

CLEANSING THE NATION

INDIA,

RAKA SHOME

THE HINDU
MODERN &
MEDIATIONS
OF GENDER



CLEANSING THE NATION



BUY

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RAKA SHOME

DUKE

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I dedicate this book to all those who are being violently
excised today by the Hindu nationalist imagination.

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The infrastructure of fascism is staring us in the face . . .
and yet we hesitate to call it by its name.

—ARUNDHATI ROY, *AZADI*

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PREFACE

Writing this book has been a journey in humility. When I conceived of this book, I was primarily interested in finding out what is going on with Hindu nationalism in contemporary India, with the ascent of the Bharatiya Janata Party to power in 2014; how Hindu nationalism has taken on such fascist colors; and why it is succeeding without much significant resistance—which marks a difference from its earlier avatars—and why more and more people in India today are consciously asserting their Hindu identity.

As I plunged into this study, I took a deep dive into issues that I knew something about: caste and the oppression of Muslim identities in India. But it is one thing to “know something” (and realize that it has been a very small knowing), quite another to dive into their everyday realities through research and engage the brutal exclusions that shape, and have shaped, the polity of India. As I spent months plunging into the writings of B. R. Ambedkar, Kancha Ilaiah, Jyotirao Phule, Dalit Panthers, Anand Teltumbde, Braj Mani, Gail Omvedt, Sharmila Rege, Yassica Dutta, and others, I was confronted again—as if I had received a sharp slap in the face (“sharp” because of the hard realization that so little has changed)—by how caste oppression is not only a fulcrum upon which the nation pivots but the violent structure that makes it *even possible*. These are not writers or thinkers whose works ever surface in the curricula of most Indian schools and colleges. Reading the works of these Dalit scholars or scholars committed to caste issues also led me to descend into the Hindu supremacist writings of Savarkar, M. S. Golwalkar, and others. You learn in such works, again and again, that “being Hindu” is deeply rooted not only in an ideology of supremacy but also hate—something that everyday liberal Hindus deny in their desire to distance themselves from such ideologies in order to appear “modern” in contemporary India. But rarely do they pause to see if the currents of those ideologies infiltrate their lives in some way or another. Thus, when Ambedkar said in 1936 that “there is no Hindu

consciousness of kind. In every Hindu the consciousness that exists is the consciousness of his [sic] caste" (2014, 189), he was so very right.

Anyone paying attention to India today also cannot, and should not, ignore the brutal yet tragic ways in which the Muslim body is being excised from the national imagination. To some extent this has always been the case in India before and after Partition. But this time around, it is happening *without apologies* and *with pride*. Stuart Hall once said, "Against the urgency of people dying in the streets what in God's name is the point of Cultural Studies?" (1992, 284). Indeed, what is the point of being scholars and intellectuals studying India when Dalits, Muslims, and other minorities (including the poor) are symbolically and even materially dying or being abused in the streets of India? What does all this brutality demand of us, especially those who are Hindus and privileged? Do we stand by and watch a multireligious and multiethnic democracy crumble just because "our lives" are not that affected by the process? As scholars and intellectuals, what are our choices here? How do we make visible, in loud and unapologetic ways, the processes of purification and cleansing at work in the nation today? How do we refuse such processes?

Speaking out against all this in whatever way possible is definitely one way. But going back and learning about the (unacknowledged) histories of violence (especially of caste and Muslim oppression) that have made today's India possible is another. For one cannot challenge something whose history (small *h*) one does not fully understand or know. To that extent, this book has been a deep exercise in relearning. I tried to access—however and wherever I could (and it is increasingly hard to do so these days)—stories and voices of caste and Muslim oppression in India, before and since Partition and right into the present. The present in India is what it is today because these histories have not been made visible in any significant way in the media, in schools and colleges, in the publishing industry (with a few notable exceptions), in the entertainment industry, in government documents, and in legends and folklore. Yet their shadows are everywhere today, growing darker and longer every moment. Such historical relearning is important also because today in India history is being used (and denied) in particular ways by the state to cleanse the nation. In focusing on a signature development campaign in current India, this book tries to address (however imperfectly) how the past reemerges in current discourses of progress and modernity in the nation.

A few months ago (at the time of writing this preface) the nation exploded in outrage about the rape of a young female doctor in Kolkata's

R. G. Kar Medical Hospital. As with the 2012 Nirbhaya rape case, the nation (and diasporic Indians) cohered in outrage against the rape (and its attempted cover up) of a (Hindu) woman—nothing wrong in that. But in that clamor and outrage, I could only hear the resounding silence around the everyday rapes and molestation of Dalit women and the increasing violence toward Muslim women—including calls for their rape and abduction—that are at an all-time high today. These women can never be India's daughters: never a Nirbhaya or an Abhaya (the name given to the female victim of the R. G. Kar Medical Hospital case). The media does not cover the violence toward them. The nation does not organize around them. Celebrities do not create hashtags for them. There are no candle-light marches that light up their violated bodies. The global Indian diaspora does not explode in outrage. There is only silence. And ignorance. And prejudice. And fear.

