Majoritarian State

How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India

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Majoritarian claims sovereign authority to impose its will on the rest of society, democracy is threatened. The present book, consisting of contributions from leading scholars of Indian politics, offers a comprehensive view of how the recent normalization of Hindus as victims of minority appeasement is violently tearing apart communities and institutions.

A valuable and timely contribution.

Chatterjee, Professor of Anthropology and Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies at Columbia University

Explicit in these comprehensive and well-documented essays questions crucial to the perception of contemporary India: they reach out to current debates. Attempts to imprint a majoritarian identity on the state and on various aspects of the lives of citizens, bring about some contestations. These are analysed. The high-quality discussion of these provides a diagnosis, which in turn could suggest a prognosis for the India of post-2019. The book therefore is essential reading.

In Thapar, Emeritus Professor of History at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Hindu activists participate in a procession organized by Vishva Hindu Parishad on the occasion of Ram Navami in Jodhpur. (© Sunil Verma/Pacific Press/Alamy Live News)
On the evening of 28 July 2012 activists belonging to the nationalist militant group Hindu Jagarana Vedike (HJV) stormed the Morning Mist homestay at the edge of Mangalore, a smaller city in coastal southern Karnataka. The HJV found seven men and five women, all unmarried, who were celebrating a birthday party. The vigilantes had been alerted by locals, some of whom had previously complained about loud ‘rave parties’ and drinking taking place in the homestay. Upon entering the property, the attackers beat and partially stripped the party goers before locking some of them in one of the rooms, sporadically hitting them as they awaited the arrival of the police.

A journalist was tipped off about the attack, and his video of women in ‘western’ clothes and shirtless men attempting to cover their faces whilst fending off blows made Mangalore the topic of national and regional news for a few days. The morality of Mangaloreans—both the attackers and the attacked—became a discussion point well beyond the city limits. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was at the time in power at the federal
state level and the then chairperson of the Karnataka State Women's Commission, C. Manjula, suggested that the birthday party was in fact a rave with drugs and trafficked women.

After the event, the local organisation Forum Against Atrocities on Women produced a fact-finding report in English, gathering statements from those at the party and their parents. One of the men whose birthday it was describes the attack:

At that time I heard loud noises downstairs. The girls were screaming in confusion. I came outside. All of them were hitting the girls. By the time I started climbing downstairs, around 5 or 6 people were behind me. They broke open the door, pulled me out, stamped me, pulled off my tee shirt and gave me a good beating. Then they brought me down. All this is not shown in the video. Even downstairs they gave me a good beating. I said, 'This is my and her birthday. This is not a rave party.' They said, 'you are celebrating a rave party' and started abusing me using bad words. They pulled off the girls' clothes and fingered their bodies.

The camera-man was familiar by sight. I asked him, 'Don't you know me?' He did not say anything. 3 or 4 more people came and started beating me. 'Do you need only girls to celebrate your party?' they asked me. They locked me in the room to the right and took photographs of me. The girls' dresses were torn. I did not have my tee shirt. They made me sit on the bed and took photographs of me. Till then no policemen had arrived there. For 10 to 15 minutes they had been beating us.

The above-mentioned journalist described the immediate aftermath:

Shocked by the events inside, I had stepped out for a breather. I saw...the area Corporator [local politician] talking to others in the group of aggressors in the compound, right in front of the house. After the assailants had completed one stage of their planned action... [the police] arrived at the spot.... Whenever the police is called to attend to a group that is unruly it arrives carrying lathis [long wooden canes]. But this group of policemen did not carry a single lathi. It appeared as though the police had had previous contact with the assailants. For over half an hour the police were immersed in conversation with the assailants. I was surprised that the policemen instead of arresting the attackers were conversing with them. Even the Corporator...was part of the group, apparently taking pride in the actions of the assailants. While they were conversing, one of the boys who had been present at the party tried to escape but was caught by the police. The assailants thrashed this boy in the presence of the police.

Aside from the fear and shock, the statements reveal a sense of smaller city intimacy, and a seemingly close relationship between the attackers, the policemen and the local elected representative. The attackers (and the journalist) were eventually arrested and jailed, and locals, including many students, held a series of protests against the attacks and the government's response in the weeks that followed.

