



Case study: A dangerous speech that triggered lynchings in India (2013-2018)

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About this report

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Abstract: India has been steadily transforming from an aspiring liberal democracy into an ethnic democracy where a narrow and supremacist interpretations of Hinduism, the religion of the majority, wields near hegemonic status. An early indication of this transformation was the systematic, and violent, mainstreaming of the ‘*gau raksha*’ (cow protection) discourse, which sought to impose a Hindu belief – the veneration of the cow and its slaughter and consumption as sacrilegious – on the entire country. Underlying the discourse were long-standing resentments against Muslims who are predominantly involved in the cattle trade, the slaughter of cows, and the consumption of beef. Endorsements by popular politicians spawned vigilante groups of *gau rakshaks* (cow protectors) who inflicted arbitrary violence on Muslims who were suspected of engaging in cow slaughter, often with the state protection and the moral conviction that their actions are chivalrous.

1. Introduction

Two fundamentally antagonistic visions of what kind of a country India is and should be have vied for prominence since the early stages of the freedom struggle – a liberal, secular republic run on liberalism and scientific temper, or an exclusivist ethno-nationalist society seeped in traditional practices of Hinduism including its central tenets of caste¹, patriarchy, and second-class status for minorities². The former view dominated during the freedom struggle (late 19th to the mid-20th century), independence from colonial rule (1947) and the initial seven decades of independent India.³ *Hindutva* (literally: *Hinduness*), a supremacist ideology that privileges Hindus over minorities started its ascendancy in the latter decades of the 20th century and has now acquired hegemonic status.⁴

The hegemonic status of Hindu nationalism in contemporary politics has had serious implications in India, similar to those of the rise of the far right in democracies like Brazil, Turkey, Israel, Hungary and, as the last administration showed, in the United States.⁵ Scholars and observers have observed that India has become a *de facto* Hindu theocracy, where institutional protections for democracy have been permanently damaged and made subservient to the interests of fundamentalists in power.⁶ The takeover of the country’s institutions has not gone unnoticed. India has been steadily downgraded in the various global indexes on civil liberties, particularly the Press Freedom Index.⁷

¹ India is a highly stratified society, particularly on the lines of caste – a feature of Hinduism that assigns individuals by birth into categories with graded access to social privileges. Though outlawed, these gradations manifest themselves in subtle forms across all walks of life, much like the functioning of racism in the West. (Jodhka, S.S. 2016). Ascriptive hierarchies: Caste and its reproduction in contemporary India. *Current Sociology*, 64(2), 228–243

² Jaffrelot, C. (Ed.). (2009). *Hindu Nationalism: A reader*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

³ Guha, R. (2017). *India after Gandhi: The history of the world's largest democracy*. New Delhi: Pan Macmillan.

⁴ Bardi, A.s. (2017). How ‘Hindutva’ recast multi-faith India as the Hindu homeland, Aeon. <https://aeon.co/ideas/how-hindutva-recast-multi-faith-india-as-the-hindu-homeland>

⁵ Mudde, C. (2019). *The far right today*. Hoboken, NJ USA: John Wiley & Sons.

⁶ Jaffrelot, C. (2019). A de facto ethnic democracy? Obliterating and targeting the other, Hindu vigilantes, and the ethno-state. In A. P. Chatterji, T. B. Hansen, & C. Jaffrelot (Eds.), *Majoritarian state: How Hindu nationalism is changing India* (pp. 41–48). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Jha, F. (2020). ‘Pressure to toe Hindutva line’ sees India drop to 142 on World Press Freedom Index, *The Print*, <https://theprint.in/india/pressure-to-toe-hindutva-line-sees-india-drop-to-142-on-world-press-freedom-index/406123/>

Freedom House (2021). *Freedom in the World 2021: India*. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2021>

The shattering political successes of *Hindutva* since 2014, when its political face, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Modi acquired power, have allowed more brazen state patronage for the pet projects of *Hindutva*. Understanding India's descent from an aspiring liberal democracy into an 'electoral autocracy'⁸ and a 'partially free'⁹ country can be explained through the one of these projects – *gau raksha* – the idea that cow is holy and its consumption as beef a sacrilege. *Gau raksha* was one of the planks of the BJP's successful election platform and a key tool for mainstreaming and imposing *Hindutva* in public policy and social life.¹⁰

The rise of *Hindutva* also saw a spike in sectarian vigilantism¹¹ driven by *gau rakshaks* groups, engaging in mob violence using the pretence of 'rescuing' cattle from slaughter as a means to defend Hinduism.¹² While there were practically none in 2012, there were 3 cow-related vigilante attacks in 2013. By the year 2017, the number of such incidents had shot up to 43.¹³ The vast majority of the victims, 86 percent, were Muslims, who dominate the cattle trade.¹⁴

In the Indian federal system, law enforcement is controlled by the provincial administration: that is, the central government's ideological intentions can be thwarted or amplified by local governments. The violence and impunity of *gau rakshaks* was at its most brazen in the provinces where the BJP was in power, indicating the ideological umbrella within which *gau raksha* flourishes.¹⁵ The paper demonstrates the features of dangerous speech in the discourse of *gau raksha* – the threat to group identity, accusation in the mirror and group loyalty – which acquired valence when articulated through widely-popular leaders of *Hindutva*.

