in

the foundations of Hindutva ideology, depend on the demonstration of “racial purity”. This has meant that Hindutva ideologues have, at times, acknowledged the relative and contingent “assimilability” of Muslims (somewhat relaxing on the “un-mixability” referred to above). Jaffrelot therefore suggests, borrowing from Taguieff, that Hindutva is a “racism of domination” (a form of incorporating the Other as a subordinate member) rather than a “racism of extermination” of the Muslim. Now, Baber rightly cautions us against accepting such a characterization of Hindutva, citing the regular riots and attempts to exterminate Muslims in India. The rise of Hindutva as described in this paper, affirms Baber by noting that Hindutva has only hardened its commitment to “racism of extermination”. Nonetheless, the fact that Savarkar speaks of Hindus as a “race-jati” is not without its implications for Muslims. It underscores the ways that Hindutva operates within a broader logic of caste that is contingent and affords some flexibility for strategic *incorporation with subordination* even with respect to Muslims. This allows us to view caste as a fundamental category animating Hindutva. It also allows us to underscore the social construction of caste. In other words, both “race” and “caste” are historical and contextual fictions that have acquired the fixity of fact, both deserving of the quotes around them. It is to this that we now turn.

Ethnicization of Dalits

Caste is the emblematic institutionalized form of violence within Hindu and Indian society. This poses problems for Hindutva in a postcolonial democratic context that formally disavows (if not decries) caste. More pragmatically, caste poses the biggest structural challenge to Hindutva with Dalits being the most strident reminder of the impossibility of viewing Hindus as a nation. Being a differentiating and provincial force, caste segments the Hindu population (indeed all of India’s population) making provincial involuted “worlds within worlds” that defy easy fusing into a nation.¹⁹ Casteism – which is the monopolization of wealth and power through status claims – produces “caste” which in turn fragments Hindu Rashtra, while generating a power of regulation that maintains caste boundaries based on a “narcissism of minor differences” (to borrow from Freud) and “graded hierarchies” (Ambedkar’s insight). To construct Hindu Rashtra, Hindutva has to decry caste as dividing Hindus internally. Yet, it cannot undertake any fundamental redressal of casteism since its own practices are based on notions of brahmanical supremacy, a commitment to essentialized views of “human nature”, the patriarchal family structure, caste endogamy, and valorization of casteized capital in India. So how does Hindutva face the caste problem?

Three lines of engagement with caste stand out – defense, deflection, and denial. A long tradition within Hindutva openly *defends* caste practices and

caste as “natural” hierarchy deriving from select Hindu scriptures. This tradition frequently manifests in the speeches of some Hindutva political leaders, with the Lok Sabha speaker being its most recent example.²⁰ A second line of engagement *deflects* blame for caste onto British colonialism or Islamic invasions rather than admit it as a central Indian “tradition”. This line is part of a neo-Hindutva intelligentsia and based on misreading of history and sociology (see Sutton 2018, for a review). The most powerful line of engagement however is a *denial* of the brutality of caste. Hindutva today increasingly represents caste as a system of *benign difference* rather than a *brutal hierarchy*. Such a move relies on isolating caste as identity from its context of inequality. It enables and encourages “caste pride” and celebration of caste identity while denying the gross inequality and violence of caste. This tradition sources from some of the early shapers of Hindutva and has been a powerful force to confer a degree of legitimacy for caste in modern India (see Jaffrelot 2009 on Deen Dayal Upadhyay, and Balraj Madhok; Visweswaran et al. 2009 shows how diasporic Hindutva develops this view).

This last view resonates ironically with a scholarly view known as the “ethnization” of caste thesis – the *claim* that castes in India are transforming from a vertical hierarchy into a horizontal “ethnic” system with each caste (*jāti*) appearing as a benign “ethnic” group, marked only by difference (in culture) rather than inequality in status hierarchy, wealth, and power (for instance, Fuller 1996; Gupta 2005; Chandra 2006). I have argued against such a view of caste as ethnicity, on grounds that “ethnization of caste” is an ideological “rebranding” of caste for a multicultural age, a sophisticated legitimization of caste (Natrajan 2012; see also Viswanath 2015). Exploring the ways that caste produces and fetishizes “difference”, I show that the transformations of caste today do not signal a collapse of hierarchy and inequality, but rather the capture of the terrain of “culture” by a new “grammar” of caste such that caste groups are revitalized as “cultural” communities or *samāj*, a social entity that aids the reproduction of casteism. I term this the “culturalization of caste” wherein caste elites deploy “culture” to camouflage casteism in an era of multicultural capitalism.²¹ “Ethnization” of caste thus is *not* a sociological reality as much as an ideological aspiration by Hindutva votaries and caste elites. Anti-caste activists thus need to be alert to such an ideological incorporation by Hindutva and seek instead a “multiculturalism against caste” (Natrajan 2018).