After the protests the Forum Against Atrocities on Women received a typed letter in English through the post:

My Dear So Called Women Protector,

...You have a lot of concern to women. You have full confidence your boys and girls in Morning Mist enjoying Bday party with least or no dress, of course per your they have the right to do whatever they want. Bloody because of you people these things happen and you provoke Sangh Parivar [family of Hindu nationalist groups] people and boys with hot blood will sure attack and trash. You people too deserve that sooner or later. Don't think you have huge support. This is Mangalore dear madams remember. We will not hide or hesitate to act. Please stop your ugly comments and activities inside four walls. Otherwise you too get same treatment however without media. This is warning to each one of you and think about this. You will better stop all your anti hindu activity before you realize the taste of slap or something else which will be done in well planned manner.

FROM SANGH PARIVAR

It is important not to overstate the importance of this particular event. It was just one of many incidents termed 'moral policing' in India, where vigilante groups attempt to ethnically discipline others, often with violence or threats. Mangalore, since renamed Mangaluru, has become famous for such moments of moral policing. The three most well-known cases are the Morning Mist homestay attack, the 'pub attack' in 2009, in which a group of women who had met in a city-centre bar were assaulted, and finally an attack in 2015 when a Muslim man was stripped and tied to a post in the street, before being whipped for allegedly trying to seduce his female Hindu colleague. These cases gained traction in the wider public's imagination, in part, because they were all filmed, but they were not particularly shocking to locals for whom news of such acts is fairly common. For instance one analysis of newspaper reports reveal forty-five instances in seven months in the district, whilst another analysis of 'communal incidents' includes a breakdown of moral policing: 17 cases in 2010, 31 (2011), 34 (2012), 46 (2013), 53 (2014), 47 (2015), 22 (2016), 23 (2017). Such moral policing is not the exclusive preserve of Hindu outfits, with both Muslim and Christian groups attempting to control the behaviour of those in their community (for instance cases of Muslim moral policing accounted for a third or more of instances each year between 2013–15 and there are complaints relating to pressured conversions by some
MAJORITARIAN STATE

Christian groups), however Hindu vigilantism has asserted itself as a powerful structurer within Mangalorean society.

Amongst most locals I spoke with who complained loudly about 'communalism', the obvious, commonly applied, and yet misplaced analysis has been to suggest that the rise of vigilante attacks is a direct consequence of the electoral success of the increasingly Hindu majoritarian BJP under Narendra Modi, especially since he led the party to victory at the centre in 2014. In recent years there have been a number of high-profile attacks against those accused of eating beef or transporting cows, and against those accused of 'love jihad' (the supposed phenomena in which Muslim men seduce Hindu women with the aim of conversion). Modi and other BJP leaders have remained silent in the aftermath of the attacks, leading many to suggest that they enable a climate within which such attacks take place. However, to not look beyond this is to ignore deep-rooted tendencies for mob violence as a competing claim of sovereignty in India, skip over the times when the centrist Indian National Congress (henceforth referred to as Congress Party) has operationalised communal violence for its own ends, and asport immense power to actions in a narrowly defined political realm—suggesting that the Prime Minister can affect law and order across state federal lines with immense ease—something that glosses over incidents that happen when the BJP is not in power at the federal state or central level or the complex ways in which politics and public debate take place in India. Political actors do, of course, ferment and shape communal incidents like moral policing, not least because they help stoke the emotionally and morally contoured public manifestations of outrage, which have a long history in India as both an affective and often effective way of engaging in the public sphere. What this all suggests is that we must look beyond electoral politics when trying to understand this articulation of cultural policing.

One other possible way of situating these attacks would be to view them within majoritarian sacred claims over national space. Satish Deshpande has argued that through 'spatial strategies'—such as the destruction of the Babri masjid (mosque) in Uttar Pradesh or the fight over raising a flag over Idgah Maidan (open space) in Hubli-Dharward in northern Karnataka—groups have attempted to construct a Hindu geography into the national space. They have found room to manoeuvre, he goes on to argue, in the gaps left by a waning Nehruvian economic nationalism: the planned economies of the decades following independence, where hegemonic notions of national 'socialist' secular development temporarily displaced religious claims from the public sphere. If we accept this argument however, then we must also accept that such an analysis is as much about time as it is about space. Yes, Hindutva-inspired groups are staking claim to spaces in cities and pilgrimage sites as part of a wider claim over the national space, but they do so with the temporal assertion that now is their moment.

