'RISE OF THE HINDU NATIONALIST PROJECT IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA : LOOKING AT THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF MASCULINITIES IN THE HINDUTVA POLITICAL SPACE AND THE SPREAD OF THE HINDUTVA AGENDA THROUGH STRATEGIC POLICY DECISIONS'

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List of Acronyms:

BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party
RSS: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
VHP: Vishwa Hindu Parishad
INC: Indian National Congress
NRC: National Register Citizens
CAA: Citizenship Amendment Act
MP: Member of Parliament
CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Contents

Abstract

The dissertation seeks to delve into the constructs of Nationalism and gender while looking at the rise of Hindu Nationalism in contemporary India. Delving into the complexities of the Hindu Nationalist politics in an Indian context, it attempts to bring a focus towards a changing reality of a new India which has emerged under its leader, Narendra Modi and the role his party is playing in reconfiguring the socio-political space in an Indian context that harks back to a contested Aryan past. In the process of looking at Hindu Nationalist politics, the dissertation seeks to employ the concept of 'masculinities' as a point of departure to look at how it has become a potent force in the Indian political discourse. Stemming from masculinities, it draws a beeline to look at the role of the Hindu female while questioning the pre-dominant passive role it has been accorded mainly in academia. Looking beyond the role that the Hindu female plays in the socio-political vacuum, the dissertation focuses on the rise of Hindutva forces in the Northeast of India, which has been the site of crucial policy decisions in the form of NRC and the CAA leaving large parts of the vulnerable population, stranded at the sidelines of the citizenship debate fuelling the burgeoning insider vs outsider debate.

Keywords: Hindu Nationalism, Populism, BJP, Narendra Modi, Masculinities, NRC, CAA...

Acknowledgement

1.0 Introduction

Two ideas of the nation have been competing for centuries, one which carries with it a universalising tendency and the other which has been centred on ethnic lines. The dominant idea that has shaped the Indian constitution has been one centred on a democratic, federal, and secular fabric (Jaffrelot, 2019: 7). The Indian state in the constitution doesn't accord recognition to any official religion, but the rise of the BJP in India has given an impetus to the Hindu Nationalists in reforming the socio-political dimension. Anand conceptualises Hindutva, which emerges out of Hindu Nationalism, as a schizophrenic one, which brings in the image of a peaceful Hindu self counterpoised against the threatening 'other' by normalising politics of fear and hatred (Anand, 2011: 1). The landslide victory of the BJP in the 2014 elections heralded a third age of Indian democracy, signalling a shift towards a disturbing alchemy of Hindutva and Populism (Jaffrelot, 2019: 5). Definition of a Hindu state stems from representations of 'the people' which becomes critical to the relationship between creating a sense of belonging and imagined community stemming from a Aryan past (Leidig, 220: 223). Through the election campaign leading to the 2014 elections, Modi exploited a populist narrative to secure mass support across Indian society as he positioned himself as an outsider with humble beginnings, construing himself as the people's voice (Leidig, 220: 230). His victory can be seen as a 'populist zeitgeist', displacing the incumbent Congress from office while creating a 'civic zeitgeist' which would be a mobilising force in the face of a threat that comes from the 'Muslim other', creating a sense of insecurity amongst the Hindu males (Leidig, 220: 230). Casting Islam as a harbinger of evil and an obstacle to the Hindu Nation has led to the framing of Muslim men as terrorists, with constant attempts to reframe the masculinity of Muslim men along hypersexualised and barbaric tropes placed in stark contrast to the 'vulnerable Hindu women' (Leidig, 220: 231). The Hindu women get painted as the 'divine' symbolising 'Bharat Mata', and any attack on the nation is seen as defiling the honour of Hindu women. Hindutva politics promotes an image of Hindu masculinity, which is often hypersexed and hypermasculinised, promoting a patriarchal mindset (Leidig, 220: 231). Deities like Ram have been transformed from pensive and tranquil figures to chauvinistic warriors with masculine traits embedding a warrior-like tradition in a narrative of survival. In the words of Jaffrelot, when it comes to Modi, "He associated himself with Hindu symbols and personalities. Besides wearing saffron clothes on

some of the most important occasions of the election campaign, Modi visited many Hindu sacred places before his meetings" (as quoted in Leidig, 220: 232).

Modi's brand of masculinity carries with it potent metaphors when it comes to defining the contours of Hindu Nationalism and the corresponding expression of manliness with a masculinised version of the nation carrying important implications for women and the role they are supposed to play in the masculinised environment (Banerjee, 2006: 62). The obsession of the right-wing political space with gender is closely linked to ethno-nationalist sentiments which emerge out of excluding the racialised 'other', constructed as dangerous to the larger nationalistic project (Dietze & Roth, 2020: 12). One can see a kind of 'strategic progressivism' in Modi's brand of masculinity as he depicts himself as a modern saint, creating a public persona that gets rooted in the specifics of India's history (Basu, 2021: 1). In the words of Basu, "Unlike most populist strongmen, Modi has sometimes venerated femininity and women, drawing on his interpretation of Hindu values. Modi's leadership style involves displaying feminine-identified traits such as selflessness, humility, and devotion. After his 2019 election campaign, he draped himself in a saffron robe and meditated overnight in a cave. He has made it clear that he prefers silence to bragging unlike his fellow counterparts, and that he is a vegetarian, teetotaler, celibate, and ascetic" (as quoted in Basu, 2021: 2). The norms when it comes to looking at gender and Hindutva politics are quite fluid than one might think, with a constant interaction spanning both public and private spheres. Focusing on fluidity and moving away from a norms-based understanding of the existing public-private debate in the larger feminist debate allows us to understand how Modi has gained widespread legitimacy amongst the masses. As seen above, Modi has brought in a sense of intimacy, which embodies masculine and feminine attributes. This has considerably impacted the modern interpretation of Hindu Nationalism, which is evoked by RSS and VHP and propagated in the Indian political space through parties like the BJP and Shiv Sena. In the words of Banerjee, "Women in these organisations draw on images of women as heroic mothers, chaste wives, and celibate masculinised warriors to negotiate their way in this landscape" (Banerjee, 2006: 63). The role of women in the Hindu Nationalist landscape reveals an interesting tension between feminist nationalism activism and feminist Nationalism which emerges out of the ideals of female virtue and chastity (Banerjee, 2006: 63). In the words of Sarkar, "Indian men felt effeminised in the public

sphere under an imperial gaze constructed with the ideas of hegemonic masculinity, they responded by asserting their masculinity in the 'inner world' or the domestic sphere" (as quoted in Banerjee, 2006: 63). A passive construction would be too narrow, as women are increasingly occupying spaces of power playing the role of Sadhvi, wherein chastity and virtue remain essential to maintain the existing hierarchy in the Hindu Nationalist space. Hindu Nationalists have sought to anchor women in a context which, in Banerjee's words, "valorises asexual, chaste women who are responsible for the honour of their body, family, and nation" (as quoted in Banerjee, 2006: 72). These gets embedded in an endless circle of viciousness wherein women can be a chaste wife, mother or a warrior presenting an ideal family representative of power and honour. The sentiments are echoed in the words of Sadhvi Uma, "Celibacy is necessary as family detracts from following the true path of nation building… Sadhvis should not just pray but be active in society… A woman should be modest, be ready to sacrifice and take on the mantle of a dutiful wife because a woman's husband forms the core of her strength" (as quoted in Banerjee, 2006: 72). The rhetoric of a 'Hindu state' has continued to spread beyond the mainland, and the Modi government has made active efforts when it comes to implementing policy decisions like NRC, and CAA which seeks to reconfigure the secular underpinnings of the Indian state.

Both policy decisions have the power to marginalise the vulnerable; most of them happen to be Muslim women who have been impacted by the policies, leaving them in a crisis of 'statelessness' (Desai, 2019: 1). Hannah Arendt's words echo here when it comes to contextualising the plight of refugees, who despite being inhabitants of a place for generations are placed as the 'outsider' and how they are ultimately transformed from being "homeless to stateless, and ultimately right-less" (Raj, 2020: 2). The thesis here attempts to answer the following research question: "How the rise of the BJP has led to the legitimising of the Hindu Nationalist project centred around a masculinist-nationalistic understanding of bodies?". In a bid to answer the question, the thesis has been divided into three key chapters based on my findings. The first part looks at the rise of Hindu Nationalism in India by using masculinity as a starting point and seeing the same in tandem with the rise of the BJP as it has led to significant reconfiguration of the secularist credentials of the Indian state. Following this, the thesis moves on to look at how, in a hyper-masculine space of Hindutva politics, there has been a shifting symbolisation of Hindu

female while moving beyond just a passive conception of their role and see how they navigate the space that exists in a socio-political vacuum. Once the above gets established, it moves on to look at a case study to analyse the rise of Hindutva politics in the Northeast of India alongside the policy decisions of NRC and CAA, which is reconfiguring the Indian political space further marginalising the vulnerable, leading to a growing polarisation of sectarian cleavages. Going beyond, it ends with a concluding chapter that brings in an overview of findings while making a call to move beyond Western conceptions of Nationalism and masculinities for shifting their focus to the Global South, which is going through a rapid flux of political changes, and giving due importance to the complexities involved in the specificities of the region.