This book is thus a small attempt to intellectually make some noise in this climate of silence and fear. Here, I join many other intellectuals, scholars, and writers whose courage is contagious and inspiring, and who are similarly trying to make some noise about the crumbling of democracy in India, while risking being silenced.

Through the process of writing this book, I found myself haunted by questions such as: How is “being Hindu” built on violence and exclusion? Has India really been a “free” nation since 1947? Free for whom? How is the democracy (however imperfect and incomplete) that India created in the post-Partition years disintegrating with such speed? And how is the silence of the upper and middle classes and castes in the nation, who proudly espouse the arrival of a “new India,” entangled with this disintegration? While these are questions for and about India, they are also not just about India but about a larger global trend: the demise of democracy, the entrenchment of authoritarianism, the normalization of state violence, and the suppression of “other” imaginations that mark our times.

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No book is ever written in isolation. Academic projects are always indirectly collaborative. Conversations with thinkers throughout our intellectual journeys shape our imaginations, our ways of writing, our ways of asking questions about the social. So, a big thanks to everyone I have encountered on my intellectual journey and from whom I have learnt something—even if I may have unconsciously forgotten that learning.

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Various parts of this project have been presented as keynote and plenary talks at conferences, and as lectures at various universities and forums: the “Gender, Mobility and Transformations in Asia” conference at University of Melbourne; the “Mapping Global Futures” conference at Ghent University, Belgium organized by the International Rhetoric Society; the Giles Wilkeson Gray Lecture at Louisiana State University; the Audrey Fisher Lecture at the University of Utah; the Annual Rhetorical Leadership Lecture at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee; the “Fire on the Mountain” conference at the Center for Media, Religion, and Culture at the University of Colorado–Boulder; the Rhetoric Speaker Series at Northwestern University; and the Graduate Speaker Series at Temple University, among others. Additionally, parts of this book have been presented at annual conferences of the International Communication Association, the

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National Communication Association, the Association for Cultural Studies (their biennial Crossroads Conference), the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Conference (Seoul), and the South Asia Conference at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I thank the audiences at all these forums for their questions and comments, which have pushed my thinking in helpful ways.

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ONE CLEANSING THE NATION

HINDU NATIONALISM, THE HINDU MODERN, AND GENDER

Our country is our Identity, so, keep Identity clean.

—@BPC RETAILGOA

Swachhata [cleanliness/purity] is a puja [a Hindu prayer] for me.

—NARENDRA MODI

May 2014 changed the political and cultural landscape of India, arguably forever. The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), the political arm of the Hindu supremacist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) gained power in a landslide victory. Narendra Modi, the former chief minister of the state of Gujarat, referred to by some critics as the “butcher of Gujarat” because of his alleged silent enablement of the massacre of scores of Muslims there in 2002, was inaugurated as prime minister.¹ Never before had a party with strong religious associations achieved such a huge victory by promising so much to the people—no less than a “new India” and *acche din* (good days) of which the people could be proud. Fatigued by the alleged corruption in the previously ruling Congress Party, whose image had been dented by scandal after scandal, and lured by the promise of a “new India” with global power, “the people” decided to take a chance on a Hindu nationalist party, despite awareness of the BJP’s hard Hindu nationalist agenda and association with the RSS.

While the “saffron wave” (Hansen 1999), referring to the color associated with Hindu supremacist movements, had existed in India prior to this time, from 2014 onward something quite unique emerged. Hindutva—the ideology of Hindu supremacy that claims Hindus are the original people of India—entered the very fabric of statecraft and governance in new ways, resulting in what Thomas Blom Hansen and Srirupa Roy term “governmental Hindutva” (2022, 9). Going forward, Hindu nationalism became seamlessly attached to national development as visions of national progress frequently came to be expressed through the vocabulary and imagery of Hinduism—sometimes explicitly and sometimes in coded language. As Angana Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen, and Christophe Jaffrelot note, today, Hindu nationalism “is shifting the relations between the Indian state and its diverse people” in a way in which the state functions not just as a political organ but as a cultural organ for celebrating and protecting the (Hindu) majority (Chatterji et al. 2019a, 2). Meanwhile, in Hindutva discourse, minorities of all stripes—Muslims, Christians, Dalits—become a threat; or they are appropriated into a majoritarian framework (often to secure votes) that keeps alive only a hollow pretense of pluralism. Fittingly, Jaffrelot (2021) calls India today an “ethnic democracy.” This explicit entrance of Hindutva into national governance today in India is what is being termed *majoritarianism* by scholars (e.g., Chatterji et al. 2019b)—which is the idea that it is the (Hindu) majority who need the nation’s protection as its power has thus far been weakened by the various protections and rights given to minorities. Another idea underpinning this formation is that the past glories of Hinduism have been suppressed by Muslim cultures since the medieval era, when Muslim empires dominated and seemingly diluted ancient Hindu grandeur. The issue in today’s political climate thus is less Hinduism and more, to use Partha Chatterjee’s phrase, the “*nationalization of Hinduism*” (1992, 1, emphasis added).