This assertion feeds from the economic changes wrought over the last three decades, though of course has an older and independent history. There is a narrative that in 1991, when India took its neoliberal economic turn, the country was 'unbound', finally set free from socialist constraints, allowing it to develop from its dark past into its 'shining' present, finally arriving on the global stage as an enterprising, prosperous and technologically adept country. This economic 'freedom' saw a concomitant rejection of secularism and rise of Hindu assertion by groups inspired by or involving members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—from the militant Bajrang Dal to the mainstream political manoeuvres of the BJP. The state-led development programme of the secular Congress Party-led governments had failed, they claimed, and it was now time for an unabashedly Hindu majoritarian marker-led country. As such 'Hindu assertion...is deeply connected with structural transformation and new modes of social aspiration. It reflects not only a changing alignment of upwardly mobile and dominant classes. It also points to a reaction against the erstwhile paradigm of postcolonial development, a paradigm that buckled under the pressures it was subject to.'

However, the joint rise of Hindu nationalism and increasing pro-market/anti-state policies in India has a complicated relationship that goes back to before the watershed moment of 1991. The relationship is both occasionally complementary and occasionally contradictory, but always, I suggest, with the need to order and control not far from the surface. The upper middle classes and elites started to fear the way the state changed in the 1970s; it moved from being one in which 'democracy and secularism meant protection and ending paternalism vis-a-vis lower-caste groups and minorities', to one in which popular figures from poor backgrounds could gain mass followings through the amoral vocation of politics, and thus the "softness" of the secular state became the target of the Hindu nationalist critique of a "pseudo secularism" that was "pampering minorities". Hindu nationalism offered an order against the disorder of a state captured by subaltern elements. More recently, the BJP has garnered immense electoral support amongst the elite and aspirant sections of the 'middle classes' by projecting themselves as CEO-type governors, free from the corrupt politics of the Congress party.22
MAJORITARIAN STATE

Neoliberalism and right-wing Hindu nationalism further complement one another as they both see divisions within society as unnecessary, if not pathological, and create bounded internal and external realms (e.g. the Muslim other, or the welfare agency) in their rhetoric of ongoing revolutionary transformation. However, and here we turn towards the source of trouble on Mangaluru’s streets, whereas the individualism celebrated by economic liberalism offers ‘freedom’ (whilst holding the market supreme and punishing those who disrupt it), the individual within a majoritarian vision is always subordinated to the good of the Hindu community. This entwines with a perceived loss of national sovereignty with the deepening penetration of global capital, leading to attempts at controlling ‘national culture’, more often than not in ways that uphold rigid conceptions of gender and sexual identities.

As such, and as I will detail below, there is an ethical tension at the heart of this Hindu majoritarian and market-led development project: the continuing ‘opening-up’ of the Indian economy has also opened up ethical questions. The same groups who celebrate ‘India’s moment’ after centuries of national impediment due to Muslim, colonial and then ‘socialist’ rule are also often those who are deeply troubled by the effects of these changes in terms of cultural purity, gender norms, and youthful experimentation. Moral policing, I argue, is one of the ways in which this ethical tension reveals itself. I will make this argument based on material gathered during twenty months of ethnographic fieldwork undertaken between 2011–16.

III-disciplined times

Every now and again I played cricket (badly), with a group of young men from the neighbourhood where I lived in Mangalore. Once in a while I used to stay and chat with Lokesh, a college educated man a bit younger than myself. During the time I knew him he was in the process of sitting entrance exams at different companies around the city. He was always forthright with his opinions, whatever we talked about. I always thought he found me naive, no matter if I was deliberately trying to be naive or not.

Once some girls were staring at us as we stood talking. ‘It’s a pity you’re married,’ he said, ‘the way all these girls look at you.’

‘They only stare at me because I’m big and white. Like seeing something in the zoo. Anyway,’ I ventured, ‘Indian girls aren’t so forward.’

‘Ho! Let me tell you about Indian girls!’ he stopped me. ‘Today, it’s a fashion for girls to have sex. A trend. Girls want to have sex, or go around telling people they are having sex.’

‘You know’, he went on to say after a moment of pause ‘girlfriends are too expensive, you have to spend money on them. Taking them to the cinema and so on.’