2. *Gauraksha* as dangerous speech

2.1 *Socio-political history*

Historians have argued that the Hindu devotion to cow protection is neither as ancient nor as widely prevalent as claimed by Hindu nationalists as grounds for *gau raksha*. In fact, ancient Hindu texts provide ample evidence of beef consumption.¹⁶ ¹⁷ Nevertheless, by the 2nd century CE, driven among other things by the need to differentiate themselves from the beef-consuming Buddhists, veneration of the cow became the defining marker of status in Hinduism's notorious form of graded inequality – the caste system – wherein vegetarianism and cow-worship became associated with higher status. The Muslim domination of the Indian subcontinent led to the concretization of the Hindu elite identity, which opposed beef consumption and had festering

⁸ V-Dem (2021), *Autocratization Turns Viral*, <https://www.v-dem.net/files/25/DR%202021.pdf>

⁹ Freedom House (2021). *Freedom in the World 2021: India*. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2021>

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch (2019). Violent cow protection in India. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/02/18/violent-cow-protection-india/vigilante-groups-attack-minorities>

¹¹ Ranjan, M. (2017). Communal violence cases up 41% in 3 years: NCRB, New Delhi: *The Tribune*, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/nation/communal-violence-cases-up-41-in-3-years-ncrb-442925>.

¹² Saldanha, A. (2017), Cow-Related hate crimes peaked in 2017, 86% of those killed Muslim, New Delhi: *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/communalism/cow-vigilantism-violence-2017-muslims-hate-crime>

¹³ Gupta, I. (2019). Mob violence and vigilantism in India. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, 23(4), 152-172.

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch (2019), Op. Cit.

¹⁵ Gupta (2019), Op.cit

¹⁶ Brown, N. (1964) .The sanctity of the cow in Hinduism, New Delhi: *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 1964,

https://www.epw.in/system/files/pdf/1964_16/5-6-7/the_sanctity_of_the_cow_in_hinduism.pdf

¹⁷ Jha, D. N. (2002). *The myth of the holy cow*. London and New York: Verso.

resentments against cow slaughter and beef consumption by Islamic rulers.¹⁸ As early as the late 19th century, *gau raksha* was a plank to mobilize Hindu nationalism, often resulting in sectarian conflicts.¹⁹ When *Hindutva* as a formal ideology emerged in the 1920s premised on a notion of an ethnic nationalist Hindu *rashtra*²⁰ (Hindu polity) wherein Hindus would have the primary and minorities secondary status, *gau raksha* remained its defining demand.

An analogy for the envisaged Hindu nation is the Hindu temple.²¹ Founding *Hindutva* ideologues were drawn from Hindu elites – the Brahmins – for whom vegetarianism had become institutionalized as the purest form of food and the consumption of meat (particularly beef) and other forms of engagement with cattle such as removal of cow carcasses and leather-work became impure work, befitting the lowest caste (Dalits).²² Temples are exemplary sites where such notions of purity are reinforced; privileged groups wielded unchallenged hegemony and meat consuming groups were until recently prevented from even entering these temples. *Hindutva* conceives of the entirety of India as a sacred land, like a Hindu temple, in which slaughter of cows and consumption of beef in any corner of the country is sacrilegious.

Drawing inspiration from the fascist movements of the inter-war years,²³ *Hindutva* categorised of Muslims (along with Christians and Communists) as internal enemies to be exterminated or at least reduced to second-class citizens.²⁴ Resentments against Muslims stem from the memories of the Islamic domination over the subcontinent, and their involvement in cow slaughter. This need to assert cultural supremacy was also laced with masculine anxieties – the “trope of the alleged vegetarianism of Hindus and that of the sexual rapacity of non-vegetarian Muslims”²⁵, overcome only through explicit display of dominance.²⁶

Being constituted, on the one hand, by the promotion of vegetarianism that appeals to the Hindu elite, and on the other, and the need to programmatically isolate Muslims from the political mainstream, *gau raksha* provided for *Hindutva* one of its powerful platforms for the mobilization of religious voters into its fold as it transformed over the decades from a fringe ideology at the time of Independence into the hegemonic position it wields in contemporary India.²⁷

The conflicts between these traditionalists who argued for the institutionalization of *gau raksha* and secularists who sought to accommodate India’s diversity were baked into the Constitution²⁸ (discussed in the next section). The separation of Pakistan as a Muslim country, first gave Hindu fundamentalists in India a political climate or religious fervor to demand cow slaughter laws.²⁹ As a compromise to the cow protectionists, restriction on cow slaughter was included as a non-

¹⁸ Jha (2002), op. cit

¹⁹ Patel, A. (2020) *Our Hindu Rashtra: What it is. How we got here*. Chennai: Westland.

²⁰ *Rashtra* means nation or state

²¹ Appadurai, A. (2011). How the BJP’s two-pronged strategy has managed to push its ideology in a fragmented society, *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/politics/bjps-two-pronged-strategy-ideology-fragmented-society-totalitarianism>

²² Jaffrelot, (200). op.cit

²³ Mishra, P. (2017). *Age of anger: The history of the present*. New Delhi: Juggernaut Books.

²⁴ Mishra, P. (2017). op.cit

²⁵ Rao, M. (2011). Love Jihad and demographic fears. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 18(3), 425-430.p.428

²⁶ Sarkar, T. (2002). Semiotics of Muslim terror: Muslim children and women in Hindu *Rashtra*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(28), p. 2872-2876.

²⁷ Patel (2020). op.cit

²⁸ Bhatia, G. (2017). Cow slaughter and the Constitution. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/cow-slaughter-and-the-constitution/article18683942.ece>

²⁹ Patel (2020). op.cit

binding statute, Article 48 of the “Directive Principle of State Policy” an instrument meant to guide policymaking. This Article carefully avoided religious reasons and couched cow protection under the label of “Organisation of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry” to achieve multiple goals including preserving indigenous breeds and ensuring milk sufficiency.³⁰