2.0 Literature Review

Hindu Nationalism has sought to transform the public-political space through strategic invocations seeking to conceptualise a political identity grounded in religion (Graham, 1990: 49). Using Hindu Nationalism as a starting point allows me to delve into the growing prerogative of the party in power to create a superior Hindu identity centred around masculinities, which has gained legitimacy and is steadily getting consolidated with the rise of the BJP. Casting a contemporary lens, the events that took place on the 5th of January 2020, which showcased the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, heading the ritual of Bhumi Pujan (Land Worship) at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya crystallised the project of Hindu Nationalism in the starkest of terms (Mehta, 2022: 31). In the words of Mehta, "India is now haunted by the twin spectre of majoritarianism and authoritarianism" (as quoted in Mehta, 2022: 31).

Bodies are crucial to the project of Nationalism, wherein, in Anand's words, biological 'maleness' becomes a referent point to define the masculinised-nationalised political bodies" (as quoted in Anand, 2008: 163). The doctrine of Hindu Nationalism has relied on casting Muslims and Christians as outsiders, as Hindu Nationalists seek to purify the nation of its omens (Anand, 2008: 166). Majoritarian Nationalism has transformed the existing political space, especially with the electoral success of the BJP in the Northeast of India,

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which for a long time had remained its Achilles heel (Longkumer, 2019: 282). The gendered perspective has been a rather conspicuous feature of Hindu Nationalism, and it has remained mainly on the margins when it comes to the mainstream discourse. Therefore, using masculinity as a point of departure when it comes to the thesis as it seeks to find an answer to the research question: "How the rise of the BJP has led to the legitimisation of the Hindu Nationalist project centred around a masculinist-nationalist understanding of bodies?". This is evidenced by the rise of Hindutva in the Northeast, citing recent regional political changes. The review of the literature here examines vital works in related areas, allowing one to answer the research question above.

In the words of Anand, "The discourse of Hindu Nationalism - Hindutva- is best understood as a collection of eclectic ideas, images, and practices" (as quoted in Anand, 2011: 2). The work by Anand allows us to delve into the inherently masculinist conception of Nationalism, with Anand seeking to extend it to Hindu Nationalistic ideals that function on seeing the Muslim population as the hyper-sexed one which poses a significant threat to the Hindu state. With the rise of the BJP and its consolidation of power at the centre and state levels, there has been a changing rhetoric when it comes to democracy and rights. This changing conception has gained a disturbing sense of legitimacy that has been echoed through the words of Home Minister Amit Shah, wherein he goes on to state, "Western standards of human rights should not be applied to matters pertaining to India" (as quoted in Scroll Staff, 2019: 1). This has been a consistent pattern as the BJP government in power under Narendra Modi, has sought to redefine the secular nature of the Indian state. In the words of Hansen, "The Hindutva moment is a conservative revolution, combining paternalist and xenophobic discourses with democratic and universalist ones on rights and entitlements" (as quoted in Anand, 2011: 3). There has been an ascendancy of Hindutva forces with the right forging a sense of fear amongst the Muslim minority population. With it comes the dehumanisation of the 'other' and the creation of a sense of antagonism, which is led through the spectre of 'overpopulating Muslims' (Anand, 2011: 49). In the words of Paliwal, "An essential plan of Muslims is to allure, attract, and abduct young Hindu girls for marriage to the Muslim men" (as quoted in Anand, 2011: 49). Statements such as this has become a part of election rhetoric and has been perpetuated through different modes of communication, with movies like the 'Kerala Story' stirring up a controversy which narrates

the stories of Hindu and Christian women from the state of Kerala who were lured into joining the cause of the Islamic State (IS) by the Muslim youth on the pretext of marriage (Sebastian, 2023: 1). In a boost to its controversial reception by the public, it received a positive boost from none other than the Prime Minister Modi during the campaign leading up to the Karnataka state elections, wherein he stated, "Such a beautiful state (Kerala) of the country, where people are hardworking and talented. The Kerala Story brings out the terror conspiracies happening in the state. Unfortunately, Congress can be seen standing in line with this terror trend that is seeking to ruin the country" (as quoted in PTI, 2023: 3). Use of rhetoric like this has sought to constantly reimpose the image of the 'Muslim terrorist' which is crucial to the Hindu right (Anand, 2011: 48). Thus, the amping up of the threat perception when it comes to Muslims, in Anand's words allows, "fear, disgust, and desire to work together in tandem, creating the image of a stereotyped Muslim" (as quoted in Anand, 2011: 50). Anand goes on to explain the threat which has become constitutive of Hindu Nationalism through the concept of 'pornosexualising' the 'Muslim other' while looking at the performative bodies who are the active agents in the project of Hindu Nationlism (Anand, 2008: 163).

Anand falls sort of making a definitive stance when it comes to looking at masculinities in Hindu Nationalist discourse and citing the work that had been published quite some time back before the BJP took power; it doesn't paint a complete picture of changing Hindu masculinities seen in relation to the rise of BJP. The masculinisation of Hindus functions on a hierarchical notion and starkly contrasts the emasculated secularists seen as the impotent ones in the Nationalist project. In the words of Subramaniam, "Hindu Nationalism turned women into a national symbol to create the motif of divine feminine power, or shakti. The nation, now female and a 'motherland', came to symbolise both the powerlessness of the colonial subject as well awakening the conscience of her humiliated (Hindu) sons" (as quoted in Subramaniam, 2019: 54). The work by Subramaniam allows one to look at how reproductive politics and women intersect in the larger project of Hindu Nationalism while also bringing into focus different roles women are supposed to perform. In the words of Uma Chakravarti, "Upper-case women became complicit and invested in the caste system because they saw its benefits, even while the Brahmanical patriarchy continued to control their sexuality to ensure the purity of the upper castes" (as quoted in Subramaniam, 2019:

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54). Thus, using Subramaniam's work becomes crucial to look at the role of the Hindu female, which goes beyond a generalised passive understanding of women in this context. However, it comes with a lacunae, as it doesn't necessarily delve into the crucible of Hindutva politics when it comes to looking at women and the hyper-masculinised form of Hinduism. In a bid to fill these lacunae, the work by Banerjee becomes essential as it draws a beeline right from the constructs of nation and gender to look at Nationalism along the lines of Hindutva in contemporary times. The rise of the BJP has heralded an age of archaic modernities wherein certain parts of the past which serve the agenda of the BJP get selectively glorified, allowing them to further their agenda. As Tanika Sarkar goes on to argue, "Hindu Nationalism simultaneously constructs a revitalised moral vision of domestic and sexual norms that promises to restore the comforts of old sociabilities and familial solidarities without tampering either with women's public role or with consumerist individualism" (as quoted in Subramaniam, 2019: 58).

The works by Anand, Subramaniam, and Banerjee provide a great starting point when looking at the relation between religion, culture, Nationalism, and masculinities. The concepts here are highly complex in their own right, but the thesis drawing from them seeks to look at Hindu Nationalism while trying to look at how masculinities have shaped the contemporary political space in India, which remains in a constant flux. Thus, the research question above seeks to delve into the existing lacunae while trying to explore how a particular form of Hindu masculinity has continued to gain a growing ascendancy in India under the Modi regime since taking power through a landslide victory in 2014.