The terms *Hindutva* and *Hindu nationalism* will often be used interchangeably in this book because the political and cultural project of Hindutva weaponizes Hinduism and conflates it with the nation and national belonging. While not all expressions of Hindu nationalism reflect the militant, culturally, and politically exclusionary aspects typical of Hindutva, which works in multiple ways, contemporary Hindu nationalism cannot be separated from Hindutva, for Hindu nationalism is the chief formation through which Hindutva secures itself today. It is through Hindu nationalism that Hindutva weaponizes the state so that the state—through its policies and instruments—functions to resecure the power of Hindus

and relegates all others to second-class citizenship. Hindu nationalism, I emphasize, is not only manifest in nationalist performances and rhetorics at the formal state and government level. There is also a kind of everyday Hindu nationalism that is both mobilized by the state *and* circulates through the discourses of nonstate actors and institutions such as the media, popular art, education, social media, digital apps, and everyday interactions between people online and on the ground. Further, Hindu nationalism is not a hardened monolith; its strategies and logics often shift in response to contextual factors, such as the needs of the ruling party in different times, places, and political situations.

This book contributes to our understanding of this nationalization of Hinduism through identifying an important yet underexplored recent campaign that has contributed to the normalization of Hindutva—the Clean India campaign, or as it is known in India, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA). Through this campaign, state and nonstate actors mobilizing upper and upper middle-class and caste notions of hygiene have linked together national development and national sanitation to enable a program of Hindu nationalist governance through cleanliness. The case of SBA brings into relief particular *logics and governmentalities* of contemporary Hindu nationalism that constitute what I call (and elaborate later) the Hindu *modern*—where ideas, images, and values informing national development, progress, and governance often rely on a Hindu civilizational ethos while also becoming aligned with the project of Hindutva, overtly or covertly. One of the most important features of the Modi government is the manner in which it is re-writing modernity in new ways through (Hindu) religious and vernacular logics.² The governmentality of the Hindu modern, I posit, enables that re-writing. Rather than merely situating SBA under the umbrella of the Hindu modern, this book contends that the SBA campaign has served as an important crucible for the refinement and enactment of a vision of Hindu modernity as an intertwined state and popular project. Organized around the ostensibly politically neutral goals of hygiene and disinfection, hallmarks of global modernity, SBA, I argue, structures a cleaning agenda at home that echoes and mobilizes a more insidious project of national cleansing; simultaneously, it works to sanitize the violence that has accompanied the enactment of Hindu modern governmentality in SBA and beyond.

The SBA campaign has been the BJP's pet development program. It was inaugurated by Modi with much fanfare and media hype on October 2, 2014, the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, to acknowledge his commitment to cleanliness and sanitation during the freedom struggle movement.

While SBA documents do not explicitly define “dirt” or “clean,” its main goals are to forge a “clean” nation by discouraging people from dropping garbage, encouraging people to adopt hygienic habits, bringing about behavioral change through raising awareness about hygiene and health, and, most importantly, eliminating open defecation (especially in rural India) by 2019 in order to achieve universal sanitation (Parmar 2020). The latter goal was the rationale upon which the World Bank pledged \$1.5 billion, a loan that by latest accounts has not yet been received due to questions about whether the program’s stated goals have truly been achieved and whether *independent* verification of ground results has been done (Rajagopal 2017; Yadavar 2017).³ The overall aim of the first phase of the SBA campaign (from 2014 to 2019) was to construct twelve crore (approximately 120 million) toilets across India, with a focus on poorer rural and urban areas. Union budget documents indicate that until 2020 approximately 67,000 crore rupees (approximately \$8.046 billion) have been spent on SBA (Gulankar 2020), and in the first three years, roughly 530 crore rupees (approximately \$63.7 million) have been spent on public campaigns (Deep 2017). This book primarily focuses on the first phase of the SBA campaign, since that has been the most spectacularly mediated phase of the program, where lots of publicity occurred and global attention—and funding—was secured or promised. Additionally, it is this phase that overtly in its rhetoric mobilized a (Hindu) nationalist imaginary. When it was originally announced, the SBA campaign was supposed to run until 2019. However, as this date approached, new phases were announced and now it is in the second phase, whose stated goal is to cement the aims of the first. (This second phase, which, among other issues, aims to focus more on technicalities around biodegradable waste management and wastewater treatment, is beyond the scope of this book.) Thus, instead of writing about SBA in the past tense, this book considers the campaign as ongoing, and uses the present tense in discussing the completed, and significant, first phase, which was also hypermediated in relation to the second.