Talk of the cinema brought up an act of moral policing that had taken place earlier in the week. Members of the Bajrang Dal had stormed a local multiplex where, in their words, ‘a Hindu girl was doing “bad things” with two Muslim boys’. They beat up the trio with glass soda bottles, filming the event on their mobile phones. It turns out Lokesh was in the cinema at the same time and saw the attack. I was a little surprised when he told me that he thought it was right for the group ‘to intervene, but not to thrash girls... [Because] we don’t want Hindu girls going around flirting here and there. We don’t want to have American culture, where a girl can spend two days with one guy and then two days later switch.’ Lokesh’s general opinion on moral policing was representative of many people that I spoke with. Such people would say that the violence was ‘bad’ or ‘too much’, especially against the girls, however, in general it was good that someone stopped the immoral behaviour. For instance, the most commonly voiced opinion about the Homestay Attack—the above-mentioned incident where young people were attacked at a birthday party in a lodge—was that hitting the girls was wrong, but if it was a birthday party, then why weren’t the parents there?! Lokesh’s approval of the attacks had surprised me, because I had wrongly put him into the category of those young students who embraced and celebrated the rapid changes the city was undergoing.

Mangaluru has been a port for millennia, and thus has long entertained outside populations and large numbers of religious minorities. Demographically, the city region shares similarities with the state of Kerala to the south: most inhabitants are Hindu (69 per cent), but there are sizable Muslim (17 per cent) and Christian (13 per cent) communities. However, it is also a culturally secluded area, surrounded by hills to the east, the sea to the west and different cultural-linguistic regions to the north and south. A majority of the Hindu population consider themselves Tuluva, and thus do not speak the state language of Kannada as their mother tongue, but rather Tulu, and have distinct religious, cultural and social traditions such as matrilineal inheritance and bhuta (spirit) worship. The largest jati (caste) group is Bhatta (estimated around 18 per cent in the wider Tulu region) and though they had untouchability practiced against them in the past (their jati profession is toddy tapping), they are a strong and upwardly mobile group. The traditional feudal landowners in the district, Bunts—sometimes referred to as ‘Shettys’ due to

IMMORAL TIMES
the prominence of the surname amongst the community—did lose some influence after the land reforms of the 1970s, but remain a dominant caste in terms of land holding, rituals and political influence. The largest Christian denomination, Catholics, and the powerful trading community Gowda Saraswat Brahmans, both speak Konkani having migrated from Goa due to Portuguese oppression during the colonial period and still live in clusters within the city region to this day. Most Muslims belong to the Beary jati, speak their own language of the same name, and have traditionally been involved in trade (byara means trade or business in Tulu).

The city is small by Indian standards, around half a million people, or around 650,000 including the metropolitan region and this has increased steadily over the decades with populations of 539,390 in 2001, 426,340 (1991), 309,490 (1981) and 217,040 (1971). However, this relational smallness feeds into feelings of intimacy and perceived lack, when compared to larger cities. Such comparative framings by locals is enabled by a long history of migration to cities such as Mumbai or Dubai. What might surprise a visitor from one of India’s larger cities, are the number and size of the shopping malls which, when opened, often feature in the ever changing ‘top ten largest malls in India’ lists, and a skyline filled with ultra-luxury high-rise apartments. These displays of new wealth do not sit in such stark contrast to poverty as is often the case in the country’s metropolitan centres. There are only a few small slums in Mangaluru and the region is comparatively wealthy, gender balanced and literate. However there has been a decline in labour intensive industries such as tile-making and beedi (leaf cigarette) production, with the new industries that have opened up around the all-weather port north of the city employing fewer and more highly qualified people. The result is a substantial group of young people who are neither extremely poor nor rich, but have quite a bit of time on their hands. These are, for the most part,quite a distant group from the large and growing body of both local and outsider students.

