Gendered Mobilisations in the (Re)Making of Nationalisms

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BOOK REVIEWS

Women, Gender and Religious Nationalism
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Hindu nationalist women's organisations have long mobilised women and girls across age groups into everyday activism, political involvement, and service of the Brahminical Hindu nation. This mobilisation has gained greater visibility since the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) rise to national power in 2014. Women have played an active role in advancing campaigns such as "love jihad," participating in demolitions of Muslim homes, mosques, and madrasas, and delivering hate speech alongside other virulent expressions of Hindutva violence. These organisations form elaborate networks of mostly dominant-caste women and girls who not only perpetuate physical violence but also run programmes, camps, and campaigns focused on education, social welfare, and the protection of Brahminical values—all while perpetuating caste and anti-Muslim violence.

The involvement of women in global right-wing movements and Hindu nationalism has prompted sustained feminist inquiry. Amrita Basu and Tanika Sarkar, who have researched and written extensively on Hindutva women, are the editors of this collaborative volume entitled *Women, Gender and Religious Nationalism*. They bring together 12 authors across 10 chapters (following a succinct introduction) to interrogate both Hindutva's gender ideologies and the role of women in its violent political project. I outline the book's key themes and arguments, while also pointing out its limitations and the questions the authors and editors must engage with more critically.

In the introduction entitled *Women of Hindu Rashtra*, Sarkar traces "the tradition of Hindu majoritarianism" (p 2) to the late 19th century, outlining its anti-Muslim foundational myths and ideologies and connecting them to the political present. She situates the emergence of Hindutva women's organisations within the broader Sangh Parivar, arguing that their inclusion was never about emancipation or a fundamental shift in Hindutva's patriarchal gender ideologies. Rather, it reconfigured the "domestic" sphere, giving Hindu wives and mothers "a political purpose and identity" (p 8) through their participation.

This reconfiguring, she argues, enables Hindutva to unify "the family, the local, the national and the global in a single circuit" (p 19), a circuit that relies on both women and gender. This raises important questions: How do we make sense of the women of Hindu nationalism, whose activism and roles are simultaneously domestic and informal, yet also aggressive, public, and often violent? And how might we use a gendered lens to analyse Hindutva as a sociopolitical force? The authors in this edited volume offer no easy or singular answers. Instead, by engaging with and departing from one another, they present diverse threads of analysis—across temporal, spatial, and thematic lines—that remain deeply interwoven.

Individuals, Institutions and Ideologies

Chapter 1 by Namrata Ravichandra Ganneri and Chapter 2 by Rina Verma Williams examine the first main theme of the book—the changing modalities of Hindu nationalist women's organising. Ganneri focuses on colonial western India, providing a compelling history of women in the All India Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti (the women's wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS]). Brahmin women like Jankibai Joshi worked to mobilise women through initiatives such as the All India Hindu Women's Conference (Pune, December 1935), raising issues from education and marriage to birth control and declining Hindu numbers. Yet these efforts failed to start a women's organisation due to the patriarchal indifference of the Mahasabha's male leadership. In contrast, Brahmin women like Laxmibai Kelkar—the founder of the samiti—supported by RSS male leaders, mobilised women by promoting ideals of physical strength—firmly situating women's power within the domestic sphere, where such attributes were seen as essential for the better reproduction of upper-caste Hindus. Kelkar fashioned herself as an ideologue and teacher, and her narratives remain influential within the samiti.

Ganneri draws on this archival material to analyse why the Mahasabha failed to sustain itself, while the sangh has flourished. Williams, meanwhile, analyses women's roles in the BJP across two periods—the 1990s and the 2010s. Using multiple methodologies, she traces key shifts in women's roles in the BJP: greater family support for politically active women; increased professionalisation over street-level and informal activism; higher electoral participation despite continued male dominance; more vocal assertion of their work; and widespread use of social media. These chapters, spanning different temporal contexts, highlight that while women's participation in Hindutva—and in any political project—mirrors broader sociopolitical and cultural shifts, the questions of power remain central.