Though only a ‘directive’, almost immediately after the Constitution came into being, many provinces (referred to in India as ‘states’) created laws of varying intensity.³¹ These policies were often enveloped in ambivalence not least due to the diversities in food habits across geographies, religions, and social categories. For the most part, during the post-independence era, traditionalists sought to mask the bigotry underlying their demands (as the ban was intended to impact Muslims who dominated the beef trade and were its main consumers), preferring to couch the justification as a way to protect indigenous species or to ensure nutrition (from the milk) or energy security (cow dung was used to fire kitchens).³² Both electoral significance of Muslims and the need to display commitments to secular principles led to these laws being unevenly formulated in terms of reach and intensity of punishments. Political parties and courts (these policies were often challenged) were constantly attempting to strike a balance between need to maintain the facade of secular-liberalism while appeasing the prevalent prejudices and the increasing hold of traditionalists on the electorate.³³

The stringency of the laws varied depending on reach and entrenchment of *Hindutva*.³⁴ In most states, the laws prevented the slaughter of cows, but tolerated the slaughter of bulls and buffaloes, as a nod to secularism. Where Hindu consolidation was firm, the need to accommodate the concerns of Muslims diminished, and cow protection laws became more stringent. For example, in Gujarat, where Narendra Modi’s brand of muscular *Hindutva* had taken root decades ago, the punishments for cow slaughter was more than that for murder and rape.³⁵ The rise and entrenchment of the same brand of *Hindutva* hegemony at the national scale, starting in 2014, has resulted in *gau raksha* gaining ground in new regions and laws in states where some form of cow slaughter laws were already in place becoming more stringent.³⁶ With political power, *gau raksha* can now be demanded and asserted as a religious matter, i.e. without the pretexts necessitated by the secular and scientific ethos that dominated the period of independence.^{37 38}

2.2 Message

A major contribution to the mainstreaming of *gau raksha* is the endorsement by powerful politicians, including the icon of *Hindutva* - Narendra Modi - whose rise to power as India’s current prime minister, has coincided with a spike in lynchings. We will discuss interconnected

³⁰ Bhatia (2017). op.cit

³¹ Patel (2020). op.cit

³² Patel (2020). op.cit

³³ Bhatia (2017). op.cit

³⁴ Patel (2020). op.cit

³⁵ Dave, H. (2017). Cow slaughter now punishable with life in jail in BJP’s Gujarat, *Hindustan Time*, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/cow-slaughter-now-punishable-with-life-in-jail-as-gujarat-assembly-passes-amendments/story-w6HhvEAqTU86dsLJC0NhOM.html>

³⁶ Patel (2020). op.cit

³⁷ Patel (2020). op.cit

³⁸ Down to Earth (2017). Cattle can no longer be traded for the purposes of slaughter: Centre.

<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/agriculture/centre-brings-in-slew-of-new-restrictions-on-cattle-trade-57947>

speech acts of the highest functionary of the country, from the leader of a province, down to lower-level political leaders and the gau rakshaks.

Speech Act 1: “Pink Revolution”

“When you slaughter an animal, then the colour of its meat is pink. This is what they call a “Pink Revolution”. And the Centre said with pride that, last year, India has earned the most from exporting meat. Across the countryside, our animals are getting slaughtered. Our livestock is getting stolen from our villages and taken to Bangladesh. Across India too, there are massive slaughterhouses in operation. And that’s not all. The Delhi Sarkar [government] will not give out subsidies to farmers, [but]....will give out subsidies to people who slaughter cows, who slaughter animals, who are destroying our rivers of milk, as long as they set up qatlkhana [slaughterhouses].” (Narendra Modi, current Prime Minister of India³⁹)

A hallmark of dangerous speech evident in these quotes is the *threat to group integrity*. Beef consumption, epitomized by the beef-consuming Muslims, is portrayed as a threat to integrity of Hindus. Let us consider each of these speech acts in succession, starting with Modi’s invocation of the ‘pink revolution’.

The use of the word ‘revolution’ has a historical resonance for Indian policy making. Concerns with feeding the huge population had preoccupied post-Independence policy makers. Policy-driven investments in food security in agriculture outputs were termed the “white revolution” (milk) and the “green revolution” (cereals).⁴⁰ A similar drive to expand beef exports, providing subsidies for slaughter, was referred to as the “pink revolution”. By 2014, Indian beef exports were steadily rising.⁴¹

So the phrase “pink revolution” evokes emotions and targets two reviled features – secular-socialist governments and Muslims. Modi’s attribution of ownership of the cows (“our animals”) and associating cows to “rivers of milk” associates cows with Hindu identity. (The fact that buffaloes, not revered, constitute beef exports was elided.⁴²) The second rhetorical move is to direct resentments against secular politicians for allowing Muslims to engage in sacrilegious acts. The third target are the Muslims, the “people who slaughter cows”, the “they” who set up slaughterhouses (Modi refers to slaughter houses in Urdu, a language associated with Muslims.)

Another dogwhistle is the barely cloaked association of Bangladesh with Muslims. Modi laments that: “Our livestock is getting stolen from our villages and taken to Bangladesh.” It is implied that the thieves are Muslims, and the stolen cows will be slaughtered for consumption by Muslims.

Speech Act 2: Yogi and the Cow

³⁹ This speech was made in the run-up to the general elections held in 2014. The quote is from Dhaniyal, S. (2015) *How Narendra Modi helped spread anti-beef hysteria*, <https://scroll.in/article/760006/how-narendra-modi-helped-spread-anti-beef-hysteria>

⁴⁰ Patel, R. (2013). The long green revolution. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 40(1), 1-63. Nair, K. N. (1985). White revolution in India: Facts and issues. *Economic and political weekly*, A89-A95.

⁴¹ Kannan, S. (2014). India's elections spark debate on beef exports, *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-27251802>; Borrer, E. (2015). Which country topped all others in beef exports in 2014? *Beef*, <https://www.beefmagazine.com/beef-exports/which-country-topped-all-others-beef-exports-2014>.