The city, or more precisely the joint districts of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi, are increasingly imagined as an ‘education hub’. Commission agents (who make money by bringing fee-paying students to colleges) boast that they can bring in young people from north India on just the promise of a place ‘at a college in Mangalore’, without specifying the institute. A lot of these colleges draw from the fame of St. Aloysius College (set up by the Jesuits in 1880), a National Institute of Technology north of the city, and the prestigious Manipal University near Udupi. This last institute was something of a trail-blazer for the current slew of private colleges marked by local jati and community identity that dominate the local ‘education market’. Set up as Kasturba Medical College in 1953 it was the first self-financing and fee-paying medical college in the country. The brainchild of local banker and doctor TMA Pai, he used his status as a Gowda Saraswat Brahmin and thus a minority language speaker (Konkani) to claim minority privileges. This allowed more autonomy in running the college, including avoiding the ban on admission fees that applied to ‘regular’ education institutes. As mentioned above, Tulu is also a minority language in the state of Karnataka (albeit the local lingua franca of the street), and this allowed Tulu-speaking communities to do the same—although this was mostly done post economic liberalisation, after changes in the law. It is now clear, at least to locals, which colleges and schools ‘belong’ to each community. Indeed some, such as Bearys College of Education, bear the jati name (Bearys are a Muslim community). This particular college is similar to many others in that it is built on money made elsewhere, in this case real estate, something that is important to keep in mind because, whilst education institutions are entwined with caste and/or religious community pride and advancement, they also can be an extremely profitable business—a motivation many make no secret of. Importantly, whilst some of the less prestigious and some of the Muslim colleges see an over-representation of students from the same communities, the better-established colleges are highly mixed. The Deputy Dean of a government college believes that ‘at the end of the day, most parents will send their children to what they believe will be the best college, regardless of [religious] community or caste’.

The relatively large student body can, during the day, give the city a youthful feel. There are numerous new public places in Mangaluru for students to socialise outside, and sometimes during, school hours. Six shopping malls, a smattering of the popular chain Café Coffee Day, ice-cream parlours and multiplexes compete with more long-standing choices such as parks and beaches as places for groups of students to hang out, often in groups that cross jati, gender and religious community lines.

The region’s students also come from a diverse number of places within and occasionally outside India. Most of the graduates from outside the region leave upon completing their studies in part due to the lack of skilled jobs. This transitory attachment to the place may also play a role in a feeling of otherness, with some of the students from outside the city expressing an exasperation with the local ‘culture’ which they claimed should be more tolerant of their ‘cultures’.
MAJORITARIAN STATE

The feeling of mutual distrust was also evidenced in an interview with an area leader from the Hindu Yuva Sena. The local organisation was formed by members of the RSS in 1989, but became separate as the RSS were ‘not involved in conflicts’—i.e. physical confrontations—and is now ‘under them but not completely, we follow the same aims, but we are separate.’ Currently, they are relatively small and insignificant with the violent acts that were previously their ‘role’ undertaken by the Bajrang Dal, who are officially affiliated with the RSS and who were founded in north India in 1984 before spreading south. The Hindu Yuva Sena area leader told me:

Nowadays the girls who go to college, most of their parents are rich, so before college they give them money—maybe 500 rupees. Their parent’s main idea is to give them education, but girls will roam here and there, taking alcohol and drugs. They are addicted. Parents are irresponsible.... In the Morning Mist case [the Home Stay attack], the students were from rich backgrounds. So they closed [solved] the case very quickly. If they were poor then nothing would have happened.

Whilst there are exceptions, broadly it can be said that many of those involved in the vigilante attacks are from so-called ‘lower’ or ‘backwards castes’. Meanwhile those in other branches of the Sangh Parivar, such as the RSS, are from the ‘upper castes’. I met some of those from Bajrang Dal who were involved in the above-mentioned attack in the cinema, all of whom were from the ‘backwards’ Billavas jati. At first, they were extremely open, proud and fearless about their activities and began showing me photos on their phones, until the second-in-command told them to stop. Meanwhile, when I asked older Brahmin RSS workers about their thoughts on the violence, they either excused the ‘hotness’ of the violence as a symptom of the attackers’ young age, or switched topic to the violent actions of Muslim groups relating to cows—or women—‘love jihad is their plan to take over the world by having more children than anyone else’. Against such attacks, it was either implicitly or explicitly suggested that violence was justified.

Whilst it is wrong (both factually and, I would argue, politically) to label those who carry out the attacks with the insult ‘jobless’, as many do in Mangaluru, it is true that most of those I spoke with were in non-prestigious and irregular work. In keeping with such classed understandings, Tambe and Tambe suggest in relation to the above-mentioned ‘pub attack’ that in Mangaluru, because the divide between the working classes and the ‘upper-middle’ classes is not so sharply spatially marked as in India’s metropolises, and because ‘[t]he young women in the pub, [are] perceived as visual signifiers of

the new wealthy consumer, [they] were viewed as a potential influence on women from other social strata because of the closer contact between classes.’

As such, the attacks were done in a way to be seen by as many people as possible: a warning to women in the city. The need to warn women in the city is, as I argued before, related to a tension between economic and social liberalism as expressed in contemporary India—a tension that ‘traditional’ forms of disciplining cannot control.