By representing caste as ethnicity, caste appears benign (i.e. not a force for domination) and non-hierarchical “difference”. “Ethnization” thus offers a potential and sophisticated camouflage for Hindutva’s attempt to incorporate Dalits within Hindu *Rashtra* (i.e. assign them a “place” within) so that they appear as simply “different” rather than as dominated and exploited. Hindu *Rashtra* then appears as a multi-ethnic plurality of castes (*jātis*). In

short, “flattening” caste in its representation (not in actuality), Hindutva discourse could make Dalits appear alongside *savarna* castes (albeit as their Other) – merely as different “ethnic” groups within the house of Hindus. Yet, Hindutva’s claims to ethnicization of caste faces two problems. Both have to do with Dalit *difference*.

The first is the fact that Dalits overwhelmingly view caste, not as benign but as brutal – as a deeply and inherently unequal form of social organization. Notably, Ambedkar discerned the need for Dalits to “ethnicize” but in ways quite different from the cynical use of this concept outlined above. Jaffrelot notes “Ambedkar, on the basis of his sociological analysis endeavoured to ethnicize the identity of the Untouchables for enabling them to be united around a separate, specific identity” (Jaffrelot 2000, 760). But we need to underscore that “ethnicization” for Ambedkar meant that Dalits needed to craft an identity *not derived from caste*. Hence, he led the *exit* of Dalits from Hinduism to build an identity based on neo-Buddhism since he was convinced that Hindu ideology was at the root of caste. Therefore, for Hindutva to claim that castes *are* ethnic groups is in stark contrast to Ambedkar’s view of the need for Dalits to ethnicize by exiting caste and Hinduism. Will Dalits implode the house of Hindutva by asserting their *difference* rather than take their assigned “place” in Hindutva’s ethnic spectre of caste?

The second problem for Hindutva is the fact that Dalits *potentially* represent a universalist logic that is starkly different from Hindutva: it is inclusive, liberatory, and based on freedom from particularities. Dalit demands are about the universal, *even when they appear to be about the particular*. For instance, in demanding reservations in educational institutions and government jobs for Dalits, the demand is really for universal access to opportunities for flourishing for all; in demanding the non-dilution of the anti-Atrocity Act, the demand is really for abolishing *all* forms of violence since caste violence is imbricated in class, gender, and sexuality. It is in this sense that Dalit assertion poses a threat to Hindutva on grounds of universality. As an anti-caste identity, “Dalit” is inherently inclusive in contrast to Hindutva’s caste exclusivity, it is moral in contrast to Hindutva’s cynical use of power, and it stresses Dalit difference in direct challenge to Hindutva’s attempts to make it equivalent to other identities and demands in society.

By making “ethnicization of caste” visible as an ideological weapon of Hindutva, we are able to discern how Hindutva seeks to distinguish the Otherness of Muslims from the Otherness of Dalits in order to protect the illusion of Hindu *Rashtra*. For, in contrast with Muslims, Hindutva offers Dalits a “place” within the Hindu *Rashtra*. It does this since it cannot afford to lose them, not only due to the demographic blow to a purported Hindu “majority” but also to deflect genuine criticism of caste. Hindutva’s attempted “ethnicization” of castes is then equivalent to the creation of the category “white ethnics” in US American racial formation – a consolidation over time

of the category “whites” to make them distinct from “Blacks”. In such a reading, Hindutva represents Hindus (including Dalits) as the consolidated “[white] ethnics” in contrast to Muslims as “racial” [Blacks]. “Ethnicization” and “racialization” are thus twin weapons of Hindutva.