The SBA campaign has two intersecting arms: SBA Urban and SBA Gramen (or rural). The former is under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and the latter under the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation (now the Ministry of Jal Shakti). Sources of funding come from the central government; individual state governments (following a 60:40 ratio for most states); a 0.5 percent tax levied on all services, so citizens are also paying for it (this is in addition to the 14 percent service tax that is typically charged); the private sector (through corporate social responsi-

bility programs); and other tax exempt donations to the SBA *kosh* (fund).⁴ The government offers a financial incentive of 12,000 rupees to individual families under the SBA Grameen scheme to build in-home toilets. In the SBA Urban scheme, the central government offers a subsidy of 4,000 rupees and states are to contribute at least 2,667 rupees (PTI 2018c). This has been critiqued by many, for in urban India the subsidy is simply not enough for constructing private toilets.

Financially, SBA typically operates on a reimbursement model. The government subsidy is generally paid only after a household has made the initial investment toward toilet construction, but some reports state that this money does not always make its way to families due to bureaucratic hiccups or corruption at the local level.⁵ The program is run by local states that operate with financial and technical support from the central government. The latter issues guidelines to states to be implemented. Although on the eve of the alleged completion of the first phase of SBA in October 2019 the prime minister declared that India is now “open defecation free” (ODF) because 109 crore toilets have been constructed, there is ongoing skepticism about this declaration (PIB 2022a). Some reports contest this claim because toilet construction does not equate to usage nor confirms the usability of the constructions. Independent agencies have not fully verified the government’s tall claims.⁶

During the SBA campaign, especially in the first phase, there has been limited focus on solid and liquid waste management, which includes sewage cleaning issues as well. This is important to note for, as the following chapters will address, it raises questions about who cleans the waste from toilets. The Centre for Policy Research notes that only 374 crore rupees (approximately \$43 million) were spent in the whole country on solid and liquid waste management from 2015–16 through December 2018 (Kapur and Deshpande 2019). This was less than 1 percent of the total of the government’s share of SBA. In 2018–19 it was 4 percent, and in 2019–20 (until early July) it was, on average, 5 percent (Shekhar 2023). This is indeed a sorry state of affairs. In the second phase of the SBA campaign (2020 to 2025), there is some commitment signaled in the policy document about the guidelines for this phase, which signal initiatives that will be undertaken to secure the safety, health, and improved living conditions for sanitation workers, which it admits was ignored earlier (see Shekhar 2023). But as Shekhar notes, “nowhere in the document one finds mention of specific initiatives” that have “improved living conditions, ensuring safety and health, and providing dignity etc. to the sanitation workers” (2023, 140),

who, as is well known, are primarily from Dalit communities. In other words, there still seems to be continued vagueness about whether the state will protect sanitation (Dalit) workers from the horrendous task of fecal waste management. Nor is there an indication of whether the state will fully recognize and acknowledge the interlinkage between a clean India, caste awareness, and structural issues relating to caste.

While these figures provide more context for the SBA program, in the end they are less important to the goal of this book, which is not to assess the “success” of SBA in the government’s terms—for example, whether purported targets are being met—but rather to explore the Hindu cultural/nationalist logics that inform the narrativization of SBA and how they may offer insights into the governmentalities of the Hindu modern in contemporary India. In particular, this book analyzes the mediation of SBA in order to demonstrate how national development logics in India today advance notions of being (or becoming) modern that are anchored in a Hindu civilizational ethos. Such narrativization, I emphasize, has “on the ground” effects in terms of excluding Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis and other minorities from the developmental imaginary of the nation, and who, according to Hindu modern sensibilities promoted by SBA and other projects—often in unseen ways—require cleansing. Its impacts also, as we will see, have particular ramifications for differentially situated women and the hetero-gendered systems of power through which exclusions and marginalizations operate in India today.

On launch day in October 2014, Modi and a host of other BJP members appeared on national television with crisp new brooms cleaning up dirt and filth in Valmiki Colony, which houses sanitation workers, most of whom are Dalits (figure 1.1). Advertisements had been placed in major newspapers over preceding days asking people to come in large numbers and participate in the launch of SBA. The prime minister reminded the people of Gandhi’s famous statement that “cleanliness is next to godliness,” and that cleanliness and sanitation had been dreams of Gandhi, the father of the nation. He emphasized that “Mahatma Gandhi secured freedom for Mother India. Now it is our duty to serve Mother India by keeping the country neat and clean” (PM India 2014).