Everyday Spaces of Mobilisation

Chapter 3 by Lalit Vachani and Chapter 4 by Aastha Tyagi unpack the second main theme of the book—the gendered techniques of mobilisation employed by the sangh and the samiti. Vachani's long-term research in Nagpur takes us into

the world of men's RSS *shakhas*. He details somatic rituals, pedagogies, games, intellectual exercises, and storytelling used to draw in boys and men across age groups. These shakhas rely on narratives of internal and external threats (for example, love jihad stories, anti-Pakistan sentiments, and anti-feminist ideas) to shape spaces that not only encourage participation in violence and riots but also foster male sociality, friendships, networks, and transitions from home and shakha into the wider world and careers. This often overlooked aspect helps explain why shakhas remain well attended and how ideology circulates.

Vachani also highlights the changing nature of the shakha itself—shaped by shifts in work life and corporate culture, the shakha now extends into different spheres such as online spaces, apartment complexes, offices, etc. Within this world, men and masculinity remain the primary agents of politics, while women are mainly seen as wives and mothers responsible for protecting the caste purity of Hindutva.

Meanwhile, Tyagi elaborates on the role of gendered storytelling in regular sessions and camps of the samiti in Delhi. These narratives, designed to draw in girls and women, share several stories with those in men's shakhas, such as internal and external threats, anti-Muslim sentiment, etc. However, within these spaces, Hindutva women emerge as actors and agents with important roles to fulfil. Tyagi examines how stories of powerful (upper caste) motherhood, maternal figures such as Jijabai, sacrifice, duty, fabricated histories, patriotism, and service to the nation and community remain prevalent. Facilitators rely heavily on performative storytelling techniques and the emotional and affective power of these narratives.

Stories are designed and narrated for different age groups—kept simple in language and adapted in format, as younger girls often prefer active play and lose interest in monologues. Interestingly, while the stories are fixed in their tropes, they remain mutable—adapted to suit different audiences. For example, stories for women with limited time are kept short and sharp. The focus is less on detail and more on lessons and *charcha*. Tyagi highlights—echoing observations from my own research—the presence of complex power dynamics and contestations within Hindu nationalist women's organisations. These storytelling spaces reflect a diversity of voices, disagreements, and even dissonance. Across both men's and women's spaces, however, familiar and recurring themes persist—modes of engagement and gendered narratives that construct rigid yet adaptable forms of masculinity and femininity.

Militant Women of Hindutva

Chapter 5 by Manjari Katju and Chapter 6 by Anshu Saluja explore an important third theme of the book: women's militancy within Hindutva. Katju focuses on the activism of women in Vishva Hindu Parishad's (VHP) women's wings—Durga Vahini and Mahila Vibhag—analysing how these organisations mobilise gender and sexuality. She examines how women engage in violence and militancy, often through the policing of morality, love, sexuality, public space, and *sanskaars,* engaging in acts of cultural vigilantism. Women's street-based activism has recently focused on love jihad, but its roots lie in longer histories of claiming to save Muslim women, censoring art and films deemed anti-Hindu or immoral, and providing community service to Hindus during crises.

The women in the VHP rarely challenge patriarchal norms within their own homes, yet they actively communalise popular culture and forge connections between the militant Hindu organisations and electoral politics. A politics of intimacy surrounds their violence, aggression, and militancy. In Chapter 6, Saluja interviews two Hindutva women activists (a junior and a senior) in Bhopal, presenting their experiences. Through these narratives, we see how participation in Hindutva enables them to build networks, alliances, and social relationships; protect and celebrate Hindu festivals and culture; reconfigure everyday ideas of home, patriarchy, freedom, and agency; and construct a Hindu womanhood rooted in Vedic ideals. We hear of their anger, rage, bitterness, violence, bargains, and transgressions, alongside anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan sentiments that centre on love jihad and the perceived need to protect Hindu women from being led "astray."