⁴² Choudhury, A. (2019). An Overview of India’s Beef Export Industry <https://www.statecraft.co.in/article/an-overview-of-india-s-beef-export-industry>

“Anyone indulging in cruelty to cows, or even talking about killing cows, will be behind bars....There is only one way to protect Indian culture: to protect gau (cows), Ganga, and Gayatri (goddess). Only a community that can protect this heritage can survive. Otherwise there will be a huge crisis of identity, and this crisis of identity will endanger our existence....Today, no one can dare to smuggle even a pinch of cow meat out of Uttar Pradesh (Yogi Adityanath, Chief Minister, Uttar Pradesh, 2017)⁴³

Another hallmark of dangerous speech is its framing of violence as a necessary reaction to an imminent threat. Dominant groups justify their violence on minorities by perpetuating a permanent feeling of siege.⁴⁴

The siege mentality is seen in Modi’s concern that “*our animals are getting slaughtered*,” and in Yogi’s observation that “*Only a community that can protect this heritage can survive*”. Both speech acts above portray *gau raksha* as integral to Hindu identity. Acts of cow slaughter are then used to fuel a siege mentality among the most powerful sections in India. The sacrilegious actions by the minority are becoming a sign of their domination over Hindus, and affront that requires action.

Public championing by popular politicians was a significant contributor to the mainstreaming of *gau raksha*. Their endorsement gave lynch mobs a moral conviction and impunity as *gau raksha* seeped into the institutional logic at all levels of the administration. Law enforcement agencies, mindful of the dominant ideological preferences, choose to ignore or even abet lynch mobs, and criminalize victims.⁴⁵ This collusion of the political, legal, and popular endorsement has provided unprecedented valorization of lynchings.

2.3. Speakers

If the *gau raksha* discourse had emanated from ordinary speakers from the fringes of political speech, its impact might not have been consequential. But it was triggered by Modi, the icon of the far right and an immensely popular politician. Modi has a carefully constructed persona of a tough and assertive enforcer of *Hindutva*.⁴⁶ Before Modi became the prime minister in 2014, he was the Chief Minister of Gujarat a province with a polarized history, and indeed, having one of the most stringent laws against cow slaughter.⁴⁷

Modi has built a brand as a enforcer of *Hindutva* and is feted for his infamous role in a pogrom of Muslims that occurred under his watch.⁴⁸ It is true that the courts found insufficient evidence of incitement, but his appeal to the *Hindutva* supporters is because they think he had a facilitating role. *The Economist* in 2013 quoted a Muslim in Modi’s Gujarat concerned that “nobody here thinks Modi is innocent. They know what he did and they are okay with that”.⁴⁹

⁴³ Poonam, S. (2017). To protect Indian culture, protect *gau* (cows): Adityanath at meeting of cow vigilantes. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/to-protect-indian-culture-protect-gau-adityanath-at-meeting-of-cow-vigilantes/story-GsKPbePGqZb7NnBCi7PTYM.html>

⁴⁴ Berbrier, M. (2000). The victim ideology of white supremacists and white separatists in the United States. *Sociological Focus*, 33(2), 175–191.

⁴⁵ Mander, H. (2019). Lynching, the scourge of new India. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/lynching-the-scourge-of-new-india/article29693818.ece>

⁴⁶ Jose, V. (2012). The emperor uncrowned: The rise of Narendra Modi, *The Caravan*, <https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/emperor-uncrowned-narendra-modi-profile>

⁴⁷ This speech was made in the run-up to the general elections held in 2014.

⁴⁸ Chakraborty, A. (2013). Narendra Modi, a man with a massacre on his hands, is not the reasonable choice for India, *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/07/narendra-modi-massacre-next-prime-minister-india>

⁴⁹ *The Economist* (2013) A man of some of the people

After Modi's election in 2014 in spite of his notorious reputation, a historian gave this chilling explanation: "The popularity of Modi is not that he is innocent but that he is guilty".⁵⁰ His statements therefore have menacing overtones picked up by *gau rakshaks*, already primed for violence, to reuse for inspiring and justifying the lynchings.

The speech act 2 was made by Yogi Adityanath who is a Hindu monk and current Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, a large province in Northern India. Adityanath was already notorious for making incendiary speeches and organizing vigilante groups to target Muslims⁵¹. Selecting him as the Chief Minister was seen by a senior scholar a symbolic rejection of secularism and the "last nail in coffin of constitutional democracy".⁵² Another shocked commentator noted that it: "signals that the BJP will now be dominated by extremes, its politics shaped largely by resentment rather than hope, ...hate rather than reconciliation, and violence rather than decency. Hubris has set in. The party believes it can get away with anything."⁵³

There is continuity in between Modi and Adityanath in the deployment of language of *gau raksha* for Hindu consolidation. Control over Uttar Pradesh by a politician notorious for spewing hate speech has wider consequences as the police is controlled by the state administration. Like Modi's anti-Muslim rhetoric as the chief minister of Gujarat had forced its state machinery into a complicity with Hindutva mobs, Yogi's endorsements of *gau raksha* were, and continue to be, picked up as cues by the police to abet the lynchings, and to often harass the victims who survive into silence by booking them under the stringent cow protection laws.⁵⁴ A police official investigating a case of lynching declared, "the cow killers are our top priority. The murder and rioting case is on the back burner right now."⁵⁵ This statement is an indication of the extent to which *gau raksha* had become institutionalized and the boundaries between the law enforcement agencies and vigilantes had blurred.

