

Love in the times of Hindutva (Part 1)

Von: Sanam Roohi

Love jihad – from narrative to law

In early December 2020, amidst the raging global pandemic, a married couple was in the news in India because the female partner had become the first woman to be put behind bars under the then newly passed Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance. Their marriage fell within the scanner of this new ordinance (later passed into law), which in letter aimed to prevent unlawful or forced religious conversion within the state, but in spirit targeted inter-religious marriages, ostensibly between Muslim men and Hindu women. The law came to be colloquially known as 'love jihad law'.

Paralleling the ascent of the right-wing Bhartiya Janata Party or the BJP in India, the love jihad narrative was first spun in 2009 in the southern Indian states of Kerala and Karnataka. By the end of 2020, it had gained enough traction nationally to become the basis of a law in the most populous North India state of Uttar Pradesh.

The woman had willingly married a Muslim man after converting to his faith, but when word spread among Hindu right-wing vigilante groups (that increasingly work with law enforcement agencies), the woman along with her husband were not only jailed (in separate prisons), but her three-month pregnancy was forcefully terminated.¹ Given the short shelf life of viral news in this 'attention economy',^{2 3} the passing of the law gathered some social media traction only to swiftly die down. Yet within a month of its passing in the state of Uttar Pradesh, some 49 people were already in jail; barring this one woman, all were Muslim men.⁴ Two months later when arrests based on love jihad law had slowly ceased to make news,⁵ another state in central India – Madhya Pradesh – passed a similar ordinance.⁶ Both these states are ruled by the BJP.

Technically, love jihad laws require prospective inter-religious couples to give two months' notice to the district magistrate office before their marriage to eliminate possibilities of coercion and forced conversion. While apparently gender agnostic, these laws irrefutably target Muslim men and Hindu women who wish to marry and not vice versa. Since inter-religious marriages are hardly accepted by their families, earlier couples would elope and wed according to their preferred religious ceremonies that were executed quite easily for a small sum of money, or even register their marriage under the Special Marriages Act (a civil

marriage), with or without the consent of their families. Under these draconian laws, however, families of the couple are immediately alerted by the magistrate's office and vigilante groups so that they can block such unions from taking place in the first place.

The narratives of love jihad have become politically instrumentalized to curb what adherents of *Hindutva* (the political ideology espoused by the Bhartiya Janata Party, currently in power in India) believe to be a cultural war waged by Muslim men to sexually target Hindu women, luring them into marriage as part of their religious duty to convert them. Since it was first formulated in 1923, *Hindutva* as a concept appears to be a highly adaptive category that has changed while keeping its core ideology of Hindu nationalism and active cultivation of Hindu values intact. Its acceptance by mainstream Indian society today can be attributed to a constellation of factors including a liberalizing economy, growth of an aspirational middle class and political strategies adopted by different right-wing groups over the years.⁷ Proposing a religiously inflected (Hindu) nationalism,^{8 9 10} it has also simultaneously homogenized the Hindu body and has often violently excluded non-Hindus from its body politic.¹¹ While the othering of Muslims in India as culturally distinct has its roots in the political churning of the late colonial period,¹² it is the Hindu right that has politicized this difference as something inimical to the Hindu nation that needs to be contained through surveillance, control and punishment.

Marriages in India are recognized as occasions for material transaction and exchange between two families sharing similar caste, class and religious locations.¹³ As it is foundational for social reproduction, the agenda of the Hindu right is to keep Hindu women within its fold and Muslim men outside of it. Men and women who willingly defy such social norms face stigma and even bodily harm, often from their own kin, as they are considered to have brought shame and dishonor to the family. Even as the threat of physical violence is real, such marriages borne out of transgressive (cross religious, caste or class) love are not altogether unheard of and legal provisions exist to support them.¹⁴ With the passing of love jihad laws, however, the state has become an active party in prohibiting such unions.

The passing of love jihad laws points to a definitive and progressive loss of personal liberty under the current right-wing regime amidst an unsubstantiated fear of a 'demographic takeover' by Muslims¹⁵. Other impulses that have accompanied this *Hindutva* narrative include increasing moral policing, containment and erasure of transgressive love, the control of female sexuality and the crippling criminalization of Muslim men. Taken together and in keeping with KWI's annual theme, in this two-part blog article I suggest that while the love jihad narratives more or less point to India's shift to the right, the passing of these laws mark one of the many precise moments of India *becoming* a Hindu *Rashtra* (nation).

Hindu vigilantes as morality police

Years before the emergence of the love jihad narrative, different Hindu vigilante groups were already morally policing couples in urban India and violently reminding them to uphold Indian values of marriage and no sexual relations outside of it. With a quick recce of public places, the vigilantes' antics ranged from beating up couples for as much as holding hands to cranking up their 'activism' on particularly 'obscene' days like Valentine's Day or New Year's Eve by marrying couples seen together publicly. In the early days of expanding private news channels in India, the vigilantes found a captive audience in the form of multiple media platforms. As if in forewarning, Paromita Vohra, a documentary film maker, uncannily titled her 2007 film on moral policing '*Morality TV aur Loving Jihad: Ek Manohar Kahani*'.