Saluja includes a dedicated section on caste, where she notes that her interviewees believed Hindutva combats caste by breaking certain taboos around pollution and purity, and by including some members of oppressed castes. Both chapters remind us that women's militancy and violence within Hindutva are carefully cultivated, dislodging long-circulated assumptions about women as inherently peaceful, and raising pressing feminist questions about violence and gender. However, a rigorous analysis of caste remains vital for understanding these dynamics and challenging such militant violence at a societal level.

Saffronising Masculinity and Transness

Chapter 7 by Arpita Chakraborty and Chapter 8 by Jennifer Ung Loh shift focus from "women" to examine a crucial fourth theme of the book: the refashioning of gender and sexuality within Hindutva. Chakraborty interrogates Hindutva masculinity by exploring the rise of ascetic masculinity in India. She traces how the ideals of celibacy, non-violence, strength, service, and duty—formulated by figures like Swami Vivekananda and M K Gandhi—travel through shakhas, where they are both adapted and contested. Placing this refashioning of masculinity within a larger global context, she highlights how technology, social media, and developmentalist discourses shape it.

Within this framework, Muslim masculinity is constructed as deviant, uncontrollable, and hyper-fertile—allowing Hindu men to position themselves as sexually controlled, and therefore patriotic and strong. Interestingly, the disavowal of sexuality (or at least hypersexuality) and abstention from meat—especially beef—emerge as hallmarks of an ascetic, controlled Hindutva masculinity. This model also takes pride in *seva* (service) and duty towards society. Modi, in this context, becomes emblematic of a strongman, authoritative masculinity—one that dedicates itself to the nation by renouncing family and sexuality, and in

doing so (or hence), helps shape a Hindutva ideal of manliness and patriarchy.

Jennifer Ung Loh's chapter—the most compelling one in this edited volume—examines the saffronisation of transgender identity. The only contribution to engage directly with queer and trans politics, it poses an urgent question: "How—and why—might the Hindu right foreground some forms of transgender identity at the expense of others?" (p 225). Hindutva's regressive gender and sexuality ideologies, many of which are discussed throughout the book, would suggest little queer or transgender support for its politics. Yet Loh reveals the workings of pink-washing, Hindu homonationalism, and a queer-trans Hindutva that promises limited inclusion and rights to select trans groups in exchange for their alignment with the wider Hindu nationalist project. Drawing on the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) judgment (*National Legal Services Authority v Union of India,* 2014) and subsequent legislative developments, Loh argues that the imagined homo-normative state subject for transgender rights is the Hindu trans-feminine citizen—often from *kinnar* or hijra communities—rendered legible through their recognisable location in the cultural and mythological schema of the nation and positioned within "'Hinduised' versions of history that reiterate their place in the Hindu canon" (p 226).

This normative transgender subject becomes the recipient of rights from a paternalistic state—at the expense of further marginalising other trans (and queer) communities, particularly Muslim and Dalit trans people and trans men. In response to this limited inclusion within the Hindu nation, Loh notes that some Hindu trans-feminine communities have publicly supported Hindutva—for example, the Kinnar Akhada's endorsement of the Ram Mandir campaign and their presence at the 2025 Mahakumbh. Yet, resistance to such state co-optation persists. Loh's chapter offers more than a glimpse into the expansions envisioned and enacted by Hindutva and the BJP state—it foregrounds the complex structures of power that shape the lives and activism of queer and trans communities.

In the first half of Chapter 8, Loh provides a meticulously researched account of how the category of "transgender" has been shaped within the Indian state. The second half explores the saffronisation of trans communities, tracing the interplay of legal judgments, state framings, cultural understandings, fabricated histories, structural marginalisation, casteism, and anti-Muslim discourse. This constellation of forces allows Hindutva to incorporate certain trans communities while excluding others. The final section of the chapter offers a compelling account of the logics of assimilation and belonging—traced through the embrace of Hindutva by some trans actors, as well as its rejection and condemnation by other queer and trans activists and groups. This careful examination highlights the "developing contestations around transgender rights in contemporary India, against a backdrop of dominant right-wing political and socio-cultural movements" (p 246), offering meaningful ways to think through sexuality, gender, and queer and trans politics in the context of Hindu nationalism.