Dalits thus occupy an ambiguous, even antagonistic space in the political-cognitive register of Hindutva. Ethnicization invites them to stay within Hindu *Rashtra* by pretending that caste is benign. But they also face the threat of being cast outside the Hindu *Rashtra* either as political “anti-nationals” or be subjected to the “racialization” reserved mostly for Muslims. Indeed, some scholars have noted the “racialization” of Dalits (Viswanath 2014), and caste does arguably share some similarity with “race” (as systems of oppression based on purported ancestry). Adivasis too share this ambiguous “place” within the Hindu *rashtra* – “racialized” (like the Muslims) but also “primitivized” as the original Hindus (again a dubious claim) and given a “place” in Hindu *rashtra*.²² Dalits thus appear in Figure 1 as partially outside and inside. The only social identity that then enjoys the fullness of a Hindu Self and a Hindu *Rashtra* is “savarna Hindus”.²³

The situation of Dalits within Hindutva discourse is illustrated in two recent examples. In June 2016, four Dalit youth in the village of Una in Gujarat, were accused by cow-vigilantes of killing a cow. They were then tied up and flogged by the cow vigilantes for several hours.²⁴ Soon after, under the aegis of the Rashtriya Dalit Adhikar Manch (National Dalit Rights Forum), many Dalits publicly denounced their “traditional” forced caste work of removing dead animals. This moment signalled an *antagonism* – a moment when the “normal” working of caste was brought to a grinding halt due to the refusal of the cultural Other to remain the Other. The act signals an end to a taken-for-granted “normal” caste society since caste or *savarna* Hindus are sustained by the labour of Dalits. By constructing “Dalit work” as “polluted” and “Dalit labour” as menialized, *savarna* work and labour are symbolically “purified” and dignified. Caste society and everyday caste relations cannot continue in the face of such antagonism. The Manch went further and demanded the granting of land to Dalits.

How does Hindutva populism respond? Firstly, the state is unable to meet the land demand by Dalits despite their legal rights to land within the agricultural land ceiling act (Jaffrelot 2015; Laxman 2019; McDougal 2007). Further, casteized capital relations require Dalit labour to be kept “unfree” even while all labour is “free” (from the means of production). Granting Dalits land would cut the basis of *savarna* domination. Unable to seriously face the reality of caste at its core ideology and practice, Hindutva instead turns to more symbolic means. Soon after the Una incident, the prime minister (the chief actor of Hindutva) makes a muted plea to cow vigilantes to not kill his “Dalit brothers” but to kill him instead.²⁵ The standard use within Hindutva discourse of the idiom of the patriarchal family enables the

construction of Dalits-caste Hindus as a filial relation. Dalits are thus sought to be “domesticated” – their rage barely acknowledged but quickly brought under control without addressing any of the underlying material issues. Gujarat, afterall, ranks very high in India in the practice of untouchability and ranks third in the practice of manual scavenging – a banned practice and one that is imposed on stigmatized Dalits as a traditional caste-based labour.

Facing much flak for neglecting Dalits in Gujarat and also glossing over the caste problem in his national drive to make India clean through building toilets, the Prime Minister staged a ritual at the national level in 2019. He publicly washed the feet of select *safai karmacharis* in far away Allahabad as an act of penance (see De Souza 2019). Apart from making Dalits in one region substitutable for Dalits in another, this only aided the deflection of the burden of actually eradicating manual scavenging in his own state. The body and actions on the body are central in such a response. At the moment of antagonism (i.e. when Dalits signal their intention to exit caste and hence Hindu society), the hegemonizing action of the Prime Minister seeks to bring Dalits back into the “Hindu” fold. By performing actions (linguistic and non-linguistic), the Prime Minister symbolically constitutes a social relation between Dalits-Hindus-*savarnas* as benign while (barely) camouflaging caste-imposed stigmatized work and extraction of untouchable labour within.

However, Dalits are also an ambiguous category for Hindutva. This is seen in a second example, the Bhima-Koregaon incident and the arrests in its aftermath. Briefly, on 1 January 2018, thousands of Dalits publicly pledged to be both – defenders of the Constitution *and* anti-Hindutva and anti-brahmanical political subjects. This symbolic act was at an event organized to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the martyrdom of Dalits who fought against the brahmanic *peshwai* regime centred in Pune (today’s Maharashtra state) in 1818. This assertion by Dalits – of being Indian citizens *and* antagonistic to caste and Hindutva – was swiftly quelled by a far less subtle response than the one above. This time the articulatory practice or discourse was the branding of Dalits as “anti-national”, the arrest of more than 200 Dalits, and the swift arrest of a number of high-profile public intellectuals and civil liberties activists (the Bhima-Koregaon 16 as they are now called) many of who are Dalit or allies of Dalits, and with Left persuasion apart from being trenchant critics of Hindutva.