Moral policing has usually been tied to the moral panic of the right, who fear losing control over women's bodies. This has been a recurrent theme around which patriarchal ideas of property and ownership of female bodies and female sexuality have persisted across time and space. The narrative of love jihad is one such manifestation of this patriarchal trope where Hindu men have an exaggerated fear of Muslim men's conquest of 'their' women.

In May 2023, for example, a woman in her early 20s had posted loved-up pictures on X with her boyfriend. Hindutva activists thought it was their religious obligation to publicly shame the woman and call for the man's arrest as he had supposedly committed love jihad and lured a Hindu woman. By the time I tried to take screenshots of the exchanges, the woman had deactivated her account for fear of actual violence. This was the time when a feature film *Kerala Story* was released, the premise of which was Hindu women in southern Indian state of Kerala being lured by Muslim men to join ISIS (see figure 1).



Figure 1: A tweet on Kerala Story's love jihad premise

These examples foreground the highly contested terrain of sexual politics under the current right-wing regime in its religiously infused national imagination of India. Such examples are not few and far between, but frequently pop up on my X or Twitter feed and search. A Twitter search by my research assistant Kaustabh Jagtap showed that the hashtag #lovejihad appeared only 41 times on Twitter in 2010, but by 2020, it appeared 15,725 times on Indian Twitter.

1. Pandey, Geeta (2020): 'Love jihad': What a reported miscarriage says about India's anti-conversion law, in: BBC NEWS, [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55314832>], 17.12.2020 (Last Access: 25.08.2023).
2. Tufekci, Zeynep (2013): "Not this one" social movements, the attention economy, and microcelebrity networked activism, in: American behavioral scientist, vol. 57, no. 7, pp. 848-870. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479369>.
3. Harsin, Jayson (2015): Regimes of posttruth, postpolitics, and attention economies, in: Communication, culture & critique, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 327-333. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12097>.
4. Sahu, Manish (2021): 1 month of UP 'love jihad' law: 14 cases, 49 in jail, woman 'victim' complainant in only two, in: The Indian Express, [<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/love-jihad-law-up-police-7124001/>], 09.01.2021 (Last Access: 25.08.2023).
5. The numbers updated by end of December [<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/month-of-love-jihad-law-up-arrests-complaints-1754073-2020-12-29> (Last Access: 25.08.2023)] remained unchanged after a few weeks which perhaps indicates not so much a halt in arrests as a halt in reporting newer instances in Uttar Pradesh.
6. Dwary, Anurag (2021): First Case Under New Law Against "Love Jihad" Filed In Madhya Pradesh, in: NDTV, [<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/love-jihad-law-madhya-pradesh-police-file-first-case-under-new-law-against-love-jihad-2354402>], 18.01.2021 (Last Access: 25.08.2023).
7. Corbridge, Stuart and John Harriss (2013): Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu nationalism and popular democracy, New York: John Wiley & Sons.
8. Jaffrelot, Christophe (1996): The Genesis and development of Hindu Nationalism in the Punjab: from the Arya Samaj to the Hindu Sabha (1875-1910), in: IndoBritish Review, vol. 21, pp. 3-40.
9. Jaffrelot, Christophe (2017): "India's Democracy at 70: Toward a Hindu State?", in: Journal of Democracy, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 52-63. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0044>.
10. Hansen, T. B. (1999): The saffron wave: Democracy and Hindu nationalism in modern India, Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400823055>.
11. Roohi, Sanam (forthcoming): Against #CoronaJihad: Somatic Hindu nationalism on Indian Twitter during COVID-19, in Journal for Religion, Media and Digital Culture. Special Issue article for 'eFaith: Rewiring the house of God', edited by Fouad Marei.
12. van der Veer, Peter (2002): Religion in South Asia, in: Annual review of anthropology, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 173-187. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.31.040402.085347>.
13. Uberoi, Patricia (1994): Family, kinship and marriage in India, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 41.

14. Mody, Perveez (2002): Love and the law: love-marriage in Delhi, in: Modern Asian Studies, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 223-256. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X02001075>.
15. Rao, Mohan (2011): Love Jihad and demographic fears, in: Indian Journal of Gender Studies, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 425-430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152151101800307>.
16. Singh, Chander Uday (2022): Lies, Insistence and Disregard for Evidence: The Journey of 'Love Jihad' Laws, in: The Wire, [<https://thewire.in/communalism/lies-insistence-and-disregard-for-evidence-the-journey-of-love-jihad-laws>], 30.12.2022 (Last Access: 19.09.2023).

SUGGESTED CITATION: Roohi, Sanam: Love in the times of Hindutva (Part 1), In: KWI-BLOG, [<https://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/love-in-the-times-of-hindutva-part-1/>], 23.10.2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37189/kwi-blog/20231023-0830>

DuEPublico

Duisburg-Essen Publications online

UNIVERSITÄT
DUISBURG
ESSEN

Offen im Denken

ub | universitäts
bibliothek

This text is made available via DuEPublico, the institutional repository of the University of Duisburg-Essen. This version may eventually differ from another version distributed by a commercial publisher.

DOI: 10.37189/kwi-blog/20231023-0830

URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:465-20231023-092432-6

All rights reserved.