3.0 Methodology

Based on the research question I am dealing with here allows me to employ an interpretative research design. Research design is crucial when pursuing a dissertation, as it shapes the framework when it comes to answering the question. In this case, interpretative research design becomes an essential methodological choice for understanding the complexities involved. In interpretative research design, if one is interested in studying a particular phenomenon, the researcher already knows how the key concepts have been

discussed in the corresponding literature, which is relevant to the research (Shea & Yanow, 2012: 18). In the words of Geertz, "It is an experience-distance concept… one that specialists of one sort or another employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims" (as quoted in Shea & Yanow, 2012: 18). It enacts an idea which gets inscribed in a hermeneutic circle, allowing one to articulate the sense-making which goes on in any kind of interpretative process in question. The concept developed through the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, which was further extended on by his protegee, Hans Georg Gadamer, amongst others, is one of a hermeneutic sense-making circle which expresses the idea that there cannot be one fixed starting point when it comes to inquiry in research as one keeps moving in a spiral constantly towards gaining a sense of the larger project (Shea & Yanow, 2012: 31). It can be visualised as a spiral, rather than a circle where sense-making develops as one An interpretative research design leads to the creation of context-specific meanings, moving away from a generalised abstract purpose, which emerge out of a particular context (Shea & Yanow, 2012: 22).

Here, the focus would be on employing qualitative research. This allows the researcher to use a theoretical lens or perspective, bringing in an overall orienting lens for the dissertation (Creswell, 2013: 119). The key here is to understand a particular social situation or a role wherein the researcher engages in an investigative process as one makes gradual sense of the complex phenomenon in question by contrasting, comparing, replicating and classifying the object of study (Creswell, 2013: 336). The findings are descriptive, wherein the researcher attempts to understand not a monolithic sense of reality but simultaneously delves into multiple realities. As a researcher, one needs to pay attention to the particulars rather than following a case of generalisations with meanings and interpretations negotiated with the sources one engages with. However, despite the space for multiple interpretations, there has to be a certain sense of objectivity, with the researcher seeking to bring in some degree of believability based on coherence, insight, and instrumental utility (Creswell, 2013: 337). When it comes to qualitative research, it becomes increasingly critical for the researcher to identify one's personal assumptions and inherent biases right at the outset of the study, lending a form of credibility to the work being pursued (Creswell, 2013: 338). Returning to looking at a theoretical lens or perspective, this becomes a crucial guide which allows the researcher to create a focus area to follow a structured approach to

answering the research question. For instance, the two overarching theoretical perspectives that will inform the thesis include Hindu Nationalism and Masculinities.

The thesis would rely on analysing secondary sources to answer the research question. Hewson defines secondary data analysis as "the further analysis of an existing dataset with the aim of addressing a research question distinct from that for which the dataset was collected initially and generates novel interpretations and conclusions" (as quoted in Smith, 2008: 3). Secondary data allows researchers to access data on a scale that they could not have hoped to replicate on the first hand, providing opportunities for discovering relationships which might not have even been considered in primary research (Smith, 2008: 21). It is a perfect compliment to qualitative research which relies on generating different forms of interpretation, but inevitably it also does come with its pitfalls too. The very nature of secondary data makes it quite susceptible to criticism, and rightly so, as it involves analysing data which, in a majority of cases, had been collected for an entirely different purpose (Smith, 2008: 22). However, despite its evident pitfalls, in the words of Glaser, "It is a method that is seemingly perfectly suited to the research needs of persons with macro-interest and micro-resources" (as quoted in Smith, 2008: 22). Glaser's words are crucial as it presents the researcher an opportunity to pursue his research at a minimal or even no costs. The establishment of data archives, the ever-expanding space of computing technologies and growing accessibility when it comes to internet-based resources have opened up a pandora's box of opportunities for researchers across diverse fields, signalling the democratisation of research in academia (Smith, 2008: 40). In the words of Smith, "Secondary analysis has a valuable role in the capacity building of research skills as well as in developing an early career researcher's theoretical and substantive interests" (Smith, 2008: 41). In addition to it, it provides researchers with limitless opportunities when it comes to replication, reanalysis, and re-interpreting existing research with new ideas allowing one to engage in diverse forms of exploratory work. While secondary data analysis involves replicating the work of others, that doesn't necessarily make it atheoretical or just a descriptive piece. It also plays a key role when it comes to theoretical development, which is elucidated in the words of Hakim, "It allows for more significant interaction between theory and empirical data because the transition from theory development to theory testing is more immediate...In removing the lag between research design and analysis, secondary

analysis allows researchers to think more closely about the theoretical aims and substantive issues of the study rather than the practical and methodological problems when it comes to collecting new data" (as quoted in Smith, 2008: 42). For the thesis here it draws from various forms of secondary sources in a bid to generate new interpretations by crafting a theoretical framework which draws from journal articles, books, official documents, news articles, and thesis done by researchers at PhD or masters levels with a focus on including more voices from the Global South to lend a sense of authenticity to the thesis.

The thesis would also look at the case study of NRC and CAA as a policy decision, analysing it through a gendered and nationalist perspective. Furthermore, it seeks to employ the 'Discourse Analysis' as a tool for unpacking the statements made by politicians and other stakeholders who have some relevance to the research question. As Johnstone puts it, "Discourse analysis involves systematically taking things apart and bringing in multiple perspectives" (Johnstone, 2018: 61). Thus, discourse analysis is a potent tool for locating multiple meaning levels and connecting semantics and contemporary realities.

4.0 Ethical issues

In interpretative social sciences, as Shea and Yanow put it, "ethical concerns are not a separate subject, but instead emerge throughout the project, embedded within the respective research findings" (Shea and Yanow, 2012: 22). Some ethical concerns to be aware of include:

a.   Avoiding falsifying authorship.

b.   Being able to verify the authenticity of the information being used in the thesis.

c.   Ensuring there are multiple perspectives which follow the methodology prescribed.

d.   Avoid any information that could cause harm or incite unnecessary tensions.

e.   Being aware of plagiarism and ensuring that there is minimal bias.

5.0 Hindu Nationalism, Manliness and the Rise of BJP

Hindu Nationalism has been centred around a chauvinist and majoritarian undertone as it has conjured up a dichotomy existing between the Hindu self, which is peaceful, and the threatening minority cast as the other (Anand, 2011: 1). Nationalism centred around religion breeds on sectarian lines, with women become critical markers of the Hindu self, and emerging as a symbol synonymous to the creation of a Hindu state (Subramaniam, 2019: 56). In the words of Anand, "Hindutva is porno-nationalism in its obsessive preoccupation with the predatory sexuality of the putative Muslim figures and the dangers to the integrity of the Hindu bodies" (as quoted in Anand, 2011: 2). The resounding victory of Narendra Modi in 2014 came with the fear of how the electoral success of the BJP, would lead to the exacerbation of existing sectarian cleavages (Burke, 2014: 2). As the image of Modi gained precedence amongst the populace allowing the BJP to use it as a plank to further the agenda of Hindutva through the means of rhetoric. Statements like the one made by the Maharashtra BJP spokesperson Avadhut Wagh have become commonplace; Wagh commented, "Honourable Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the 11th Avatar (incarnation) of Lord Vishnu" (as quoted in PTI, 2018: 1). In Hindu mythology, Vishnu is symbolised as the preserver and protector of the Universe. Placing Narendra Modi in a revered manner shows the kind of masculine role Narendra Modi has come to espouse as he seeks to balance the scales of good and evil in a troubled world. The creation of messianic imaging supplants the populist leadership style he espouses as he projects himself as the saviour of Hindus.

This was visible in his recent actions, as the proponents of a Hindu state received a new lease of life with the events that transpired on the 5th of January 2020, which saw the Prime Minister of India, performing the Bhumi Puja (land worship) for the construction of the Ram temple in the city of Ayodhya which has remanded a critical flashpoint in the project of Hindu Nationalism (Mehta, 2022: 31). Mehta further claims; "India is now haunted by the twin spectre of majoritarianism and authoritarianism" (Mehta, 2022: 43). Going beyond the rise of Narendra Modi as a messianic figure, the BJP and Hindu Nationalists has sought to create a new form of Hindutva centred around archaic modernities which has been transforming public and private lives (Subramaniam, 2019: 14). In looking at the public and private divide, bodies are crucial to the Hindu Nationalist project, and it becomes

unequivocally important to use biological 'maleness' as the referent point when it comes to defining the masculinised-nationalised political bodies (Anand, 2008: 163).

