

INDIA: A DE FACTO ETHNIC DEMOCRACY?

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Abstract: India, one of the most populous democracies in the world is a celebrated territory for its immense diversity. It is home to a multifarious, multilingual, and multireligious populace. The expanse of the country is not only marked by vibrant cultural pluralism but different communities are constitutionally empowered to observe their unique faith. But owing to the increasing communal violence, especially pre, and post-elections, for instance, the 2021 post-Vidhan Sabha election violence in West Bengal, fingers are raised towards the efficacy of Indian democracy. The past and present have borne witness to manifold communal violence, especially where Hindus and Muslims are pitted against each other. The paper through content analysis aims to highlight the role played by specific political speeches in accelerating xenophobic tendencies toward Muslims in the country and how far it is instrumental in devolving from a liberal democracy to a de facto ethnic democracy.

Keywords: Ethnic democracy, ethnic nation, Muslims, political speech, xenophobia.

I. Introduction

The third wave of democratization has revealed that democracies can vary from the liberal model standards. Sammy Smooha's (2001) pioneering work in the field of *de jure* Israeli ethnic democracies (legally sanctioned communal discrimination) has confirmed the same by showing how minorities are second-class citizens and bureaucratically 'otherised'. Similarly, India's contemporary majoritarianism stoked a *de facto* kind of ethnic democracy (communal discrimination that exists, in reality, irrespective of legal sanction). Due to the well-pronounced ideals of secularism, the *de jure* aspect is virtually absent but the de facto aspect is stirred by communal hatred. Therefore, this article seeks to show how India has moved towards a de facto ethnic democracy by using a qualitative feminist rhetorical approach to analyse the self-presentation of political actors rooted in a linguistic tradition. In other words, doing a content analysis of political speeches.

II. Literature Survey

In this section, a review of existing academic literature will focus on the prevalence of communal discrimination and subsequent violence perpetrated upon Muslims in India. By doing so I aim to show that India is falling short of the liberal democratic ideals.

Mohammed Sinan Siyech and Akanksha Narain have argued in their article ‘Beef-related Violence in India: An Expression of Islamophobia’ (2018) that Muslims are the largest sectional minorities in India and their historical clashes with Hindus have been misused by far right-wing organisations and political parties. Such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Dal or Bharatiya Janta Party had evoked such riotous instances to first isolate the Muslims as ‘Others’ and then justified communal violence against them. The Muslims are portrayed as potential threats, and the Hindus are urged to assume the sacred onus to wipe them out of the country. In this context of discriminatory practices, we can apply Sammy Smootha’s model of *de facto* ethnic democracy which is propelled by ethnic nationalism. Smootha in ‘Ethnic Democracy: Israel as an Archetype’ (1997) showed how *de facto* ethnic democracy declares a specific community or population as an ethnic nation, tied by common descent, language, and culture. Furthermore, entry into the ethnic nation is permitted only upon a shared socio-cultural identity and not citizenry. This is why, although India is a democracy and renders citizenship to one and all, entry into the ethnic nation is predominantly a Hindu imperative. Non-members of an ethnic nation are thus not only considered undesirable but the undesirability is explained in terms of political instability, cultural downgrading, and security tensions. As a result, Sammy Smootha argues that an ethnic democracy that takes the ethnic nation and not the citizenry as the cornerstone of the state falls short of the qualities of a liberal democracy contingent upon equality of rights. Therefore, despite the Indian Constitution granting equal rights across the expanse of the country, ethnic nations’ sentimentalities and ideologies justify communal discrimination.

III. Objective

In the previous section upon elucidating the rationale behind a xenophobic tendency towards Muslims, the paper will now commit itself to the fundamental objective of showing how communal discrimination is perpetrated by specific political speeches, especially in the context of otherising and hypermasculinising Muslims. Therefore, through the aforementioned aspects, it discusses the nature of a transforming Indian democracy.

IV. Methodology

The present paper has used content analysis of specific political speeches replete with xenophobia. While open coding was performed, emphasis was placed on particular terminologies used by the political actors,

mostly in their vernaculars. Moreover, content analysis of the political speeches involved a comprehensive thematization and theorization of each linguistic category, whereby a sense of populism was evident. Multifarious populist ideas such as anti-elitism, and people-centrism were conspicuous through all the speeches — representing India as a land of Hindus to urging the Hindu man to step into the ideal of heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity in order to save the nation in crisis.

V. Otherising: Muslims as infiltrators and potential threats

A vast repertoire of verbal expressions, gesturing towards communal hatred accompanied by strong Right Wing Hindutva connotations delineate the fact that Hindus are the rightful owners of Hindustan. In February 2022 BJP MLA Mayankeshwar Singh from east Uttar Pradesh's Siddharthnagar made a speech threatening Muslims with bodily harm for effectively just existing. He targeted the community using blatant threat attacks, 'If Hindus in Hindustan wake up the beard will be pulled and made into a *choti* (a tightened braid). If you have to live in Hindustan you have to say 'Radhe Radhe', else, like those who went to Pakistan during the partition, you can go too... you have no use here' (Barton, 2022). This sort of ultimatum gestures nothing more but an extreme form of the 'US' versus 'THEY' bifurcation with the rightful appropriation of India by Hindus as the fulcrum of the argument. This otherization of Muslims has taken place by claiming them to be (1) descendants of foreign invaders who destroyed religious symbols in India, (2) Pakistani agents in India, (3) intent on dominating the country demographically by reproducing without control and by converting Hindus to Islam and (4) sacrilegious individuals who eat cows, which is a sacred entity in the Hindu religion (Siyech & Narain, 2018: 189).