Valmiki Colony was a symbolic choice because Mahatma Gandhi had lived there for approximately two hundred days with Dalits (formerly “untouchables”) who were and are (despite a law outlawing the practice) primarily manual scavengers. Although some Dalits have made advancements through higher education despite gross systemic obstacles, cleaning filth,



FIGURE 1.1 Modi at Valmiki Colony launching Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. This picture has gone viral and become emblematic of “clean patriotism.” Photo: India Press Information Bureau, via European Pressphoto Agency.

sewers, and latrines has remained their primary occupation because of centuries of the dominance of the Hindu Brahmanical order. So, inaugurating the movement in Valmiki Colony was supposed to be a respectful but tokenistic nod to the labor of Dalits—yet, as we will see in this book, the Dalit body too often disappears from the screens of the Clean India spectacle which I argue functions to further entrench social and political hierarchies.

From its launch, Modi positioned SBA as a patriotic project devoid of politics: “this is beyond politics. This is inspired by patriotism not politics. . . . If we paint this again with a brush of politics, we will again do a disservice to mother India” (Srivastava 2014). The launch of the SBA campaign, with its contemporary usage of the term *Bharat Mata* (Mother India), set the stage for a broader project: a patriotic people’s campaign, articulated through Hindu divine and familial frameworks, to cleanse the national space of filthy elements. Through centering *Bharat Mata*, a Hindu figure who has variously been imagined through different incarnations of Hindu goddesses in nationalist history, Modi positioned SBA as a freedom struggle *within* the nation—a struggle not against external colonizers but

against filth and dirt that have subjugated Bharat Mata from inside the nation's borders. If Bharat Mata must be saved from dirt and filth, then, metaphorically, that saving also becomes linked to the excising of Muslim and Dalits, whose bodies can never be birthed by Bharat Mata and have historically been seen as "contaminating" her, given her situatedness in a Hindu symbolic order that this campaign modernizes through the rubrics of hygiene and development.

The media has framed SBA as one of the most popular movements in recent times to grip the imagination of the nation by inviting participation from everyday citizens to build a clean nation. It has invited behavioral change where people, especially in villages or poor areas of cities, are being taught the importance of using latrines and other hygienic habits. This movement, mobilized primarily through the media and social media, has been framed by the government as a "people's movement" (Jan Andolan) as it invites "the people" to do their bit to rid Bharat Mata of filth and dirt.⁷ The movement has impressed global health leaders such as Bill Gates, whose foundation (with Melinda Gates) conferred the Global Goal Keeper Award to Modi for the SBA program despite criticism from many Indians—in India and globally—that Modi's government is turning India into an authoritarian Hindu nation. The Gates Foundation's award speaks to SBA's power, enabled by its associations with modernity, to sanitize Modi's reputation and attempt to legitimize Hindu modern governmentality not only at home but also on the wider global stage. In an effort to oppose such legitimations of ethnoreligious nationalism and authoritarian power, this book critiques the SBA campaign and the Hindu modern logics and governmentalities that it shores up. And importantly, it does so through foregrounding postcolonial feminist insights that explicitly challenge the government's framing of SBA as an arena of empowerment for women, the rural and urban poor, and even the nation itself.

HINDU MODERN

The SBA campaign evinces practices of governmentality that are anchored in a logic (or logics) of the Hindu modern that have become pervasive in Modi's India and through which visions of Hindu modernity are being institutionalized. Here I would like to make a distinction between the Hindu modern and Hindu modernity, categories that may sometimes bleed into each other. By Hindu modernity I am referring to a *project* that aims at

Hindu revivalism by suturing it to the idea of a “new India.” It is a nationalist project that functions to secure a “developed” India that rests on Hindu values, and notions of a culturally/morally pure (and even sacred) Hindu self, while aligning that self to neoliberal ideologies, shallow notions of empowerment, and global ascendancy. With Hindu modern, a concept I develop through this study of SBA, I am referring to a *mode of governmentality or logic* (and I often use these terms—*governmentality* and *logic*—interchangeably in the book) through which citizens and noncitizens are being disciplined and regulated in manufacturing and institutionalizing a project of Hindu modernity—with its visions of a new and powerful Hindu India. Scholars such as Talal Asad have argued that modernity is neither a “coherent object” nor an entirely “bounded one” (2003, loc. 272 of 5724). Nor is modernity, as has been well argued, something that is found only in the West, and it is not only secular. Modernities can be religious in their manifestations, as contemporary India demonstrates.