5.1 The Hindu Nationalist ideology

The doctrine of Hindu Nationalism has been centred around seeing Islam as a religion of proselytism and how lustful Muslims would rape Hindu women, adding to the Muslim population (Raychaudhuri, 1997: 282). In the words of Brian Hole, "A key aim of Hindu Nationalism has been to create a large body of work that emphasises the continuity of Hindu culture in India from the earliest times and denigrates the contribution of other cultures" (as quoted in Variyar, 2018: 28). The hyper-sexed Muslim is seen as a grave threat and plays a crucial role in facilitating political organisation centred around the lines of Hindu Nationalism (Anand, 2008: 164). Looking at the sexual dimension of Hindu Nationalist politics becomes politically salient, as it creates an image assuring Hindu Nationalists of a moral superiority functioning on a masculine anxiety which can only be solved through a militarised awakening of the Hindu souls (Anand, 2008: 164). Majoritarian Nationalism when it comes to Hindutva has been centred around a hyper-masculinised Hindu society that is reproductively fertile, organised effectively on a hierarchical level, espousing a sense of pride when it comes to a Pre-Islamic Golden age and is aware of the dangers posed by those within the country wherein anxieties surrounding masculinisation becomes crucial in delineating the emasculated secularists (Anand, 2008: 167). Anxiety regarding masculinity has remained vital to the foundations of Hindutva. While writing about the Hindu-Muslim riots of the 1920s, Charu Gupta points out, "These movements constructed Hindu masculinity as a contrast to the colonial image of the emasculated, effeminate and militarily incompetent Hindu male. For militant Hindu organisations, a show of physical strength was their psychological defence; their reply to the images of the powerful, rational British and the lustful Muslim" (as quoted in Sen, 2020: 3). This anxious awakening leads to the articulation of gender archetypes, with the Hindu female being cast into the figures of "the heroic mother, chaste wife, and the celibate warrior" grounded in the notion of virtue, that becomes integral to the cause of nation-building on the lines of Hindutva" (Banerjee, 2005: 140). The idea of virtue becomes crucial in controlling female sexuality in relation to the

spread of a masculine form of Hinduism. Banerjee notes how women across visible Hindu Nationalist groups like the VHP, draw on these images as they negotiate the complex Hindu-Masculinist landscape (Banerjee, 2006: 63). Hindu Nationalists have vowed to protect the honour of Bharatmata or 'Mother India', showing how the idea of the nation as women cross the existing nationalist discourse through the use of honour and virtue as a tool to further the dreams of Hindu Nationalists (Banerjee, 2003: 168).

5.2 Honour, virtue, and the creation of the 'other'

Tied to this notion of honour and virtue, there is a creation of others who are seen as defiling the sanctity of the nation (Banerjee, 2003: 168). This leads to the creation of the image of the Hindu warriors emerging to defend the honour of the nation tied to a cultural myth rooted in projecting women as social reproducers of virtue. In the words of Banerjee, "The image of the Hindu warrior is rooted in a nation of masculinity defined by attributes such as decisiveness, aggression, muscular strength, and a willingness to engage in battle, as opposed to a notion of femininity that is defined by traits such as weakness, non-violence, compassion, and a willingness to compromise" (as quoted in Banerjee, 2003: 168). The image of the warrior shows how the process of masculinisation in Hindu Nationalism doesn't necessarily erase women from the nation-building process but engages them by employing culturally endorsed traits signifying femininity, which will be socially accepted within the Nationalist framework. A historical obsession with manliness has been carried through a somewhat ironic admiration of India's conquerors, namely the Muslims and the British. Kakar brings in the words of Swami Vivekananda in this context, wherein he states, "Vivekananda often proclaimed that he wanted to build an India with a Muslim body and a Vedantist brain, and maintained that no race understood as the British did 'what should be the glory of a man' " (as quoted in Banerjee, 2003: 171). We looked at how the creation of a hegemonic nationalist discourse includes the construction of the 'other' seen as the nation's enemy. With the rise of the BJP in contemporary India, Islam has become the enemy of choice (Banerjee, 2003: 170). Elements of Masculine Hinduism can be found in the use of BJP's iconography. The most visible of these elements is through the reconfiguration of the image of Ram, which has been turned into a divisive figure (Banerjee, 2003: 173). This

divisiveness has been employed strategically in Indian politics, with politics of polarisation finding a space of legitimisation as the BJP took power in 2014. The use of Ram in BJP's political iconography is not a new phenomenon; the then BJP president Lal Krishna Advani on his Ram Rath Yatra during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, used the massive wave of communal polarisation to his advantage which led to Ram being infused within the space of Hindutva politics on the national stage (Lal, 2015: 1). Advani's autobiography attests to this recurrent theme which was used during his speech wherein he states, "Ram bhakti se lok shakti jagrut ho sakti hai (The power of devotion for Ram can unleash people's power)" (as quoted in Lal, 2015: 1). The movement led by Advani would reinvent Ram as a militant god casting Ram as a battle-ready masculine hero, allowing the BJP to further its political agenda. Badri Narayan's words in his work Fascinating Hindutva enunciates the reason behind reconfiguring the image of Ram by the BJP, "The BJP was in quest of an aggressive image of Lord Ram as its symbol, which could be used to mobilise all the Hindu castes to fight against their common enemy, the Muslims… Amongst the multiple meanings of the symbol of Ram, a single aggressive imagery of Ram was picked out, and the various cultural connotations were transformed into a political one" (as quoted in Lal, 2015: 4). With Ram being crucial to the cultural project of Hindutva politics, it becomes a central signifier of the harrowing politics of polarisation which has come to define the political space. Ram finds its presence in the Indian epic of Ramayana, which, in the words of Pollock, supplies "a repertory of imaginative instruments for articulating a range of political discourses…Ramayana enabled a political imagination that allowed the creation of a historically grounded, narrated, divine political order" (as quoted in Ajsal, 2020: 2). This is often seen in conjunction with the violent invocation of using Nuclear tests showcasing the reimagining of a new India (Subramaniam, 2019: 58). Swapan Dasgupta in the India Today magazine while writing about the Nuclear tests went on to state, "Vajpayee has released a flood of pent-up energy, generated a mood of heady triumphalism. He has kick-started the revival of India's faith in itself. To the west, these explosions are evidence of Hindu Nationalism on a viagra high" (as quoted in Subramaniam, 2019: 59). Narendra Modi has transformed Vajpayee's vision into casting India as a country which is steadily turning away from its secularist credentials to becoming a state wherein existing sectarian cleavages are further polarised to create a state of instability projecting Modi as the 'messiah' of its people.

5.3 Reconfiguration of Mythological figures and recasting of Narendra Modi in the changing Masculinist landscape

Icons like Ram, Ganapati, and Hanuman have transformed over the last few decades. This was visible during the elections of 2014, as a hyper-masculine image of Modi coupled with promises of development and anti-corruption would catapult the BJP into power (Ajsal, 2020: 3). The rise of the BJP has brought back the concept of 'one nation, one people, one culture', making being a Hindu a common denominator of India's national identity, with Lord Ram being used as an ideological mascot (Das, 2008: 213). Once at the fringes, this cultural tone has defined the nationalist discourse rooted in a particular interpretation of Hindu manliness, as discussed above, drawing on India's nationalist imagings and cartographic anxieties (Das, 2008: 217). Few leaders have taken the world by storm like Modi, as he brings in a new kind of masculinity which can be placed at the intersection of consumerist aspirations, traditional masculinity, and lower-class sensibilities (Tripathy, 2023: 75). Modi has assiduously sought to cultivate his image amongst the Indian population by projecting himself as an 'Aam Aadmi' (Common Man) saying that the acronym CM stood for Common Man, rather than a Chief Minister (Vittorini, 2022: 280). Since becoming Prime Minister in 2014, Modi has skillfully tried to position himself away from his predecessors by breaking away from the established way of politics. In the words of Vittorini, "In burnishing his anti-establishment credentials, he has openly flaunted his Hindu identity, thus breaking the norm of Nehruvian secularism, that public displays of religious belonging and beliefs should be done with care" (as quoted in Vittorini, 2022: 281). Modi has exhibited a calculated, manly leadership style by articulating powerful rhetoric and regular references to having a 56-inch chest. In the words of Srivastava, the myth of boating a 56-inch chest refers to how he is "able and willing to bear the harshest burdens in the service of Mother India" (as quoted in Vittorini, 2022: 288). The metonymic rise of Modi's masculinity has continued spreading across social media, with face sketches that show half Modi and half lion becoming popular, portraying the messianic impact of Modi in the existing political space (Sen, 2020: 1). This image gets constructed as anthesis to other opposition leaders, the most prominent being that of Rahul Gandhi the leader of the INC, who gets projected as a perennial baby who refuses to grow up (Sen, 2020: 2). Furthermore, Modi's manly leadership style was situated as counterpoised to former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh,

who was portrayed as the 'effeminate' Indian male who has been unable to strike hard at both internal and external threats (Srivastava, 2015: 334). Gopinath recognises the significant role of masculinity in creating the image of Modi in the media, "Modi's Empire Line is most flattering to himself- of opulent turbans adorned with pearls and feathers, rath chariots of gold and chrome, a machismo swagger with his self-proclaimed 'chappan chatti' (56-inch chest), giant cut-outs in every street, to 3D virtual images that walks, talks and eats; mammoth road shows of pomp and pageantry; flashy showmanship and stagecraft at public meetings; it's an intoxicating cocktail of hyper-masculinity, virility, and potency. Good grief, Narendra Modi does sound like a Mughal emperor in Modern India" (as quoted in Srivastava, 2015: 334).