In this 'Othering' exercise the Muslim man is perceived as a potential, hyper-masculine threat to the Hindu nation-state. The Hindu Right's imagination of Muslim men's 'irresponsible sexuality' drives the hyper-masculinity myth which will be elucidated in the following section.

VI. Hypermasculinization: The Muslim man is a demon

A country driven by fear of love jihad paints a virile, predatory and lustful image of a Muslim man. It is in this context that we can conceptualise BJP leader Parvesh Kumar's 'awakening call' for Delhiites whereby he drew parallels with oppression perpetrated by Muslims on Kashmiri pandits, predominantly a Hindu faction. He made headlines while campaigning for the Delhi Assembly elections in January 2020 by targeting anti-CAA campaigners,

The people of Delhi are aware of the kind of fire that spread in Kashmir years back. Kashmiri Pandits faced atrocities, their sisters and daughters were raped. That fire spread to UP, Hyderabad, Kerala. Now that the fire

has spread in parts of Delhi. Lakhs of people have gathered there and that fire can enter the houses of Delhi anytime. People of Delhi should know that these people will enter houses, rape, and kill our sisters and daughters. So there is still time, the people of Delhi need to wake up and choose the BJP government. By doing so they will feel safe and we will ensure that Shaheen Bagh is cleared off within a month. If my government is formed in Delhi, then give me only one month's time after February 11. Will not spare a single mosque in my Lok Sabha constituency (Kumar, 2020).

This political commentary holds implications that delve deep into the realm of gender performance. Kashmir has been the litmus test for feminisation of territory. The evidence lies in none other but Jawaharlal Nehru's statement, 'Like some supremely beautiful woman, whose beauty is almost impersonal and above human desire, such was Kashmir in all its feminine beauty of river and valley' (Yaseen, 2007). In this regard, Kumar's reference to massacring Kashmir and Hindu women implies situating a hypermasculinized Muslim man in a feminised territory. This inescapable interlinkage between demonisation of Muslim men and feminisation of Kashmir can also be captured in BJP MLA of Bihar, Haribhushan Thakur Bachaul's statement. While attending an event in Patna on May 7, 2022, where a discussion was held on 'The Untold Story of Kashmiri Hindus' he expressed unvarnished hatred, 'Muslims should be set ablaze just as Hindus burn Ravana effigies during the festival of Dussehra. We need a Hanuman ji so that our youth could be strong, and the people of our country could be strong. Just like Ravana's Lanka was burnt by Hanuman ji, the demon-like Ravana hovering over Bihar and the country should also be burnt' (The Wire, 2022). When asked where are these 'ravana' in Bihar, he blatantly named four of the Muslim-dominated districts - Kishanganj, Araria, Purnia, Katihar. The notable dimension in this speech is not only the fact that Kashmir is placed as bait but the extreme violence fancied by Thakur drawing comparisons with Indian mythology and epics. Ravana, eternally represented as lustful and predatory, had characteristic traits very easily associated with Muslim men, with the parallel that Muslims be set ablaze like Ravana effigies. Thus iniquitous Ravana (representative of Muslim men and virility) is pitted against a testosterone-generated, heroic Hanuman representing Hindu masculinity. It is interesting that while hypermasculinity is demonised in the case of a Muslim man, it is idealised in a Hindu man. This is evident in Narendra Modi's famous 56-inch chest (Chappan Inch ki Chatti) speech. On January 23, 2014, in Benaras, BJP alpha male, Narendra Modi drew attention to his broad chest as he attacked Samajwadi Party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav. 'Netaji (Yadav) has said Modi does not have what it takes to make another Gujarat out of Uttar Pradesh. Do you know what making another Gujarat requires? ... It requires a chhappan inch ki chhati (56-inch chest)', declared BJP's prime ministerial candidate, thumping his chest King Kong style (Jain, 2016). This expression of a '56-inch chest' draws ideals on how putative real Hindu men should behave, such as the cultural ideal dictates— Vivekananda envisioned his Hindu man to possess 'nerves of steel and muscles of iron'. Furthermore, it also invites compliance from all Hindu men. Such as an entire band of followers, 'bhakts' who attempt to reach the threshold level of becoming a true man. Therefore, the presumed performance of masculinity is often used as a ploy for discrimination.

VII. Conclusion

The two aforementioned aspects of otherising and hypermasculinization have so far explained a xenophobic tendency replete in recent political speeches. Furthermore, favouritism towards majoritarian policies disentitles the Muslims, in turn producing communal discrimination as per the definition of de facto ethnic democracy. Thus the paper has attempted to assert the transformation of India's face of democracy, which if not legally arrested might take a turn into severe authoritarianism.

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