Modi’s 2022 Independence Day speech crystallized this project of Hindu modernity when he spoke about the aspirations of a coming Amrit Kaal, a phrase from Vedic astrology that signifies a golden time period when ambitious ventures can be taken up. Reminding the people of their already rich heritage (read: Hindu/Vedic), which will power them into the development aspirations of their future, he roused the people with these words: “We are those people who see Shiva in every living being. We are those people who see Lord Narayana in every man. We are people who call women ‘Narayani’. . . We are those people who see Shankar in every stone. This is our power” (Times Now 2022). That is, the people were/are already sacred (a Hindu sacred), and now they have to recover that sacrality to power neoliberal development aspirations, which happen to be coterminous with empowering Modi and his party. Recovering that sacrality relies on the governmentality of the Hindu modern. While the logic of the Hindu modern pervades many areas of governance, and particularly developmental governance today, this book addresses the ones that infuse and emerge from the SBA program because they not only elucidate the governmentalities of contemporary Hindu nationalism, but hint at the ultimate destructiveness—of communities, and of democracy—inherent in its “developmental” visions. By democracy, here, and elsewhere in the book, I do not simply mean the procedures of democracy (such as voting, mass elections, and so on) but the egalitarian outcomes—equalities and rights for all, especially the disenfranchised—that democracy is meant to deliver and protect. Many scholars observe that democracy today is being

reduced merely to procedures of democracy instead of functioning as a “substantive democracy.”⁸ Hindu nationalist India today has emerged as an appropriate and troubling example of this. Thus, in using the term *democracy* in this book, my focus is on substantive democracy.

The logic of the Hindu modern does not simply marry a Hindu ethos to notions of being developed or modern. It is very much a *political logic*. In the name of crafting a “new India,” it shores up caste and religious inequalities that constantly determine who is authentically Indian and who is not, and who belongs to the nation and who does not. While it is casteist and antiminority in its tenor, it also stretches itself when needed to assimilate minorities, sometimes violently, into its logics—often promising them development and upliftment that frequently rests on their deracination, which can be proven through participation.⁹ It refuses to recognize minorities as *political subjects* with political/economic needs and agendas that are inherently incompatible with the neoliberal Hindu nationalist project. Rather, it treats minorities as cultural identities, bearers of cultural difference, that can be brought into (by conversion or, if need be, force) the folds of the Hindu nationalist project, thus flagging the project’s seeming inclusionary potential. The recent appointment of Droupudi Murmu, an educated tribal woman, as India’s president is a case in point, for the BJP has been hostile to tribal communities, not hesitating to contain their resistance to land grabs and polluting mining ventures while implementing draconian forest laws that allow forest guards to shoot with impunity.

Practices of gender and sexuality are centrally written into the logics and governmentality of the Hindu modern. Because the governmentality of the Hindu modern disciplines subjects into new (but reworked from old) subject positions of being Hindu that cohere with new visions of being Indian, gender and sexuality are often evoked in apparently progressive ways that on careful scrutiny belie the deep privileging of a casteist and classist Hindu heteropatriarchal order. Murmu, for instance, is one of several high-ranking women in the BJP government; yet India today is ranked 126 out of 146 countries in gender parity, according to the 2023 Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum (PTI 2023).

The case of SBA helps us to identify some *specific features* of the Hindu modern. First, as indicated earlier, development aspirations in India today are being framed by Hindu values, categories, constructs, logics, assumptions, symbols, referents, and imagery in which ancient Hindu ideologies, gods, heroes, and traditions are actively employed in the construction of a sense of moral grandness and exceptionalism about a “new India” and being Indian.

This “new India” enlists ancient Hindu mythological pasts and projects and turns them into dreams and aspirations of a modern present and future.¹⁰

This offers explanations for why, in arguing for developments in science, BJP ministers and officials have made claims that: reproductive genetics and cosmetic surgery existed in ancient India, for how else could Karna (a character in the ancient Hindu epic the Mahabharata) have been born to virgin queen Kunti, or Lord Ganesh have had an elephant head attached to his body (this point was made by Modi); that the internet existed in ancient times, for how else could Sanjay (the charioteer) have narrated the Kurukshetra War to King Dhritarashtra in the Mahabharata; or that the cow is the only animal that inhales and exhales oxygen and cow urine cures cancer, thus the need for cow protectionism (the cow has a revered divine status in the Hindu religion). In the BJP’s rhetoric, myths often take on the authority of facts, and Hindu mythological narratives and symbols charge up national dreams of advancement and global recognition. Meera Nanda terms this as manifesting a logic of “India first” (2016, 6)—that is, Hindus had already achieved *x*, *y*, or *z* (all traits of progress) several centuries ago, but the people seem to have forgotten that, so they need to recover and revive them.

We see this voluminously in how SBA discourse offers “clean citizen” as a national subject position that is frequently based on ideas of (Hindu) civilizationalism, bodily discipline, and purity. This is represented, for example, by an article in an online journal that chastised contemporary India by reminding readers that cleanliness and sanitation were an integral part of ancient Hindu practices (see Talukdar 2019). The author quotes from Hindu religious texts including the Vedas to claim this. Quotes such as “Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere,” in the Yajur Veda (5:43), or a verse from the Manusmriti that says “Let him not throw urine or faeces into the water, nor saliva, nor clothes defiled by impure substances, nor any other impurity,” or a reference to Kautiliya’s Arthashastra are offered as evidence by Talukdar (2019) that cleanliness was an integral part of ancient Hindu civilizations. Thus, that ethos needs to be recovered.