Such contrasting imageries have allowed the BJP to project Modi as a leader endowed with divine powers seeking to save Mother India from evils. He has constantly attempted to project an image of being an ascetic since his re-election in 2019. But, it was the COVID-19 pandemic that provided the Indian Prime Minister with an opportunity to show his saintly look to the population and the world (Vittorini, 2022: 289). In the words of Chakraborty, "Appropriating the religious imagery of the rishi raj- the holy man who is also king - Modi appeared in public since the first lockdown in March 2020 with a flowing beard and shoulder-length white hair: a self-less Hindu guru devoted to the service of the nation" (as quoted in Vittorini, 2022: 289). Thus, a hegemonic form of Hindu Masculinity was achieved through the celibate body of Narendra Modi. Hailed as the Vikas Purush (The development man), Sushma Swaraj, the former Minister of External Affairs, while addressing an election rally in the town of Satna, in Madhya Pradesh, stated, "He (Modi) is the Vikas Purush and the Indian woman is a spark, not a flower" (as quoted in Pande, 2022: 415). The masculinity of Modi goes beyond the possibilities of worldliness but also comes with the promise that men can continue to maintain their hold both in the public and private space. Even though men and women might be offered equal opportunities in a post-colonial India, the women, as the sacrificing figures who facilitated the masculine outlook of males, are given an uneasy sense of legitimacy through the hyper-masculine leadership style Narendra Modi espouses. Nationalist politics in an Indian context is populated with a diverse field of gendered power relationships, which has sought to inscribe its boundaries, anxieties, and a growing sense of insecurity (Pande, 2022: 410). Masculinities have been evoked and valorised in the most

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unexpected of spaces, going beyond the mainstream political areas wherein chauvinistic ideologies and power structures continue to be articulated in hegemonic terms. The constant valorisation of Hindu masculine traits has led to the formation of an anti-feminist right-wing polemic which has continued to functionby endlessly reproducing gendered dynamics of dominance and subordination, stemming from archaic times, being served to meet the contemporary political needs of those in power. Nation and community, even when it comes to looking at Hindu Nationalism, can be condensed in the forms of looking at the sexual honour associated with the figure of the mother, with discourses surrounding Hindu Nationalism frequently constructing men and women on gendered lines inhabiting different domains of agential capacities with explicit associations with certain archetypes that have come to define masculinity and femininity (Sethi, 2002: 1545). In the words of Sethi, "The modern state that remains imbued with familial ideology has also served to harden this boundary between public and private. It assumes a masculinist subject and takes the mantle of a patriarch" (as quoted in Sethi, 2002: 1546).

6.0 Symbolisation of the Hindu female and their Political Participation

Nationalism is gendered in a way that it draws upon socially constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity, which shape the embodiment of a nation functioning on the imaginings of self-professed nationalists (Banerjee, 2003: 167). The above idea holds even while looking at the narrative of Hindu Nationalism through a gendered lens, shaping contemporary India's politics. We looked at the concept of the Hindu warrior in the previous chapter, which is rooted in hyper-masculinity. Attached to this hyper-masculine imaginaries is the role of women in the project of Hindu Nationalism, who are tasked with delicately negotiating their way through the culturally dominant idea of masculinity. In the words of Banerjee, "Women become warriors to defend the nation in two ways. One, by protecting national possessions (goods and land) and two, by fending off attacks on their bodies" (as quoted in Banerjee, 2003: 169). The latter act becomes critical to national honour through playing the culturally endorsed roles of 'wife' and 'mother' (Banerjee, 2003: 169). Women in the Hindu Nationalist project are aware of the masculinist fears and use various strategic invocations which stretch beyond masculinity's codified nature. The words of Peterson

brings us to look at the role of masculinisation and the role of women in the Hindu nation, "...Motherland is a woman's body and as such is ever in danger of violation - by 'foreign' males. To defend her frontiers and her honour requires relentless vigilance and the sacrifice of countless citizen warriors…" (as quoted in Banerjee, 2003: 174). It is common to see India depicted as Bharatmata, painted in the form of a beautiful woman in the RSS, and BJP offices pushing forward the notion of 'Nation as Woman' (Banerjee, 2003: 174). The relationship of women to the Hindu Nationalist project has changed with the idea that the endangered Hindu women have become an extraordinarily potent weapon which has legitimised the need for violent mobilisation against Muslims (Soherwordi, 2013: 40). The theme of Hindu impotence was now not being employed as a defeatist relegation, but it became a clarion call for bringing Hindus together for a war of apocalyptic proportions with the virility of the Hindu male being recuperated for the present by conjoining textual Brahmanism with 'true kshatriyahood' (Sethi, 2002: 1545). With men taking the role of warriors, women were thus seen as 'breeders', and their bodies became a site of holding future reservoirs of Hindu warriors (Sethi, 2002: 1547).

6.1 Hindu male warrior and the Hindutva agenda

With the Hindus being extolled into a warrior tradition, the Hindu male was now being presented as sexually desirable not only for the Hindu women but the one being lusted over by the Muslim women (Sethi, 2002: 1547). However, to look at women in the Hindu Nationalist project as just breeders would be a narrow conception, as women would take up active roles in furthering the agenda of Hindutva. They were to be empowered for self-defence (Atma Raksha) to protect them from the lustful Muslim men. A book from the RSS titled 'Sangathan ka Bigu' stated to the Hindu women urging, "Every sister who joins the army of this revolution called the Sangathan, should have a sharp knife with her which she can use whenever she needs… It is a prime religious duty of all the women who enter the army of Sangathan to be able to defend their chastity and honour" (as quoted in Sethi, 2002: 1547). This was far removed from the pre-dominant notion of seeing Hindu women as soft and delicate, who were confined to private spaces, as an increased emphasis came to be placed on strong female bodies who could play a crucial role in furthering the cause of

creating the Hindu Nation. The conventional roles of Hindu women were not cast away; instead, it foregrounded the role of a valiant warrior and a solidarity network which supported the sister-in-arms (Sethi, 2002: 1548). Words of Savitri Devi, a key figure in the early stages of the Hindu Nationalist movement, outlines the duties of Hindu women, "We would first of all like… the Hindu women to 'feel' personally insulted whenever they come to know of any such action (reference here being made of course to the Muslim tyranny); that is an insult, not merely to such and such family or person but to the Hindus as whole. They should feel ashamed and indignant; they should promote to action their husbands, brothers, and sons" (as quoted in Sethi, 2002: 1548).

However, this role of activism was to be contained within a mode that does not subvert the existing leitmotif of a traditional Hindu family structure. Consequently, the major caveat with 'woman' as a category in Hindutva politics is the deliberate silence on the structural violence of a woman's life within patriarchy, and the systematic silence has continued even now when it comes to domestic violence, rape, incest, and unwanted pregnancies (Banerjee, 2005: 113). As per Banerjee, the representations of women in Hindutva draw on a common theme of female virtue and chastity, informed by terms of hegemonic masculinity (Banerjee, 2005: 15). Thus, women's voices and models of femininity were not absent from its dominant interpretation of Nationalism, with Masculine Hinduism attracting female advocates while stimulating the creation of corresponding female images within the Hindu Nationalist context: the nation as a woman (Mother India), heroic mother, pure wife, and masculinised, celibate woman-warrior (Banerjee, 2005: 73).

