

Love in the times of Hindutva (Part 2)

The sexual politics of religious nationalism in India

Von: Sanam Roohi

Jihadist discourse and the threat of Muslim male sexuality

From 'love jihad' in 2009 to 'corona jihad' in 2020, the expanding vocabulary used by the Indian state to target Muslim men is a spin-off of the global jihad discourse that sprung up after 9/11. Jihad as a violent Islamic struggle against non-believers was inscribed in the formulation of national security policies across the globe in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US. The clash of civilizations thesis, which sees the world divided into distinct cultures whose interaction produces conflict,¹ has become a widespread view that perpetuates the idea of Islam as the violent other. Barber² showed early on that the West constructed an essentialized idea of jihad as opposed to universalized American consumer culture, or what he referred to as McWorld. At the same time, the social and political manifestations of this jihadist discourse have been particularized to their regional and historical settings.

The national security language of jihad was critiqued by Turner³ for its glaring orientalization, and Talal Asad⁴ who pointed to the inherent violence of the liberal doctrine itself. Nevertheless, conservative regimes across the globe have found jihadi terror to be a particularly useful trope to pass draconian anti-terror laws that give exceptional powers to the executive branch, not just in the US but in other countries like India which emulate it.⁵ A crucial component of these anti-terror laws is that the Muslim male is always already a suspect. Between 2001 and now, with right-wing populism gaining considerable traction across the globe, Islamophobic discourses and the criminalizing of Muslim men have only deepened.⁶ The love jihad trope, as a sub-set of larger Islamophobic discourse, also has a global appeal for the right. A special issue of the journal *Religions* in 2021 (edited by Iselin Frydenlund and Eviane Leidig)⁷ threw light on this by covering examples from beyond India to include its renderings across Europe.

The discourse of jihad, while globally inflected, is also locally and historically grounded within Hindutva's populist and corporeal politics. In India as elsewhere, right-wing populist politics has denuded the term jihad of its historical and spiritual meaning. Perceiving it as

not just a violent religious doctrine to ‘wage war’ against non-believers in India, Hindutva rhetoric uses different forms of the term jihad as a ploy to unleash the spectre of a demographic battle within the country in insidious ways: in the case of love jihad, by using love and sex for socio-religious reproduction to make India a Muslim majority country and in the case of ‘corona jihad’ for instance, by spreading the virus to kill non-Muslims in India.⁸

This problematic rendering of the term jihad may be recent, but the fear of the Muslim male as a threat to Hindu social order is old. Charu Gupta, who documented this development early on, noted that Hindu organizations like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Sri Ram Sene, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, and Hindu Janjagruthi Samiti ‘have been holding meetings, distributing pamphlets, and even filing court cases’ against Muslim men.⁹ She also pointed how the discourse resonated with an earlier historical period when the Arya Samaj (a Hindu revivalist group) made allegations about the abduction of Hindu women by Muslim men in the 1920s to convert them. Gupta sees both these episodes as an attempt to project Hindu women as passive victims devoid of agency. However, I contend that this is only a partial reading of the love jihad narratives and that male sexuality needs to be fully situated in any discussion of the Hindutva’s jihad-laden narratives.

Embodied and performed,¹⁰ feminists have argued that gender permeates all aspects of social organization, a significant part of which is the performance of masculinities¹¹ particularly in the public sphere.¹² Precisely because of this centering of the male within the public sphere, in pluralist societies, a reordering of masculinities occur where not all bodies are accorded the same value. Nations valorize certain articulations of masculinity as a virtue, while perceiving other articulations as a threat to that virtue, and yet others as peripheral even if essential to the nation. In India’s post independent history, Muslim masculinity was never seen as the nation’s core virtue, but rather as peripheral or even antithetical to the nation (depending on which ideology reined). According to Hindutva, the problematic sexuality of the Muslim man is inextricably interwoven with the subcontinent’s history of Muslim rule. It has attempted to rewrite this history to be more amenable to its projection of Hindu masculinity as unsubdued,¹³ which ties in with its politics of Muslim hate.¹⁴

Muslim male desire as disruptive of the Hindu moral order

If you [Muslim men] don’t mend your ways [of trapping Hindu women] your Ram Naam Satya [chant associated with funerals] journey will begin.

Yogi Adityanath, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh addressing a rally in October 2020

In 2022, news of a Khoja man (a minority group with the South Asian Muslim community) killing and chopping up his Hindu girlfriend’s body became the mainstay on primetime for many weeks. It fueled a lot of debate on social media about the barbarity of Muslim men and the vulnerability of Hindu women. It also became an occasion for Hindu men to warn

their women from falling prey to the sexual allure of Muslim men. Now added to the love jihad narratives is the deviousness of the Muslim men who would not only convert and/or marry a Hindu woman but also kill her. It did not matter that, within days, many more news stories of the killing of women by their lovers or spouses came out where the perpetrators were Hindus. The public memory refused to acknowledge these acts and highlighted only the one committed by a nominally Muslim man. This tactic of the Hindu right to spread fear of Muslim men was perhaps thought to be more powerful.