Again, the telling sign of hegemony was the strange accusation that the BK-11 had plotted to kill the Prime Minister – an accusation that succeeded in temporarily justifying the incarceration of the BK-16.²⁶ The body of the supreme leader is again invoked as coterminous with the nation. The symbolic action of framing a Dalit-led political formation as “anti-national” threatens Dalits with patricide at the very moment of their declaration of independence from a brahmanical Hindu state. The choice was clear: Dalits

have to choose between remaining within the Hindu *rashtra* as domesticated subjects or become despised and disposable if they retained their antagonistic stance (rejecting caste relations and opposing Hindutva). These two examples demonstrate how Hindutva seeks to manage Dalit “difference” in public culture through practices of identification and “boundary-making”.

Conclusion

This paper has advanced a view of Hindutva as a form of authoritarian populism driven by an ultranationalist project to create Hindu *Rashtra*. Central to this project is the creation of an internal frontier in which enemies of the nation are perpetually produced and acted upon. Muslims and Dalits are key to this project with the former constructed as a “racialized” external Other (despised and disposable) and Dalits as an “ethnicized” internal Other (tolerated and domesticable and sought to be incorporated). The neat construction captured in [Figure 1](#) is however messy in reality. Each of the constructed identity categories, especially Dalits and Muslims threaten the stability of the Hindu *rashtra*. Nonetheless, the figure aids us in grasping the logic of Hindutva’s actions and vision. It points to the fact that Hindutva hegemony is a project far beyond electoral victories. The capture of state power only aids Hindutva install its longterm cultural work as state policy with the backup power of the “fist” of its stormtroopers.

The insistence on Dalit *difference* in the last section above is also a call to attend to the fact that both Dalits and Muslims exist, not as unitarily formed subjects, but as heterogeneous subjects formed within a matrix of what historian Shailaja Paik has called “interlocking technologies” of oppression (2014). Hegemonic projects suture a whole by denying heterogeneity within. Thus, the existence of the category of Dalit Muslims throws up a challenge to the racialization/ethnicization strategy of Hindutva. For it signals the fundamental Indian-ness (or South Asian-ness) of Islam, structured along lines of caste. Similarly, the existence of Dalits who are part of the Left in India also poses challenges to Hindutva – which category ought they to be in (the despicable disposable or the tolerated domesticable?) So also the increasing clarity of Dalit feminist possibilities form a leading edge of the struggle to open up the discourse on caste-patriarchy. Indeed, a Dalit sexual minority subject is uniquely situated to challenge the militaristic masculinity and heteronormativity that undergirds the methods critical to Hindutva. For, it throws up the existence of repressed desire within the heart of a repressive regime.

Each of these intersectional identities is refracted in the Muslim register. Dalit identity can then be seen as far closer in equivalence to Muslim (and Left) identity. Both have been excluded categorically: Dalits for a caste system to exist, Muslims (and Left) for a Hindu *Rashtra* to exist. The biggest threat then to a Hindu *Rashtra* is when Dalits identify their demands as

equivalent to Muslims and Left. This means that the Dalit call to reject Hindutva-style “ethnicization” in favour of a dismantling of caste materially and symbolically, needs to be articulated to the Muslim demand to reject “racialization” and instead insist on the indigeneity and inherently “mixed” character of all Indian populations, and the Left demand to recognize how capital works through and with “difference” in enabling accumulation at the cost of needs of workers. Each of the social identities sutured together by Hindutva discourse and sought to be “fixed” by Hindutva hegemonic practices reveal the antagonisms within the Hindu Rashtra.