A second feature is the sacralization of land (national territory), which is combined with the sacralization of forms of development. This has been a key characteristic of Hindutva discourses from the very inception of the Hindutva project (Jaffrelot 2019). It is prominently evident in the works of Savarkar, the father of Hindutva, who, in his book *Who Is a Hindu?* (originally published in 1923), claimed that a Hindu is one who sees the land from the Indus River to the sea not only as his country but as his holy land. Thus, he famously exhorted Hindus to “Hinduise all politics and

militarise Hinduism” (quoted in Banerjee 2005, loc. 851 of 2549). Since the 1990s, and more aggressively in the Modi era, this sacralizing of land has moved to the center of political imaginations. It is mobilized not just by the BJP administration but by an increasing everyday culture of Hindutva vigilantes who terrorize national space by targeting those seen as engaging in non-Hindu activities, such as killing cows (which are sacred to the land and Hindu religion) and eating beef, or preventing the loud public reading of Muslim prayers in mosques on the grounds that it causes sound pollution in the environment (which has always occurred in mosques but has never been challenged as it is being today), thus polluting the land. Such hyper-sacralization of land of course makes perfect sense, for if “the people” were already civilized (and sacred) in ancient times and beyond, then their land is a blessed land. Modi, on the anniversary of Savarkar’s birth in 2014, tweeted about Savarkar’s “tireless efforts towards the regeneration of our Motherland” (Modi 2014).

Modi frequently refers to Bharat (he rarely uses the secular term India) as a *punyabhoomi* (holy land)—a word littered in ancient Hindu epics such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana, and utilized dangerously in Savarkar’s work itself (see Savarkar 2022, loc. 998). If national territory is a *punyabhoomi*, then its development is not a political obligation but a sacred obligation. And since Bharat is a “sacred geography” (Eck 2013), that sacral-ity needs to be *visible* and *reclaimed*. Cultural cleansing thus becomes an easy rationale, and anything or anybody that threatens the sacrality of the land—even verbally—must be ousted or otherwise neutralized. Thus, the minister of culture, Mahesh Sharma, said in 2015, “We will cleanse every area of public discourse that has been westernized and where Indian culture and civilization need to be restored—be it the history we read, our cultural heritage or our institutes that have been polluted over years” (quoted in Gowda 2015). There is thus what Kajri Jain identifies as a new kind of “spatial emergence” in contemporary India (2021, 5). Cities are being renamed with Hindi names; statues of Hindu icons and gods are aggressively being built (Jain 2021); Muslims are being prevented from performing prayers in public spaces; Muslim (especially poor and lower middle-class) homes are being demolished; Muslim women are being banned from wearing hijab in some colleges, so that religion (that is, Islamic religion) does not contaminate public space, even though Hindu religion is always allowed to be public; Hindu prayer sites are being (re)developed with millions of dollars (for example, the Namami Gange project, the Kashi Vishwanath corridor in Varanasi, and the construction of the gigantic Ram Temple in Ayodhya);

mosques are being demolished, often based on claims of “illegal construction” (the destruction of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 was just the beginning!); and national leaders, increasingly fashioning themselves to look like Hindu sages, dominate media spaces.¹¹

This *visible* deification and marking of land as Hindu are a prominent part of SBA. During the implementation of the SBA program, the land that is to be cleaned up is figured in the prime minister’s speeches as well as posts by everyday citizens on social media platforms as Bharat Mata¹²—a figure that in Indian nationalism has often been represented through Hindu goddesses, as addressed earlier. Currently, this figure can be activated to reference women’s rights discourse that can be marked as modern. Once we are taught to see the land that is now seemingly dying under filth as Bharat Mata, we begin to see the land as Hindu, and SBA as a vehicle for women’s protection and empowerment. As I discuss in chapter 2, Bharat Mata is frequently represented in many SBA media spaces, including Modi’s own speeches, as an injured figure—that is, “the people” have damaged her by dirtying her. Figuring the nation’s land as a divine Hindu gendered figure invites awe toward that land, and also calls for heteropatriarchal protection of, and attachment to, the land as the Hindu mother.

A third, and I would suggest a central, feature of the Hindu modern is security.¹³ This directly follows from the notion that India is a sacred Hindu land. For if it is a *punyabhoomi*, then it needs to be fiercely protected as the original land of Hindus. Thus, heightened security emerges as a logic of national governance, and this logic is simultaneously hetero-gendered (while also spinning on the entangled axes of caste, class, and sexuality) as the nation reemerges as Bharat Mata, who needs protection, and Hindu majorities (especially men) reemerge as her protectors. Today, protecting Bharat Mata serves as a rallying cry in BJP quarters as well as in everyday spaces to shore up a national security framework. Unlike earlier, this security framework is not just operational in terms of “external” threats to the home/land but internal “enemies” as well. In fact, the line between external and internal enemies has blurred. The “threat” is frequently the Muslim body, dissenters of the government or (perceived) critics of Hinduism such as journalists/artists/intellectuals, who are seen as sullyng Bharat Mata with their criticisms, or even Dalit bodies that dare to transgress the boundaries that keep the Hindu order alive. As an aside, I would not be surprised if I were “punished” for writing this book as it analyzes and critiques the BJP’s pet development program, and one that has received considerable international praise.