Regulating intimate spaces is neither new nor specific to the right-wing regime in India.¹⁵ While sex has been under the purview of socio-religious regulations for a long time, states have increasingly withdrawn from dictating what can go on in private and intimate spaces largely due to the resistance movements led by feminists and sexual minorities.¹⁶ However, through love jihad laws,¹⁷ the Indian government has found newer means to uphold Hindu patriarchal family values as a civic duty.¹⁸ In India, where marriage rules are governed by norms of caste endogamy (with only a little over 5.8 percent of marriages being inter-caste),¹⁹ inter-religious marriages break centuries-old caste norms. They also break the socially enforced religious codes which are increasingly upheld in a highly political climate of the steady ascent of right-wing militant majoritarianism in India. In such a political climate, the figure of the Muslim man vexes the right, and the containment of his sexuality becomes part of the Hindutva nationalist project.²⁰ However, not all forms of sexual boundary crossing are treated the same way. Inversing the idea of immorality, since the late colonial period Hindu men were hailed as heroes when they won over Muslim women.²¹

This history of sexualized Muslim bodies offers interesting insights into how norms have changed or evolved over time. In terms of the nature-culture (*sankriti-prakriti*) debate, Muslim men are projected as lacking the refinement to distinguish between the biological and social functions of sex, a trope similarly used for *mlecchas* (lower caste or outcaste men) in older shastras²², but with the added lens of an outsider and an enemy. The ordinance passed by the Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh governments to prevent inter-religious unions for all intents and purposes is aimed at preserving this nature-culture balance as upheld by the upper caste moral Hindu order which the Muslim man perpetually threatens by virtue of his being. Conversely, the support for Hindu men to bring Muslim women into the Hindu fold is not seen as tipping this nature-culture balance.

This dichotomous representation of Muslim male and female sexuality is largely a product of the demographic battle between Hindus and the Muslims to lay claim to separate electorates in the colonial period – an issue that was ultimately resolved by the partition of the country and the creation of Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority yet secular India. Despite the partition of India and Muslims becoming a minority in the country, the demographic scare has not subsided. During political canvassing, BJP politicians attack the alleged sexual politics of Muslim men with taunts like ‘Hum do hamare pachees’²³ (we are

two but we will produce 25 kids). Such common refrains are meant to convey not only their insatiable sexual appetite but to also propagate an idea of Muslim men robbing the agency of women and treating them as a tool for reproduction.

Ostensibly in order to combat the purported overt and covert attempts of Muslim men at making India a Muslim-majority country, the BJP and its affiliate groups have gone beyond the recourse to law by attempting to contain Muslim men through violence often unleashed by vigilante groups. In the states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, boundaries between law enforcement agencies and militarized youths have become increasingly blurred. For instance, on 18 September 2023, a Muslim man was thrashed in Bareilly (a town in Uttar Pradesh) in front of the cameras for sitting with a Hindu woman.²⁴ The violence was directed at him in the garb of preventing love jihad. Vigilantes, who often work alongside law enforcement agencies, go unpunished, as a report in New York Times noted.²⁵

With the passing of each new law meant to enforce a homogenized Hindu nation and a subjugated Muslim minority, the brunt of these measures is almost overwhelmingly borne by lower-caste Muslim men (and women) who do not have the social or cultural capital to cushion themselves from the state's excess.

Conclusion

The rise of right-wing populism has gained a lot of scholarly attention in Europe and the Americas, where it is often contended that this politics is fed by socio-economic inequalities, gendered discourses of immigration, 'white power', racism, Islamophobia and xenophobia. However, the rise of right-wing politics is not a 'Western' phenomenon alone²⁶; in India, it has found a 'natural' home in exclusivist Hindutva ideology and muscular Hindu nationalism. Like other forms of extremist nationalism, Hindutva ideology builds upon gendered discourses of exclusion, often with violent consequences for its marginalized groups: Muslims, Dalits (oppressed castes), and women, offering an extremely relevant global comparison.

This two-part blog article untangles the discursive framings of love jihad, a term coined by adherents of Hindutva to describe what they perceive as the religious cum demographic war waged by Muslim men to sexually target and convert Hindu women. Paralleling the ascent of the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), the narrative first spun in the southern Indian states of Karnataka and Kerala in 2009 finally gained enough traction to become law in the BJP-ruled states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh by 2020 and 2021. Seeing these laws in conjunction with a series of events and decrees in the recent past, the cumulative aim of the state's punitive measures is to preclude Muslim men from their substantive citizenship rights in a country increasingly moving towards becoming a Hindu nation. Arguing against the interpretation of these instances as mere examples of populist vigilantism, the article rather asserts that these events form a conundrum at the

heart of Hindutva politics – the progressive loss of the personal and sexual liberty of Hindu women in an attempt to subdue or even suppress Muslim male desire. Love jihad laws have seen a tenuous coupling of sex, heterosexual marriages and anti-Muslim politics. In times of accelerated entanglement of religion and politics, there is a serious erasure and silencing of female and non-binary sexuality. With love jihad narratives coming to fruition in the form of laws, the dream of a total Hindu Rashtra inches closer to reality by brutalizing and criminalizing Muslim men through legal and extra-legal means.

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