2.4 Audience

A permissive context, in which the mob's actions are condoned by the community, is a defining feature of lynching. A classic definition of lynching is "an illegal and summary execution at the hands of a mob, or a number of persons, who have in some degree *the public opinion of the community behind them*".⁵⁶ The mainstreaming of *gau raksha* resulted in a phenomenon hitherto associated with a widely different context of Jim Crow era in the United States – 'lynching' – entering the lexicon of popular press in India.⁵⁷ Of the recorded beef-related lynchings by

<https://www.economist.com/briefing/2013/12/18/a-man-of-some-of-the-people>

⁵⁰ Polanki, P.(2014). Popularity of Modi is not that he's innocent but that he's guilty, *Firstpost* <https://www.firstpost.com/india/popularity-of-modi-is-not-that-hes-innocent-but-that-hes-guilty-1442989.html>

⁵¹ *The Washington Post* (2017). Modi's party picks Yogi Adityanath, strident Hindu nationalist priest, as leader of India's biggest state. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/19/for-state-leader-modi-taps-firebrand-politician-who-once-advocated-killing-muslims/>

⁵² Chandhoke. N. (2017). The appointment of the Dodgy Yogi as CM is last nail in coffin of constitutional democracy, *The Citizen* <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/4/10227/The-Appointment-of-the-Dodgy-Yogi-As-CM-is-Last-Nail-in-Coffin-of-Constitutional-Democracy>

⁵³ Mehta. P.B. (2017). In the moment of his political triumph, Modi has chosen to defeat India, *Indian Express*, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/yogic-madness-yogi-adityanath-uttar-pradesh-bjp-narendra-modi-4576588/>

⁵⁴ Mander, H. (2018). The mob that hates, *Indian Express*, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/supreme-court-on-mob-lynching-law-against-lynching-case-social-media-whatsapp-rumuors-5265173/>

⁵⁵ quoted in Human Rights Watch (2019). op. cit

⁵⁶ Cutler, 1905, cited in Rushdy, A. H. (2012). *American lynching*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

⁵⁷ Ali, M. (2020). The rise of a Hindu vigilante in the age of WhatsApp and Modi, *Wired*, <https://www.wired.com/story/indias-frightening-descent-social-media-terror/>

vigilantes that occurred between 2010 and 2017, 97 percent took place after the BJP assumed power in 2014.^{58 59}

Vigilantes adopted the framings of *gau raksha* as adopted by Modi and Yogi to justify violent attacks as defence of identity and an expression of loyalty. The speech acts below by *gau rakshaks* displays another feature of dangerous speech – the evocation *group loyalty* – for mob violence.

The gau rakshak (cow protector)

“If a cow is being slaughtered, you should know that the foundation of the country is being slaughtered..” (Pawan Pandit, chairman of Bhartiya Gau Raksha Dal)⁶⁰

The identification of cow with the (Hindu) nation can be traced to the speeches of Modi and Yogi wherein the prevention of cow slaughter becomes indistinguishable from patriotism. By extension, lynching becomes an act of punishing traitors and hence chivalrous. The exhortations for in-group loyalty is clearest in the statement below by *gau rakshak*’s assertion that “real Hindus” will not hesitate from lynching. The holiness of the cow is dogma that adherents to Hindu nationalism are expected to respect without challenge. Conversely, the out-group is defined by their violation of the dogma.

The gau rakshak (cow protector)

“First we check where the cows are being taken. If they are being taken to be slaughtered, kill the person transporting the cows right there. Because when our mother is slaughtered then who is hurt? We are. That is why I feel we should kill those transporting the cows, if we are real Hindus. We can worry about the law later.”(Lakhan Yadav, Vishwa Hindu Parishad)⁶¹

The toxicity released by Modi and Yogi is amplified by other BJP leaders in lower rungs across the country with political ambitions. Statements by BJP politicians across the country after the lynchings began echoes of endorsement of *gau raksha*.⁶²

A lawmaker Gyan Dev Ahuja threatened: “If you slaughter cows, you will be lynched just like this.” A minister in Modi’s cabinet Arjun Meghwal, repeats the threat: “The more popular Modiji becomes, the more frequent such incidents will be.” Another lawmaker from Uttar Pradesh threatened to “break the hands and legs of those who do not consider cows their mother and kill them.” (Vikram Saini, BJP lawmaker from Uttar Pradesh). A member of the *Hindutva* network exulted: “Hindus never had the courage to stand up for their religion and now they are standing up,” he said. “The cow issue has led to an awakening.”⁶³

⁵⁸ Saldanha, A. (2017), op cit.

⁵⁹ Singh, N. (2021). Bearing Witness: Living in times of hate. In Fazal. T. (ed.), *The Minority Conundrum*, London: Penguin.

⁶⁰ Masoodi. A. (2016). Who is a Gau Rakshak? *The Mint*. <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/Mi6HZpayTzwJT7G6zy8dTO/Who-is-a-Gau-Rakshak.html>

⁶¹ Nandy, A. & Bose, M. (2018) , The making of Lynchistan: Inside India’s deadly gau raksha network, *BloombergQuint* <https://www.bloombergquint.com/politics/mob-lynching-cow-vigilantism-india-gau-raksha>. Quote is translated from interview https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UaCtvYtV2f0&list=PLfxX9kysVxH5SoWLA9tmjcGQqiz7VvKf5_&index=8&t=0s

⁶² quoted in Nandy, A. & Bose, M. (2018) Op. Cit.

⁶³ Siddiqui et al (2017). Special report: In Modi’s India, cow vigilantes deny Muslim farmers their livelihood. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/india-politics-religion-cows/special-report-in-modis-india-cow-vigilantes-deny-muslim-farmers-their-livelihood-idINKBN1D61E8?edition-redirect=in>

The blatancy of the statements endorsing hate and violence by both *gau rakshaks* and lawmakers, are indications of how dangerous speech has become ‘aspirational’ in contemporary India, a vehicle for upward mobility in an institutional climate where *Hindutva* wields unchallenged power.⁶⁴

2.5 Medium

Both speech acts represents milestones in the entry and mainstreaming of *gau raksha* in contemporary Indian politics.