6.2 Participation of females in the Hindu Nationalist agenda

When it comes to female political participation, women in Hindutva reveal two key issues, as per Banerjee, "one, women's alliance with hatred and violence, and two, female support for ideological movements that can be construed as anti-feminist" (as quoted in Banerjee, 2005: 111). This comes within Hindutva, which is a deeply patriarchal ideology seeking to draw women out of their homes in limited ways which would serve the needs of the masculine Hindutva force and push them back into designated spaces and roles once

those political episodes are over (Banerjee, 2005: 113). However, they are not pushed to the margins completely as they remain active in disseminating the ideas of the Hindu Nation that range on a broad far-right political spectrum. Leaders like Uma Bharati and Vijayraje Scindia validate the interpretation when it comes to the intersection of masculine Hinduism and asexual female identity, with both of them being celibate (Banerjee, 2005: 114). None of the Hindutva women have been involved in armed combat, but one can see it as the women being part of a metaphorical battle when it comes to establishing the Hindu nation (Banerjee, 2005: 114). A prominent female proponent associated with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Sadhvi Rithambhara provides a different model of female participation, moving beyond being just a foot soldier but being an eloquent speaker who has been tasked with propagating the idea of Masculine Hinduism (Banerjee, 2005: 128).

Rithambhara, while arguing that the time has now come for Hindu warriors to demand their rights for their nation, "I mean to say that the long-suffering Hindu is being called a religious zealot today… The Muslims got their Pakistan. Even in a mutilated India, they have special rights… What do we have? An India, its arms cut off. An India where restrictions are placed on our festivals, where our processions are always in danger of attack" (as quoted in Banerjee, 2005: 128). Thus, as celibate, masculinised warriors, women protect their bodies from being violated by the 'other' and exemplify the public shaming of the 'other'. The juxtaposition of India imagined as a warrior goddess and young Indian women performing martial moves eloquently illustrates the female representation of the citizen warrior (Banerjee, 2003: 175).

It was just recently when a BJP MP from the Central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, Pragya Singh Thakur, who is also a prime accused in the 2008 Malegaon Blast case, stoked controversy while addressing a convention wherein she stated, "Hindus have the right to respond to those who attack them and their dignity" (as quoted in Express News Service, 2022: 1). Further, in a stark reference to the Muslims, she went on to state, "They have a tradition of jihad and if nothing else, they do love jihad. Even if they love, they do jihad in that. We (Hindus), too love, love the god… a sanyasi loves his god" (as quoted in Express News Service, 2022: 1). Post, which the police would immediately register a case against Thakur, who had become the first person to be fielded by a major political party in the

national elections despite the accusations in place. Over the last few years, Thakur has gone from being a pariah in Indian politics over her alleged involvement in the 2008 case to winning a national election for BJP (Dhingra, 2023: 1). Sporting a pixie-cut hairstyle coupled with her occasional appearances in the Indian Parliament on a wheelchair, which reminds her Hindutva supporters about the alleged torture that was inflicted on her during her time in prison, and an added penchant for playing Basketball and Cricket, despite her health issues embodying a kind of masculinity which is seldom associated with women in Hindutva politics (Dhingra, 2023: 2).

Thakur's role in furthering the Hindutva agenda that the ruling party espouses, has found support amongst other women who espouse the vision of creating a Hindu nation. Hindu nationalists have consistently sought to benefit from the rise of strident women leaders, allowing the organisations to attract more women towards the cause. This approach seems to be working quite well through leaders like Thakur, who are seen as a symbol of divinity and female power, being placed in stark contrast when it comes to an atavistic representation of Muslim women as she continues to garner support from those at the grassroots. One such supporter is Chaitra Kundapura, who is a young Hindutva activist from the coastal town of Kundapur in the Southern Indian state of Karnataka; while talking about Thakur, she points out, "She calls a spade a spade. She is fearless even though she has to suffer for her honesty… As a woman who stands for Hindutva, it is imperative to be fearless… The future of Hindutva depends on women" (as quoted in Dhingra, 2023: 2). The belief of Kundapura is in line with the idea that it is the divine duty of Hindu women to be a part of the cause, serving the Hindu Rashtra while playing a critical role in the process of nation-building (Dhingra, 2023: 2). Women like Thakur and Kundapura are fast emerging as the norm in the Hindutva dynmaics rather as an exception. Thus, the conservative worldview that Hindutva organisations espouse, coupled with the burgeoning ambitions of the women themselves, has created a somewhat strange and contradictory form of women's politics in contemporary India (Dhingra, 2023: 3).

6.3 Use of rhetoric and navigating an inherently masculinist landscape

Politicians have used political and ideological rhetoric to suit their needs when it comes to holding onto power, with men being able to enter the political space with a sense of unabashed ambitions. However, when it comes to women like Thakur and Kundapura, they have to rally around the notion of threats posed to their honour, the future generations they are supposed to bear, to justify their presence in the male dominated space. In the words of Singh, "Women joining local organisations are typically more militant because you need a degree of street power to fight local patriarchy. They tend to struggle more and have to keep justifying their place, ambition and even moral purity to everyone" (as quoted in Dhingra, 2023: 4). With women joining the movement in even greater numbers than before, there are other members from Hindu Nationalist organisations who are coming to the fore, one of them is Sadhvi Prachi, who has emerged to be a polarising figure in Hindutva politics. At an event in the National capital of Delhi, she stated, "If there is one child, where all will you send him? To protect the border… or make him a scientist, or he will take care of business… So, we need four children. One can go to protect the borders; one can serve the society, give one to the saints and one to VHP to serve the nation and protect the culture. This is very important" (as quoted in Dadoo, 2015: 1). Prachi is known for courting controversies and has toed the lines of male leaders of the VHP with calls to make India "Muslim free'. These statement were made by Prachi in the city of Roorkee in Uttarakhand, which had seen a riot break out just a week before, leading to 32 people sustaining injuries in the clashes (PTI, 2016: 1).

The comments made by Prachi in the national capital of New Delhi, and seeing the same in conjunction with the comments she made in Roorkee, draw on associating women's reproductive capacities and national security concerns, echoing the themes of service and pious disposition towards the Hindu Nationalist movement (Dadoo, 2015: 2). Women are central to the comment made by leaders like Prachi, which also alludes to the perceived demographic threats posed by Muslims. Menon's work titled 'Everyday Nationalism: Women of the Hindu Right in India' argues how "women activists at the grassroots level engineer eclectic constructions of religion, national security, history and social responsibility to make Hindu Nationalism appealing to diverse communities" (as quoted in Sen, 2020: 2).

With women occupying a rather sustained space in the Hindutva landscape, it has allowed them to launch a sustained campaign of hate politics, following the footsteps of their respective male counterparts. The ruling party found itself in the midst of a diplomatic storm after the party's national spokeswoman, Nupur Sharma, made disparaging remarks about Prophet Muhammad (Apoorvanand, 2022: 1). With the storm that followed, it forced the BJP to release a generic statement stating, "The party strongly denounces insults of any religious personalities of any religion" (as quoted in Apoorvanand, 2022: 2). However, and perhaps most importantly it would be difficult to argue that the comments made by Sharma are a statement made from the fringes, citing the slew of Islamophobic policies, and statements that the BJP has been associated with since it has come into power. One of the critical issues of contention that has emerged is the passing of the controversial CAA, which was met with criticism and saw protests erupting across the country. However, it also demonstrated how the BJP leaders would openly encourage militancy, calling their supporters to shoot those who were in disagreement with the decisions made by the ruling party. Situating the rise of Narendra Modi and the BJP in the Indian context can be seen as a part of a populist wave that has seen a surge in recent times with the COVID-19 pandemic highlighting the aggressive masculine traits of leaders like Vladimir Putin, Boris Johnson, Jair Bolsonaro, and Donald Trump (Basu, 2021: 1). In contrast, Modi has subverted some of the existing masculine traits as he reveres the notion of femininity and the role of women, drawing from the interpretation of Hindu values. Modi has sought to achieve a sense of intimacy with the masses, going beyond a monolithic understanding of machismo in populist politics. This seems to be working, with millions of women rallying behind Modi being a critical factor in BJP sweeping state elections (Pande, 2022: 1).

This changing tide was evident with the Assam state elections in 2016, as the BJP-led coalition took charge with a majority, ending dominance by the INC in the region (Purkayastha, 2016: 1). With a sheer authority in number at the centre, and now at the state level has allowed the BJP to unleash its Hindutva agenda which is evidenced through its policies, decisions, and the rhetoric it has employed as it toes the political dilemma in the Northeast of India that is centred around fragile sectarian faultlines.