Ethical openings

During a roundtable discussion that I organised at one of the more prestigious local colleges, I asked a group of fifteen students (aged 19–20) what they thought ‘Westernisation’ meant. The word was often used by those from the religious right, and indeed a local Muslim organisation had recently leafleted at the college gates warning students about the dangers of ‘western culture’ in relation to premarital relationships. I brought along my wife (also an anthropologist), to help ease any gendered issues relating to asking young women about ‘unethical’ behaviour. The students were a mix of different religions and came from different parts of India, with just under half from Mangaluru.

The students of course had a variety of views, but one of the common threads was that moral policemen will disappear once the region becomes more ‘developed’—some further suggested that the Bajrang Dal and others were a reaction to a fast-changing city in which local culture is disappearing. They equated development, to a large degree, with increased freedoms akin to those they see in ‘The West’. Indeed one even said that ‘[being western] means to be free. Not to be questioned in terms of what to wear, how to behave. In terms of religion’.

In a very different setting, the anthropologist Robbins argues that during moments of intense cultural change moral conflicts arise. He suggests moral codes are smoothly socially-reproduced in cultures that have a dominant value from which ethical norms can derive. At times of rapid cultural change however values come into conflict, and people have a heightened sense of freedom as they are pushed into reflecting on (moral) decisions. Whilst there was not a single strong value around which Indian society has traditionally been organised (and we should be wary of suggestions that there was), in the past there was, nevertheless, a stronger sense that, within communities, certain ethical considerations were not open to question.

This argument chimes with Kapur’s suggestion that there is a heightened awareness of the ‘politics of time’ with concomitant shifts in moral norms
emanating from the state in contemporary India. She argues that whereas the early post-colonial state in India had a certain moral imperative based on the struggle for freedom, the contemporary neoliberal state has abolished many of the past notions of collective responsibility. Moreover, she suggests that contemporary global capitalism positions certain places as being characterised by systematic under-development, which in turn helps ferment an often individualistic and precarious race against time (a sort of catching up). This all takes place within a system that simultaneously abstracts time into exchangeable units—i.e. a person’s time has a price that she can sell as labour. Building on this, she further argues that contemporary India is marked by a fragmented time consciousness, with the present, past and future experienced as if they were cut from each other. Within this environment youthfulness, novelty and ‘living for the moment’ are celebrated (as evidenced especially strongly in adverts and films) and an increasingly individualistic morality in which future consequences are brushed aside is on the ascendency.

Drawing from this, I suggest that because in contemporary urban India there is no one coherent and dominant value system, for some young middle-class students there is a feeling of ethical ‘freedom’. Freedom here is understood as the freedom to ethically cultivate oneself through various techniques drawn from a diverse range of moral exemplars (streams or processes, some strong some weak, variously pulled together). Kapur identifies a number of such exemplars in popular culture—commercials that celebrate newness and youth, self-help ‘business guru’ books that draw on a reading of the Mahabharata that suggest one should do one’s duty without worrying about the consequences, and films in which vigilantes administer summary justice. Crucially, she suggests that such exemplars, engendered by the fragmented experience of time, are conducive for cultivating a self as a packageable commodity in competition with others. Taken together this produces a feeling of helplessness for many as they struggle to assemble a coherent self under such conditions.

Here is where the link between neoliberalism and the appeal of authoritarian movements makes itself apparent. It is not only the case, as is sometimes simplistically argued in the popular press, that violent Hindu nationalist groups have a strong appeal for those ‘losers’ of economic change. Rather the type of moral ordering offered by vigilante groups is accepted and quietly supported by many in Mangaluru because, at a time when cultural change has led to an explosion of ethical values and the opening-up of new possibilities for ethical self-cultivation, the actions of vigilante groups offer both a coherent narrative and a sense of control for many who feel helpless to stop the decay of morality. The Bajrang Dal’s motto, as they reminded me when I met them, is ‘service, safety and culture’; they saw their service to Indian culture in their provision of protection to Hindus, especially Hindu women, from the dangers of western influences and Muslim men. In practical terms, this means a careful observation of people’s timings (for example, to catch interreligious couples) and the controlling of times, realised through attacks on late night parties, or the reporting of women on the street after dark.

Conclusions: A new discipline for a new India?