Consider the first speech act made by Modi at a public rally during his campaign for the 2014 general elections, at a town called Nawada (in Bihar, North India), to belligerent supporters and broadcasted live on all major television channels.⁶⁵ An important and novel theme in this election was the explicitly sectarian portrayal by Modi of policies of the previous governments to increase beef exports – the ‘pink revolution’ – as a sacrilege to Hindu sentiments. The contents of this speech act, however, had been rehearsed and perfected over time.⁶⁶ As early as 2012, Modi is reported to have complained in provincial venues about the central government policies to offer sops on beef exports.⁶⁷ He has even chided a crowd of business executives for not opposing beef export initiatives: “Is this what we pride ourselves on? I do not know if you are saddened by this or not, but my heart is crying out loud. How are you silent and why are you tolerating this I do can never understand”.⁶⁸ This particular Modi’s speech signalled the arrival of *Hindutva* on the national stage and laid the path of its later entrenchment.

The second speech by Yogi Adityanath, was made in November 2017 to a public gathering at an event for *gau rakshaks* organized by the far right Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Congress) in Lucknow (northern India). By now, *gau raksha* had become mainstream state policy and lynchings had spiked. As noted earlier, Adityanath had been notorious for decade for his incendiary speeches against Muslims. Nevertheless, such a public event, and the legitimation of a more explicitly sectarian agenda by the most powerful executive in the province is another milestone in the path towards *Hindutva* achieving its hegemonic status in contemporary India.

The affinity between social media and the far right populists is a global trend and Modi is no exception.⁶⁹ ⁷⁰ In fact, the *Hindutva* establishment was way ahead of other politicians, not just in India, in recognizing the power of social media;⁷¹ groups with it run the country’s most sophisticated social media infrastructure.⁷² Modi’s ascension to power just gave the Indian social media landscape its uniquely sinister feature. Amit Shah, and arguably one of the most powerful

⁶⁴ Appadurai, A. (2020). A syndrome of aspirational hatred is pervading India, *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/politics/unnao-citizenship-bill-violence-india>

⁶⁵ *Supra*: note 39

⁶⁶ Konikkara, A. (2021). The price of meat, *The Caravan*, <https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/contradictions-bjp-animal-protection-politics>

⁶⁷ Outlook (2012). Modi again speaks on meat export 'subsidy' <https://www.outlookindia.com/newswire/story/modi-again-speaks-on-meat-export-subsidy/760237>

⁶⁸ Indian Express (2017). PM Narendra Modi’s earlier statements on cow protection: Cow is mother, but no one should take law in hand, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/pm-narendra-modis-earlier-statements-on-cow-protection-opposed-to-beef-exports-wanted-national-law/>

⁶⁹ Laub, Z (2019). Hate speech on social media: Global comparisons, *Council for Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/hate-speech-social-media-global-comparisons>.

⁷⁰ Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *# Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press.

⁷¹ Patel, A. (2014), India's social media election battle. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-26762391>

⁷² Mirchandani, M. (2018). Digital hatred, real violence: Majoritarian radicalisation and social media in India. *ORF Occasional Paper*, 167, 1-30. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/43665-digital-hatred-real-violence-majoritarian-radicalisation-and-social-media-in-india/>

Hindutva politicians and who oversees the propaganda campaigns for the government, boasted, “We are capable of delivering any message we want to the public, whether sweet or sour, true or fake”.⁷³

Social media, particularly WhatsApp, have had a crucial role in translating the *gau raksha* message into lynchings.⁷⁴ The advent of *Hindutva* coincided with the introduction of affordable smart phones and cheaper internet in rural areas, enabling WhatsApp to create its second largest market, in India.⁷⁵ Social media was the main gateway for news and information for many – technological illiteracy combined with deep-rooted prejudices set the stage for misinformation and polarisation strategies for the spread of *Hindutva*.

Enthusiastic *gau rakshaks* in the crowd from rural areas were seen broadcasting this speech live on Facebook to families and fellow vigilantes.⁷⁶ Social media also allows lynchings to become performative, with members of the mob recording themselves in the act of violence and sharing these gruesome videos in their networks.⁷⁷ Recordings of the violent subjugation of Muslims were meant to be communicated to every corner of the country as a message to both the potential perpetrators (on how to do a lynching) and a warning to Muslims of their fate if accused of cow slaughter.

Far-right populists are typically forced to use social media to communicate with their target audience, circumventing traditional media companies who are, ostensibly, gatekeepers of the norms of civility and respecters of facts.⁷⁹ *Hindutva* did not face this hurdle as mainstream media companies and its viewers were enthusiastic in their support for a brand of politics based on Hindu supremacy.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the top management at social media companies, particularly Facebook, played a significant role in the creation of the social media strategy for *Hindutva* propaganda to dominate India’s social media landscape.⁸¹ ⁸² The continuing collusion between the top management and the regime adds to the continuing reluctance to restrict dangerous speech that contributed to the entrenching of *Hindutva*.⁸³

⁷³Marlow, I. (2018). Head of India’s ruling party emboldens volunteers spreading fake news, *BloombergQuint*, <https://www.bloombergquint.com/politics/india-ruling-party-head-emboldens-volunteers-spreading-fake-news>

⁷⁴ Ali, M. (2020). op. cit.

Kumar, R. (2019). India’s media can’t speak truth to power, *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/02/indias-media-cant-speak-truth-to-power-modi-bjp-journalism/>

⁷⁵ Singh, M. (2017). WhatsApp hits 200 million active users in India. *Mashable*, <https://mashable.com/2017/02/24/whatsapp-india-200-million-active-users/>

⁷⁶ Supra. note 43

⁷⁷ Mukherjee, R. (2020) Mobile witnessing on WhatsApp: Vigilante virality and the anatomy of mob lynching, *South Asian Popular Culture*, 18(1), 79-101, DOI: 10.1080/14746689.2020.1736810

⁷⁸ Udupa, S. (2019). Extreme speech| nationalism in the digital age: Fun as a Metapractice of extreme speech. *International Journal of Communication*, 13(22), p. 3143–3163.