7.0 Rise of Hindutva politics in the Northeast, Gender bias in NRC and the CAA protests

BJP, despite taking power across states in mainland India, for a long time, the Northeast of India had remained its Achilles heel (Longkumer, 2019: 282). However, as the party took power at the centre in 2014, the messaging of Hindutva has instead been overtly spread in the region, which became evident through the appointment of Padmanabha Balakrishna Acharya as the governor of the state of Nagalong, signalling a symbolic shift (Longkumer, 2019: 281). In just over three years, and to the surprise of many, the BJP has grown from a negligible presence to gaining power and developing strong alliances with parties at the local level. The activity of the BJP/RSS in the region is centred around the ideological vision of Akhand Bharat (Greater India, or an Undivided India). A political advisor to the BJP Chief Minister in Manipur would put impetus on this vision, "For the nation to be culturally and nationally integrated in spirit and not just geography, the Northeast is important. For the BJP, the Northeast is not a peripheral state but the heart of India" (as quoted in Longkumer, 2019: 284). The imagination of the BJP in this context, for a long time, has been on the peripheries, as the ideological notion of 'Akhand Bharat' has been primarily linked to an ancient Sanskritic culture. Sheldon Pollock, an Indologist, describes this as 'Sanskrit Cosmopolis' (Longkumer, 2019: 284).

A key entry point which showed that the BJP was to stay in power emerged with the party sweeping the state elections in 2016; it was a focus on reviving an Assamese identity and creating fear when it comes to illegal immigration from Bangladesh catapulted the party to gaining immense popularity amongst the masses. In this case, 'the foreigner' was the face of the Muslim, which became the critical anchor in juxtaposition to the citizenship debate. The citizenship debate would reach a crescendo and be a reason for joy for the Assamese nationalists who were instrumental in voting the BJP into power. Three years after being elected, the NRC list was published on the 31st of August 2019 (Saha, 2021: 41). The list would leave nearly two million people, stoking fear of a 'statelessness' crisis and bringing in outrage within the country and from international actors (Al Jazeera, 2019: 1). Seen in conjunction with the NRC, has been the controversial passing of the CAA which came into effect from the 10th of January, 2020 attempting to redefine Indian citizenship (Ranjan & Mittal, 2023: 463). In the words of Subramaniam, "The CAA passed by the Indian parliament

provides a fast track to citizenship for refugees fleeing into India from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Refugees of every South Asian faith are eligible - every faith, that is, except for Islam" (as quoted in Subramaniam, 2020: 2). This shows a rather dangerous shift which fits neatly within the RSS and BJP playbook of demonising the Muslims, serving the agenda of Hindutva activists who have constantly sought to expunge Islam from their vision of a 'Hindu Rashtra' (Hindu Nation). The Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, echoed the aim behind implementing the CAA wherein he stated, "It is India's responsibility to give refuge to those people who have been oppressed due to their faith. These people have faced historical injustice… and to stop this and fulfil our old promise, we have brought the CAA" (as quoted in PTI, 2020: 1). Furthermore, in a sort of rebuttal to the protests launched by opposition and downplaying the concerns expressed by them, Modi goes on to state, "Our government brought in CAA to give citizenship to such people, but some political parties compete to do vote bank politics. For whose interest are they working? Why can't they see the atrocities faced by the minorities in Pakistan?" (as quoted in PTI, 2020: 2). As an independent country, India is now faced with a severe crisis, with most of its independent institutions being forced to toe the line of the ruling party or face its wrath. The Hindutva agenda gripping the Indian consciousness and its institutions is alarming, coupled with the viciousness of politics centred on religious lines, poisoning the existing political discourse to suit its agenda (Subramaniam, 2020: 3).

7.1 Fuelling the insider vs. outsider debate

The exclusionist national agenda has found legitimacy amongst some of the population, with the ruling party spreading unsubstantiated claims such as, "Hindus are under threat from the growing Muslim population". The BJP has continued to make every possible effort to redefine the notion of being a citizen, which would fit its Hindutva agenda, as ir seeks to use the NRC as a potent mechanism for driving out infiltrators from the land of Assam, which is supposed to be for the Assamese first, who are placed as the legitimate sons of the land in relation to the Muslim inhabitants, who have been placed in the category of infiltrators. As discussed above, NRC was one of the tools employed to exclude the 'other even further wherein one had to produce official documents proving their Indian roots

before the decided cut-off date of the 24th of March 1971 (Saha, 2021: 15). This becomes quite challenging as in a densely populated country like India lack of proper documentation has remained a perennial issue, coupled with the shortage of resources. Thus, an exercise like NRC has led to the further marginalisation of already marginalised groups; most notably, it has been visible among Muslim women in the state of Assam (Saha, 2021: 17). With the process being heavily weighed against women, the authorities have treated the documents being presented by them with a sense of deep cynicism in the face of criticism which has been levelled against the implementation of NRC, characterised by a series of arbitrary arrests and suicides in the detention centres (The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). One of the detainees in the camps, who identified herself as Momiran Nessa, while talking about the conditions in the camp, states, "It is tough to live there; there is hardly a foot space for one person, and only twice a day are we given some rice to eat" (as quoted in Agarwal, 2020: 2).

When seen in combination, the NRC and CAA have the power to render minorities and vulnerable groups stateless if they are unable to drum up adequate documentation which would prove their citizenship (Desai, 2019: 1). Looking at the list of documents which is required including voter identity cards to driving license, it is highly dependent on ensuring that there is at least some form of agency in relation to an individual which is a privilege for many of these marginalised women whose freedom continues to be negated both in the public and private spaces (Desai, 2019: 1). A report released by an advocacy group, Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression (WSS) which had embarked on a fact-finding mission for looking at how the implementation of NRC has impacted women in the state. One of the crucial findings stated, "Proving citizenship under the NRC relies mainly on land, lineage, education and the availability of documents… In a patriarchal society, women in general and women from marginal and oppressed communities, in particular, have historically and traditionally been excluded from entitlements to land and access to education and have almost no documentation to prove their existence as citizens" (as quoted in Desai, 2019: 2). In the case of NRC, even if due to the lack of documentation someone has been rendered 'stateless', but when now it is put in conjunction with the passing of the CAA, and if one is a Muslim it effectively renders one as an illegal immigrant, which perfectly fits the election promises of the BJP. The fear has led to widespread protests

and demonstrations, which have erupted across cities in the country (Bhowmick, 2020: 1). This fear is not without basis for the women who are leading the protests, as the implementation of NRC saw 1.9 million people being left out, and 69 per cent of them were women (Bhowmick, 2020: 1).

7.2 Gendered impacts of the NRC exercise and CAA

Two interrelated reasons explain the disproportional impact women have to deal with in this process. Firstly, the evidentiary rule to prove citizenship, as discussed above, is highly dependent on documents which come from a patrilineal lineage, leaving single mothers, widows, and those who trace their familial lines matrilineally at a disadvantage (Raj, 2020: 1). Vasudha Chhotray and Fiona McConnel, while talking about the burden of proof for proving citizenship, describes the documents as "... a particular mode of writing the history of the state and its technologies of rule, which is indicative of the fact that the right to documentation can only be accessed upon the fulfilment of criteria that the state explicitly sets out" (as quoted in Sabhapandit & Baruah, 2021: 243). Adding to it, looking at the state of Assam, wherein underage marriage and polygamy have been a common occurrence, most of the documents often carry the names of the patriarch on them (Raj, 2020: 1). With the identity of women when it comes to the NRC being inextricably linked to that of their husbands, most of these women end up as mere appendages, occupying a subservient position to the male rather than being seen as citizens themselves. The legal status of women and their statehood comes under broader attention in the CEDAW, to which India is a signatory. Article 9 of the Convention goes on to state, "State Parties shall grant women equal rights with men to acquire, change or retain their nationality. They shall ensure, in particular, that neither marriage to an alien nor change of nationality by the husband during marriage shall automatically change the nationality of the wife, render her stateless or force upon her the nationality of the husband" (as quoted in Raj, 2020: 3). There has been an utter disregard by the Indian government when it comes to respecting CEDAW, as its policies of NRC and CAA places women at the lines of exclusion. However, this also brings us to confront that citizenship, in theory and practice, has continued to evolve in a way that has systematically excluded women (Sabhapandit & Baruah, 2021: 239).

It is no different when it comes to the NRC exercise in Assam, which leads us to confront some severe issues of gender discrimination, migration, and a crisis of identity, which has become an increasingly polarised space with the rise of the BJP. One of the women left out of the NRC, Manikjan Nessa, a 43-year-old woman from the Baksa district in Central Assam, expressed her anguish over the process, "I have all documents, birth certificates, land records and legacy papers, and all my sisters and brothers are in, but I am out, and this has affected my children as well" (as quoted in The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Nessa's story is one of many and is representative of the rampant gender bias and religious prejudice that has plagued the NRC process right from the start. Additionally, severe discriminatory allegations have been levelled against officials at the Foreigners Tribunals (FTs), the only place for recourse and appeal left to contest their citizenship status.