Each and every day in Mangaluru, as in many other places across India, a group of men dressed in khaki meet on a public ground and perform games, sports and synchronised actions with long sticks. The drill, known as the sangh shakha, aims to instil virtuous behaviour and ideals, as the local RSS Vibhag Sharirik Pramukh (trainer) explained:

> The main thing is personality development... The most important thing is one programme, every day, uninterrupted. It’s a tapasv [meditation]. There is no syllabus, it’s not written, yet the procedure is the same everywhere. How to start, the games, the end—the one hour programme. The main thing is to bring changes in the man. So, what type of changes? That he loves his country, his motherland.

The shakha has been performed in Mangaluru since 13 September, 1940, when around twenty or so people gathered. Since then, the shakha has grown from place to place in the region and, by 2013, 100,000 uniformed RSS members gathered outside the city for a one-off extended performance of various martial drills. However, despite its militaristic overtones and large numbers of attendees, such gatherings do not provide a moral exemplar to the students I spoke with. Rather, for the most part, the students found the often middle-aged Brahmin men in shorts as figures of fun. I also got the same impression from the vigilantes’ wry smiles when I probed them on along these lines, although they would not voice such opinions openly to me. Such activities are not, in short, ‘cool’, and they certainly lack the dangerous edge palpable at some Bajrang Dal actions. As a moral exemplar, the shakha sits alongside activities such morality camps for young girls organised by RSS-supporting dance schools, in failing to bring order to the ethically disorderly city.

If the khaki-clad men gathered for drills on open land resemble, or want to resemble, a parastatal army, then the vigilantes are the guerrilla urban street
fighters: groups that blend in and out of the city’s flows appearing, when needed, to attack. As we saw above, such groups are not always above the law, and the vigilantes I met were keen to point out the number of cases filed against them. However, very often their actions remain unreported and many of the attackers are happy to openly talk about what they do and why they do it. When I went to meet some of the Bajrang Dal on Valentine’s Day they were crowded round a computer screen, laughing and joking with one another. The source of their entertainment was a news report on the English site Daiji World, in which they were the stars. They had spent the morning burning (blank, purchased) Valentine’s Day cards outside Besant Women’s College. Their behaviour at that moment reminded me of any group of friends looking back together at photos from a trip or celebration.

The public sphere in India, and indeed elsewhere, is not only constituted by transparent debate and discussion—rather image and spectacle proliferate, with seemingly spontaneous yet highly organised acts of mass violence framed by political actors as the will of the people, and both the number of debaters as well as the quality of the debate important, guided by the knowledge that protest, force and agitation are a means for getting their demands met. Within such an arena, the public nature of the attacks moves beyond a reaction to perceived immoral behaviour, and becomes a proactive intervention into the shaping of behaviour in contemporary India. A further example of how anger and violence function as a legitimate mode through which to realise political aims. Moreover, via traditional media, such as print news and television, and increasingly via new media such as WhatsApp groups, the actions of the street reverberate throughout the city, region and country.

As the majoritarian Hindu state project continues with its pro-market development model, attacks against those who experiment with multiple streams of ethical cultivation in public urban settings will continue to serve as a reminder of one of its contradictions. Moral policing is, in part, a response to the wider ethical-temporal tension between India’s time on the global stage and the concurrent time of ‘immorality’. It has resulted in an increased disciplining within the immediate times of the city: an attempt to hold time still on moral transformations and curtail the liberalism within neoliberalism. As long as the tension remains unresolved, such violence is set to continue.

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REFLECTIONS IN THE CROWD

DELEGATION, VERISIMILITUDE, AND THE MODI MASK

Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi

Delegation

In *La délégation et le fétichisme politique*, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu analyzed the mysterious mechanism by which power is transferred between individuals when forming larger social orders. A group achieves permanency in the act of representation through a deputy (a leader, a manda-
tory, a spokesperson). In India one finds ministers, members of parliament, political leaders, a president and a prime minister. Delegation constitutes that extraordinarily complex social act by which a group brings itself about through its proxy. The power of proxy, in turn, is based on a tacit authorisation given by each mandator to the delegate (the plenipotentiary, the minister) to speak and act on his behalf. This transmission of power locates the proxy in a privileged position vis-à-vis his mandators to usurp this power, the meaning through which the group constitutes itself. He writes, ‘in appearance the group creates the man who speaks in its place and in its name.... [while] in reality it