⁷⁹ The Guardian (2018). The populist social media playbook: the battle for Facebook, Twitter and Instagram

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/17/populist-social-media-playbook-who-is-best-facebook-twitter-instagram-matteo-salvini-narendra-modi>. The period studied in this case study precedes the recent actions by social media companies to curtail the spread of misinformation and dangerous speech.

⁸⁰ Baru, S (2021). Narendra Modi used India’s media elite for his own advantage. Sanjaya Baru explains how he did it, *Scroll.in*, <https://scroll.in/article/992808/narendra-modi-used-indias-media-elite-for-his-own-advantage-sanjaya-baru-explains-how-he-did-it>

⁸¹ Horwitz, J. & N.Purnell (2020). Facebook executive supported india’s Modi, disparaged opposition in internal messages, *The Wall Street Journal*, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-executive-supported-indias-modi-disparaged-opposition-in-internal-messages-11598809348>

⁸² Sam, C&P.M. Thakurta, (2018), Did Facebook in India help BJP and Modi? Or was it vice versa? *Newsclick*, <https://www.newsclick.in/part-2-did-facebook-india-help-bjp-and-modi-or-was-it-vice-versa>

⁸³ Biswas, S, (2020), Is Facebook favouring the ruling BJP in India? *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53803256>.

3. Response

Lynching, on the one hand is framed as necessary to pre-empt harm, and on the other frames the alleged cow slaughterers and beef consumers as deserving punishment. The lynchings follow a consistent pattern. A group of *gau rakshaks* accosts Muslims seen with cattle or meat (whether they are milk traders or traders of the meat itself need not restrain the vigilantes) and proceed to lynch.⁸⁴ The mobs invariably scream Hindu religious chants, and in some cases, the victims are forced to chant while being assaulted.⁸⁵ The enthusiastic chanting of religious slogans, the inclination to film the act and post the gruesome videos on the social media, and the eagerness to boast about their participation to journalists are indications of the presumed support of the public and politicians.⁸⁶

Modi has made all of two statements against lynchings. The first was in 2016 when six Dalits were lynched by *gau rakshaks*.⁸⁷ However, there could be political calculations behind this gesture as Dalits are a group that *Hindutva* requires in its fold to maintain the numerical majority.⁸⁸ The second was in 2017, the worst year for lynchings. Here again damage to India's, and by implication Modi's, international reputation could have played a role as by then international media was beginning to take notice. He stated: "Today, when I hear that someone is killed in the name of a cow — whether he is innocent or guilty is something the law will decide — no person has the right to take the law into his own hands. I appeal to the people of the country: Violence is not a solution to the problems."⁸⁹ Adityanath made similar appeals and warnings against vigilantism.⁹⁰ However, the damage to the secular and plural social fabric was already done.

The reporting of lynching by the Indian media had riled the state⁹¹. As the National Crime Records Bureau does not collect data on religious hate crimes, most analysts rely on independent sources such as those that were meticulously maintained as Hate Crime Watch by Indiaspend, a portal committed to data journalism. The regime's response was to force the media to remove the information from its websites.⁹² Simultaneously *gau raksha* as a justification for lynchings had become pathologically normal feature of India and also mainstream policy position.⁹³ Modi's insincerity was exposed soon enough. Just a year later, a senior BJP cabinet minister

⁸⁴ quoted in Human Rights Watch (2019).Op. cit.

⁸⁵ BBC (2019). Jai Shri Ram: The Hindu chant that became a murder cry <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-48882053>;

Menon, A. (2019); Jai Shri Ram: How a chant became a war cry for attacking Muslims, *The Quint*, <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/jai-shri-ram-slogans-anti-muslim-lynchings-in-india>

⁸⁶ Banaji, S. & R. Bhat (2019). WhatsApp Vigilantes: An exploration of citizen reception and circulation of WhatsApp misinformation linked to mob violence in India. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/projects/WhatsApp-Misinformation-Report.pdf>

⁸⁷ Doshi, V. (2018). Modi finally speaks out against lynchings of 'beef eaters', *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/modi-finally-speaks-out-against-lynchings-of-beef-eaters/2017/06/29/f171e042-5ccf-11e7-aa69-3964a7d55207_story.html

Varadarajan, S. (2016). Stung by Dalit backlash, Narendra Modi eats his own words on cow slaughter. *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/politics/stung-by-dalit-backlash-modi-calls-cow-vigilantes-anti-social>

⁸⁸ Vij, S. (2016). Narendra Modi's brotherly words for Dalits make his silence on Muslims ring louder, *Quartz*, <https://qz.com/india/752841/narendra-modis-brotherly-words-for-dalits-make-his-silence-on-muslims-ring-louder/>

⁸⁹ Doshi (2018), Op.cit

⁹⁰ Supra. Note 43

⁹¹ Schultz, K. Raj, S, Gettleman, J. and H. Kumar (2019). In India, release of hate crime data depends on who the haters are, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/24/world/asia/india-modi-hindu-violence.html>

⁹² Srivas, A. (2017) Hindustan Times editor's exit preceded by meeting Between Modi, newspaper owner, *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/media/hindustan-times-bobby-ghosh-narendra-modi-shobhana-bhartia>

⁹³ Shukla A. (2018). 'Pathological normalcy' and mob violence, *Economic and Political Weekly*.

https://www.epw.in/journal/2018/31/commentary/%E2%80%98pathological-normalcy%E2%80%99-and-mob-violence.html?0=ip_login_no_cache%3D526e499b8f3898b2daf0ca755d20c95b

even congratulated some lynchers released on bail, with no consequences for his position within the party.⁹⁴

4. Countering the *dangerous speech* – A bleak picture.

The discussion of the consequences of *gau raksha* in the entrenching of Hindu nationalism reveals the analytical benefits of the dangerous speech framework. Dangerous speech and misinformation often reinforce each other. This is particularly true in the case of *Hindutva* which, like most supremacist views, draws its strength from unfounded beliefs in civilizational superiority, uniformity, and exclusivism on the one hand, and exaggerated resentments against minorities on the other hand.⁹⁵ Restricting the creation, propagation, and consumption of misinformation is necessary for meaningful counter-speech to *gau raksha*.