A report by Amnesty International points out a disturbing fact, "The Tribunal member openly declared that regardless of the number of documents that Muslims bring, even if it is land deeds, I will send them directly to Bangladesh" (as quoted in The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). The testimonies by women when it comes to the hearing process at the FTs reveal the gross insensitivity of the members on the ground who are instrumental to the process. This creates a sense of further anxiety about the respective future of those whose names have been left out of the NRC; the concern was echoed through the words of Pisharoty, author of Assam: The Accord, The Discord, wherein she stated, "People whose names are not on the final list are really anxious about what lies ahead, One of the reasons is that the Foreigners Tribunal does not have a good reputation, and many people are worried that they will have to go through this process" (as quoted in Vaidyanathan, 2019: 2). The potential long and existing process of appeal for scores of people have led to many already being placed in detention centres, which the current government calls 'transit camps'. Thrust into a predicament of statelessness and forced to inhabit detention centres, which have been primarily placed away from the scrutiny of the media or other independent actors (Mander, 2018: 2). Multiple reports have pointed out how the living conditions in these centres are close to hell, with lack of procedures in place when it comes to dealing with detainees, with little progress being made on those lines (Laskar, 2019: 1)

7.3 Politics on sectarian lines in the fragile Northeast

The case of Assam needs to be seen as a cautionary tale when it comes to looking at the negative repercussions and possible pitfalls involved when it comes to implementing NRC on a nationwide level (Hari & Nagpal, 2022: 199). It showed how already marginalised women are facing the brunt of the exercise and being Muslim (Hari & Nagpal, 2022: 199). A shift in the Indian context when it comes to being a citizen towards the notion of jus sanguinis (citizenship by descent) from the stringent jus soli (citizenship by birth) requirements can leave a large part of the population excluded, condemning them to a politico-legal dilemma (Hari & Nagpal, 2022: 199). However, this would prove to be a little deterrent when it comes to the BJP, as it gives an impetus to their routine campaigning of prejudicial citizenship for decades in the region (Chatterjee et al., 2021: 1). The portrayal of Muslims as illegal immigrats has continued to be politicised under the BJP, creating an increasingly polarised political state in a region which has continued to witness long-drawn conflicts.

The protests that erupted in its wake have been massive, as discontent rises with different sections trying to resist the reconfiguration of the Indian state on Hindu lines, moving away from its secular beginnings despite the massive repressive mechanisms being on full display. Moving away from the state of Assam, the growing polarisation centred on identities and ethnicities plunged the state of Manipur into violence (Baker, 2023: 1). Many have dubbed it as a state of civil war, as the state tethers onto violence with the majority Meitei tribe who are mostly Hindus and minority Kukis engaged in a battle over land and influence (Baker, 2023: 1). Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shockingly remained silent and has not made any public comments on the same as the violence continues to rage like wildfire. The BJP sits at the helm when it comes to Manipur, with the government led by Chief Minister N. Biren Singh, who happens to be a Meitei himself, as his government had placed the blame squarely on the Kuki insurgent groups for inciting violence in the region. A sheer silence on the mayhem shows how Hindutva in the Northeast of India, once just an ideology on the fringes, has come to influence policies, decisions, and regional power dynamics.

8.0 Conclusion

Nationalism has been primarily constructed through a masculinist lens, and often, the very constructs of gender and nation have been left out of the political discourse. The thesis attempted to delve into the complexities of Nationalism while bringing in a gendered perspective delving along the lines of religion. Here, the focus was explicitly on looking at the rise of Hindu Nationalism, which has emerged as a schizophrenic form of Nationalism in the Indian context, showcasing a changing tide in the political space. There has been a reimagining of masculinities under the BJP government, which secured a victory in 2014 and would further consolidate its power when the 2019 elections came. Its leader at the helm of affairs, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been hailed as a 'strongman' in Indian politics, which draws inspiration from Atal Behari Vajpayee, who led an unstable coalition government at the centre during the 1990s. It was during this period that Hindu nationalist sentiment would reach a tipping point with the Ram Janambhoomi movement in Ayodhya, which saw the refashioning of the mythological figure of Ram, allowing the BJP and its allies to further its agenda of Hindutva. This functioned on casting the Hindus as superior, the true sons of the land who came from an Aryan lineage, while casting those from other religions as the 'other' which would go on to shape the 'insider' vs 'outsider' debate, that has been weaponised by the BJP to serve it's needs time and again.

The project of Hindu Nationalism saw its revival with Narendra Modi, gaining power who is seen as a 'messiah' and has been given a deific reception by his allies. It was the year 2020, which saw the country being battered by the COVID-19 pandemic, but it also showed the Prime Minister of the Indian state laying the foundations of the Ram Temple at Ayodhya, effectively demonstrating the direction in which the country was heading. Heralded by the head of state, the Indian state has sought to create a landscape which harks back to a Pre-Islamic golden past and reimposes the narrative of casting Muslims as the 'invaders' who were defiling the Indian state, which is often eulogised in Hindu Nationalist lingua franca as 'Bharat Mata'. This conception brings the notion of honour and chastity as key sites for Hindu women who are supposed to navigate an increasingly hyper-masculinist space designed by the men who still hold on to power across the public and private divide. As we looked at in the thesis, there has been a changing conception of the role of Hindu women

and how they are not merely passive actors when it comes to the Hindu Nationalist project and are supposed to play an active role within the boundaries defined by the patriarch.

Leaders like Sadhvi Prachi and Pragya Thakur have played an active role in furthering the Hindutva agenda. They have constantly sought to remind the Hindu population of their superiority in the face of the Muslim' other', with calls for open violence showcasing how they are not taking a step back compared to their male counterparts. Their rhetoric echoes the aims that majoritarian Nationalism espouses, which imagines a hyper-masculine society that is reproductively fertile to out-populate the growing Muslim threat and organise a society that functions on a hierarchical level. Combined with the motif of the divine feminine power associated with the figure of 'Bharat Mata', it becomes the reason for the awakening of the Hindu males in stark contrast to the emasculated secularists who threaten the Hindu nationalistic ideals. The invocations of the past, a changing dimension of masculinities, and the populist ideas of the BJP government in power have brought a new age in Indian politics, bringing xenophobic sentiments to the core of its decision-making process. There has been a constant dehumanisation of the 'other', and a sense of antagonism has seeped into the sectarian faultlines that have shaped the complicated sphere of Indian politics.

The BJP has been toeing these fragile lines and testing them to its limits, as seen in the case of Northeast India, which is a region tucked away from the Indian mainland wherein instability on ethnic lines has been a raging issue. With the entry of the BJP into the region, there has been an impetus to push the envelope of the agenda of Hindutva through decisions like the NRC and the CAA, which has stirred widespread protests, leaving a large section of the population quite vulnerable. The construction of the 'insider' vs. 'outsider' debate has been crucial to the success of the BJP in the state of Assam, with the NRC being one of its primary election promises. This exercise has been a mess, to say the least, with widespread reports of prejudice and leaving millions of people in a state of vacuum regarding their citizenship, pushing them to occupy a space of statelessness in a country they have called home for decades. The passing of the CAA was the last straw that the country needed to see as protests would soon erupt across the country, calling out the xenophobic intentions of the government and how it is an inherently discriminatory

legislation. Leaders from the BJP have consistently echoed calls for a nationwide NRC, which is supposed to stem illegal immigrants, with many fearing this might be a tool to marginalise the Muslim population further, which will serve the Hindutva agenda of the BJP. There has been a steady erosion of the independent institutions in the country, which has been flagged as a concerning development that has been emerging out of the world's largest democracy as its secular fabric continues to remain under threat. There is an urgent need to shift our focus to India, where a form of Nationalism centred on religious lines led by a majority government in power is taking shape, which is firmly rooted in the multi-faceted complexities of the Indian past that might have larger implications for the region and the world in the times to come.

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10.0 Ethics form

University of BRISTOL

13/03/2023

Dear Mr Angkuran Dey

Ref: 14380

Title: Dey, A - PG dissertation

Thank you for submitting your ethics application for the above-named study. The School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your ethics application and we can confirm that your ethics application has received a favourable ethical opinion.

Please note that the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies Research Ethics Committee expects to be notified of any changes or deviations in the study.

If you have any queries regarding your research ethics review please contact spais-ethics@bristol.ac.uk

Yours sincerely

School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies Research Ethics Committee