Gendered Protest and Resistance

The final chapters—Chapter 9 by J Devika and Chapter 10 by Basu and Amna Pathan—take a different direction, closing the volume by exploring alternative and divergent activist responses to the Hindu right. Devika questions whether women's resistance is necessarily emancipatory by studying the debates around the Sabarimala pilgrimage in Kerala in 2016 and 2019. The author focuses on the #ReadyToWait movement—led mainly by professional, educated, tech- and media-savvy savarna women—who opposed the Supreme Court judgment that cited gender equality to allow menstruating women entry into the temple.

The #ReadyToWait women were highly self-organised, and their mobilisations spanned both physical and virtual spaces, operating at regional, national, and global levels. They employed a range of technologies to create "intimate digital publics" capable of carrying agitations far and wide. Focusing on how savarna and privileged-caste women formed alliances with some oppressed-caste Shudra women, Devika sheds light on how such socialities and movements articulate femininity, gender, and caste. While the #ReadyToWait campaign emphasised a plural Hindu-ness and Hindu femininity—dissociating itself from Hindutva—its participants, like many Hindu nationalist women, denounced feminism, accepted purity-pollution taboos and male-led regulations, and expressed disregard for other religions.

Basu and Pathan discuss the 2019 protests at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi. They poignantly capture the resistance of local Muslim women—both elderly and young—who led and sustained a sit-in at Shaheen Bagh to protest the draconian, anti-Muslim Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC). These measures, the authors note, would allow the BJP to render many Muslim Indians stateless and enable their detention and expulsion by the state. The *dadis* and *nanis* (grandmothers) of Shaheen Bagh stood firm through harsh Delhi winters, an oppressive and violent state, and repeated official orders to end their protests, continuing their sit-in for 101 days, pausing only due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They understood what the Constitution meant for them; they delivered powerful, politically nuanced speeches; welcomed solidarity visitors; studied legal issues; discussed numerous topics; and sang, danced, painted, and wrote slogans. They placed a politics of care at the heart of their resistance.

Basu and Pathan historicise their discussions and interviews with Shaheen Bagh women by situating them within longer histories of gendered partition violence, the struggles of Muslim communities in post-partition India, and global women's movements for justice and peace. Through this exploration, we see how the women of Shaheen Bagh contested every stereotype of the "oppressed" Muslim women propagated by the Hindutva state, claimed public space in radical ways, stepped beyond domestic roles, and nurtured a community rooted in liberatory politics, solidarity, and resistance in the face of an Islamophobic, misogynist, and violent Hindutva state. The

book fittingly closes with this chapter, bringing us back to its opening dedication, *To the Unforgettable Women of Shaheen Bagh*.

Through these chapters, we come to understand how gender shapes and operates within Hindutva through the politics of masculinity, femininity, intimacy, violence, affect, and emotion. Carefully crafted gender-segregated pedagogical spaces, forms of street activism, repeated narratives of threatening and dangerous "others," and elaborate networks of socialisation allow women (and men) to formulate strategies that further the ideologies and everyday violence of Hindu nationalism. The mutability and adaptability of these strategies—particularly as they engage with digitalisation, youth, neo-liberalism, and technocratic politics—allow for both their expansiveness and their capacity to hold together varied, regional, and sometimes marginally dissonant voices. Women's involvement in Hindutva organisations becomes a religious and national duty that may shake but does not fundamentally dislodge gendered, casteist, and familial formations. Yet, women gain forms of agency, mobility, and power through their complicity in this project. Religious and caste-based logics of assimilation and belonging also allow Hindutva to include some queer and trans communities within its fold.

By elaborating on these themes and on resistance, the contributors illuminate the urgency of asking new feminist questions about Hindu nationalism, exploring multiple methodologies in our theorisations and research, and keeping feminist, queer, and trans activism central to our scholarship and politics.

Limitations, Gaps, Future Directions

Moving beyond a sole focus on "women," the book highlights the workings of gender within Hindutva. While the book touches upon sexuality, it leaves room for a more rigorous engagement with sexuality and queer studies. Loh's chapter presents a compelling account of contemporary queer and trans politics in relation to the state, Hinduism, and Hindu nationalism. However, it remains the only chapter in the volume that engages with sexuality in a nuanced way—treating it both as a site of identitarian politics and as a necessary theoretical framework and lens of analysis.