However, recent studies in the field of political cognition reveal how demagogues are able to retain support in spite of breaking fundamental norms.⁹⁶ Under polarized conditions, expression of outrage by opposing groups binds the supporters more firmly to populist figures. Other studies show that demagogues are appealing precisely *because* of disdain for pluralism and norms of decency.⁹⁷

Arguments based on reason and liberal frameworks have proven ineffective in India. Each time an incendiary remark was made and lynchings enacted, academics, activists, the liberal press, fact checkers, and political leaders committed to secularism have responded vociferously and demonstrated that lynchings were facilitated, if not triggered, by the dangerous speeches by BJP's politicians.⁹⁸ Pursuing *gau raksha* as its central agenda has also led to economic losses and ensuing unemployment.⁹⁹ The re-election of the BJP, with an even bigger mandate in 2019, points to the ineffectiveness of the resistance to the core supporters of the regime, and reiterating the point noted above that, the popularity of *Hindutva* is *because* of its endorsement of dangerous speech.

Since re-election in 2019 of the Modi-led government, *gau raksha* has gone full throttle. The government has created a department exclusively for the promotion of benefits of the cow.¹⁰⁰ More recent iterations of the cow protection laws are providing explicit impunity from prosecution for vigilantes.¹⁰¹ The Yogi government in Uttar Pradesh has recently proposed a cow cess to fund cow shelters.¹⁰² Even political parties that were historically and ostensibly aligned

⁹⁴ Gettleman, J. & Kumar, H. (2018). A minister fetes a convicted lynch mob, and many Indians recoil, *The New York Times*, 20 July, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/20/world/asia/india-jayant-sinha-lynch-mob.html>

⁹⁵ Mudde (2019); Jaffrelot, (2019). Op. cit

⁹⁶ Swire, B., Berinsky, A. J., Lewandowsky, S., & Ecker, U. K. (2017). Processing political misinformation: comprehending the Trump phenomenon. *Royal Society open science*, 4(3), 160802.

⁹⁷ Richards, B. (2020). Trump the transgressor: the psychological appeal of leaders who break the rules, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/trump-the-transgressor-the-psychological-appeal-of-leaders-who-break-the-rules-130247>

⁹⁸ Mander, H., Badhwar, N., & Dayal, J. (Eds.). (2018). *Reconciliation. Karwan e Mohabbat's journey of solidarity through a wounded India*. Chennai: Westland Publications.

⁹⁹ Kazmin, A. (2017). Modi's India: the high cost of protecting holy cows, *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/63522f50-caf3-11e7-ab18-7a9fb7d6163e>

¹⁰⁰ The Wire (2020). In syllabus for national exam on cows, Rastriya Kamdhenu Aayog Unleashes Half-Truths, <https://thewire.in/government/cows-rastriya-kamdhenu-aayog-exam-gau-seva>

¹⁰¹ Murthy, A. (2020). Explained: Karnataka's new Anti-Cow Slaughter Bill and its provisions, Fact Checker, <https://www.factchecker.in/explained/explained-karnatakas-new-anti-cow-slaughter-bill-and-its-provisions-702831>

¹⁰² *The Scroll* (2019), National cow commission, promised in interim Budget, gets Cabinet approval

<https://scroll.in/latest/912309/national-cow-commission-promised-in-interim-budget-gets-cabinet-approval>

with secularism and science jumped onto the *gau raksha* bandwagon to burnish their Hindu credentials – an ideological commitment now referred to as ‘soft *Hindutva*’.¹⁰³ As a final indication of triumph of *Hindutva*, a serving Muslim police person from Uttar Pradesh publicly stated that a “theological denunciation of cow slaughter is an imperative for peace, and self-preservation of Muslims”.¹⁰⁴ The statements by chief ideologue of *Hindutva* that lynching goes against *Hindutva*¹⁰⁵ seems to not deter other key spokespersons from spewing dangerous speech explicitly calling for violence against Muslims¹⁰⁶.

Given the extent of polarization in contemporary India, counter-speech messages that are premised on reason and compassion are unlikely to dislodge the impact of dangerous speech. As the various external indices of democracy indicate, human rights discourses have diminishing appeal within the government and among its supporters, and civil rights groups are beleaguered through various forms of explicit and insidious state-sponsored repression. For political parties, assiduous uses of *gau raksha* have proven benefits; conversely, being opposed to it is a definite path to electoral oblivion.

The National Herald (2021) Yogi govt levies *gau raksha* cess; opposition asks why people are being burdened

<https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/yogi-govt-levies-gau-raksha-cess-opposition-asks-why-people-are-being-burdened>

¹⁰³ Dixit, R. (2019). How the Congress is normalising soft-*Hindutva* in Madhya Pradesh, *The Wire* <https://thewire.in/politics/how-the-congress-is-normalising-soft-hindutva-in-madhya-pradesh>

¹⁰⁴ Hoda, N. (2021). Cow and conciliation, *The Hindu*, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/cow-and-conciliation/article34022009.ece>

¹⁰⁵ The Indian Express (2021), ‘Educate BJP leaders first’: Digvijaya, Owaisi on Bhagwat saying lynching for cow against *Hindutva* <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/hindutva-owaisi-digvijaya-singh-reactions-rss-chief-mohan-bhagwat-7389654/>

¹⁰⁶ Halarnkar, S. (2021), Suraj Pal Amu and the New *Hindutva* <https://scroll.in/article/997308/suraj-pal-amu-and-the-new-hindutva>