Notes

1. Scholarly sources on Hindutva would include Anderson and Damle 2019; Basu 1993; Bhatt 2001; Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 1996; Ludden 2005 (ed); Vanaik 1997.
2. Dalit is a term referencing the ex-Untouchable populations within Indian’s caste system. It is a term of self-definition and dignity symbolizing the brutal crushing of Untouchable identity.
3. As per Human Rights Watch report (2019), between 2015 and 2018, at least 44 people (36 of who are Muslims) have been killed by cow vigilantes across 12 Indian states.
4. <http://vhp.org/organization/org-hindu-agenda/> (accessed 19 March 2021)
5. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/be-fearless-vhp-to-cow-vigilantes/article19290187.ece> (accessed 19 March 2021).
6. The lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq occurred in September 2015. The PM’s first statement was made in August 2016, and the second in July 2017.
7. <http://www.news18.com/news/india/read-full-text-of-rss-chief-mohan-bhagwats-vijaya-dashami-speech-1532625.html> (accessed 19 March 2021).
8. The RSS does not maintain an official roster of membership but is known to operate through its 57,000 branches all over India.
9. Apart from the RSS, examples include the Bajrang Dal (mentioned above), the Hindu Yuva Vahini (Hindu Youth Vehicle), Ram Sene (Army of Ram, a popular Hindu god). There are numerous other such organizations, each of which operates locally and usually becomes visible when implicated in local riots, vigilante acts, or even bombings.
10. Examples include the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS, Indian Labor Corps) and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad (ABVP, All India Student Council).
11. Sangh NGOs seek public and private funding including international funding. Examples include the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (Center for Tribal Affairs) focusing on India’s indigenous people, Seva Bharathi (Indian Service) working mostly on aid and relief with its international front organization (Indian Development Relief Foundation, IDRF), and Vidya Bharathi or Indian Knowledge working to build RSS schools.
12. Examples include Jain Studios and the Gita Press (see Brosius 2005; Mukul 2015).
13. See the reports from the Campaign to Stop Funding Hate (USA) and Awaaz – South Asia Watch (UK).
14. The term communalism is a uniquely South Asian term that refers to conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in particular (but about any “religious-based”

conflagration). I place “religious” in quotes to emphasize that much more than religious differences are at play in any communal event.

15. Examples include Hindutva’s recent attempt to demand proofs of citizenship through the twin policies of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).
16. Interestingly, Jaffrelot (1996, 233) refers to a “sangathanist populism”, and some scholars trace a Hindutva form of populism to the early part of the twentieth century (Visana 2020). There are other compelling characterizations too. Hansen (1999) views Hindutva as “swadeshi fascism” but rejects the label as not analytical enough, whereas Bhatt writes “... it is difficult to think of a description other than ‘fascism’ that can aptly characterize the authoritarian intensities and will to institutionalize Hindutva power” (2001, 204; see also Desai 2016).
17. Some other works on populism that focus more on the historical matrix of views, ideas and visions of populist politics and parties include Postel (2007), Müller (2017), and Urbinati (2019).
18. Savarna refers to *all* Hindus other than Dalits (who are *avarna* or “outcaste”).
19. Ambedkar (1936) famously said that “Hindus cannot be said to form a society or a nation,” a view that questions Hindu nationalism.
20. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/brahmins-have-always-been-higher-lok-sabha-speaker-om-birla-stirs-row-with-casteist-remark-1597830-2019-09-11> (accessed 19 March 2021).
21. I also argued that the dominant form of casteism today is “cultural casteism” based on heterophilia (not heterophobia), or a demand to show(case) “cultural difference” such that caste-mixing continues to be proscribed (see Taguieff 2001 for “mixophobia” as key to heterophilic racism; also Balibar 1991).
22. This is apart from the fact that Adivasi lands are the most important potential asset that drives primitive accumulation in India.
23. Savarna itself is a term not without contradictions, chief among which is that between “elite castes” and “intermediate castes” – a fact that prompts some scholars to view the Dalit and non-Dalit division as fundamental (Teltumbde 2018). Further, one could add the small minorities of Jains and Sikhs who are constructed by Hindutva as part of the Dharmic and Indic traditions to be subsumed as “Hindus”.
24. As it turned out the cow had been killed earlier by a lion. The incident went viral on social media.
25. The quote was “If you want to attack, attack me, not my Dalit brothers. If you want to shoot, shoot me, not my Dalit brothers” (7 August 2016).
26. “Temporarily” – since that accusation has strangely disappeared in the charge-sheets that have since been drafted by the state.

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