In recent years, LGBTQ's support for Narendra Modi and the BJP's election campaigns has emerged alongside judicial debates on same-sex marriage and its relation to the Hindutva state, demands for horizontal reservations by transgender communities, the passage of the discriminatory and regressive Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill (2018) and Act (2019), and Hindu nationalist pink-washing of Article 370's abrogation, framed as liberating Kashmiri queers. Hindutva's foundational myths—rooted in sexualised constructions of the "deviant" and "dangerous" masculinity of the "other"—continue to shape the logics of "love jihad," demographic insecurities, hostility towards Bangladeshi and other Muslim-signified migrants, the normalisation of everyday anti-Muslim sentiments and violence, anti-conversion laws, and the use of draconian anti-terror legislation against Muslim boys and men.

Sexualisation and targeted harassment of Muslim women—ranging from routinised social media trolling and everyday violence to the emergence of websites such as *Sulli Deals*—continue unabated, alongside the persistent erasure of sexual violence against Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi women. Hindutva's "feminist" saviourism underpins campaigns for a Uniform Civil Code. Furthermore, the sexualised construction of the Hindu savarna women, who must be protected from the nation's "others," remains rooted in caste endogamy and Brahminical imaginations of the nation that have always relied on gender, sexuality, and caste.

Sex and sexuality are everywhere. Gender, as well as nationalism, religion, and the state, cannot come into being without them, both discursively and in the realm of everyday policies and politics. For a book like this, it becomes imperative to think seriously about sexuality and to examine more concretely the sexual logics that underpin gender and Hindu nationalism, especially as these intersect and co-constitute one another through caste, gender, class, and race. How might our understanding of women, gender, and religious nationalism shift if we approached sexuality as a starting point, one that shapes gender relations, and in turn, sees sexuality and gender as always emerging in relation to one another?

Questions of transnationalism, capitalism and extraction, militarisation, and settler colonialism also arise here. While the book covers some of this terrain, two important areas of engagement remain conspicuously absent. The first is an interrogation of gendered Hindu nationalism's relationship to capitalist extraction and the dispossession of Adivasi (and other) communities. The second is any substantive discussion of religious nationalism and its gendered contours in relation to India's occupation and the ever-increasing militarisation of Kashmir. In both cases, there is an urgent need to understand the gendered consequences of nationalism and state actions, as well as the mobilisation of gender in the pursuit of these violent projects.

Moreover, as right-wing movements gain strength globally, the book misses an opportunity to think transnationally, even while maintaining a focus on India. How might we situate Hindu nationalism, and the understanding of gender and women in relation to it, within a larger transnational context? How might we map the connections, contradictions, and tensions of location and global geopolitics?

What might this reveal about gender and women's mobilisations? What are the discursive and material links between Hindu nationalism and other movements that rely on religious and ethnic nationalism, for example, Zionism and Israel's colonial project in Palestine?

Finally, and most importantly, the book's engagement with caste needs to be more significant and rigorous. Several chapters offer little meaningful engagement with caste politics or with how caste shapes gender and vice versa. Even where caste is addressed, it is often treated as an add-on rather than as a core analytic that permeates all social, cultural, and political formations in India. I would thus ask the authors and editors: What if we reconsidered the frameworks through which we theorise and think? What if caste were the starting point for our understanding of religious nationalism, gender, and women? How might religious nationalism—especially Hindu nationalism—be understood as a gendered project if both religion and gender were seen as always co-constituted through caste? How might we trouble neat binaries of Hinduism/Hindutva, secular/religious, liberal/right-wing, masculinity/femininity, and public/private if we approached these analyses with caste—and an anti-caste praxis—at the core? How might this shift allow us to more concretely understand the gendered formations of religious nationalism (and the state), women's mobilisations within them, and their resistances to them? I end with these questions—questions that, perhaps, ought to have been at the very forefront of this book.

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