Protecting Bharat Mata thus calls for a Hindu heteropatriarchal and militaristic call to arms, seen today most explicitly in relation to Kashmir. Kashmir represents the head of the geobody conceived as Bharat Mata (Ramaswamy 2010). Thus, it cannot be severed from the national body—anyone (typically Muslims) can be arrested and thrown in jail without trial for at least two years under the brutal Public Safety Act that operates in Kashmir. Religious gatherings of Hindus today increasingly call for the killing of Muslims or exhort other Hindus to pick up weapons for a large “cleansing” of Bharat Mata—this occurred for example in Hardiwar in 2021 (Al Jazeera 2021)—while other Hindu religious gatherings have called for impregnating Muslim women (via rape) by Hindu men if Muslim men dare to look at Hindu women. The raped Muslim women would then produce Hindu babies, and this would also prevent Muslim population increase (Asthana 2022). The potential rape of Muslim women becomes a security act!

This security logic today pervades spaces of intimacy—seen in the policing of “love jihad” and the implementation of anti-conversion laws, as well as in personal hygienic realms that will be discussed later in this book. Thus, security has become intimate and intimacy has become securitized (see chapter 3). Hindutva hardliners such as Yogi Adityanath (chief minister of the state of Uttar Pradesh) stated in 2021 that the National Security Act will be used against religious conversion. Although unstated, religious conversion in Yogi’s statement particularly implies a Hindu (especially a woman) becoming Muslim through marriage (see Ali 2021)—although it can also include becoming Christian or other non-Hindu religions). As chapter 3 will elaborate, as a highly hetero-gendered logic, this security logic ultimately functions to protect the Hindu (upper/middle class) heterosexual woman as a symbol of the nation while ignoring assaults on other women’s bodies—for example, caste-based rapes of Dalit women that are at an all-time high today. From the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) to Aadhar biometrics and the lockdown and heightened surveillance of Kashmir (and revocation of its semiautonomous status), India today has turned into what Chatterji terms a “majoritarian security state” (2019, loc. 7580 of 13123), gripped by the “fear of small numbers” (Appadurai 2006)—a fear that is not uncoincidentally compatible with germ metaphors.

In operating through spaces of intimacy, this security feature is significantly focused on morality—the policing of morality that produces moral panics that are gendered and sexualized with intersections of caste and religion—about the loss of culture and values that often find embodiment in

NOTES

CHAPTER 1. CLEANSING THE NATION

Epigraphs: The first quotation is taken from a post on X (formerly Twitter), July 5, 2022. The quote from Narendra Modi, the Indian prime minister, comes from his own account on X, dated September 23, 2017.

- 1 It bears noting that in 2022 the Supreme Court of India gave Modi a “clean chit,” but this judgment has been questioned and criticized by many (Pasha 2022). See also Joseph (2014).
- 2 See also Chatterji et al. (2019a), Nanda (2011), and Basu (2008).
- 3 At the time of this writing, I still could not find data about whether the funds had ever been released.
- 4 For more on the funding of SBA initiatives, see MJS (2017).
- 5 See Himatsingka (2018), NewsClick (2017) and Singh and Mishra (2019).
- 6 See Kuchay (2019), Mahaprashasta (2019), and Rukmini (2021).
- 7 See PM India (n.d.). See also PM India (2014).
- 8 See esp. Comaroff and Comaroff (1997, 141).
- 9 For more on the issues mentioned here, see, e.g., Longkumer (2019).
- 10 See also Nanda (2016) and B. Subramaniam (2019).
- 11 This reclaiming and remarking of territory as Bharat, and thus Hindu (for Bharat is a mythological Hindu construct, as opposed to India, which reflects a more secular idea) also underpins the Akhand Bharat (Undivided Bharat) movement. Akhand Bharat is the idea that Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tibet, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka were all part of the same Hindu land, but because of British colonial rule they ended up being partitioned into different nation-states. Mother India thus has been divided. So, to recover the wholeness of Mother India, the country needs to reclaim an undivided Bharat. This dangerous idea speaks to Hindu expansionist ambitions.
- 12 Inaugurating the Swachh Bharat Mission, Modi’s speech invoked Mother India and Bharat Mata to refer to the nation’s body; see PM India 2014.
- 13 Recent works have begun attending to how India is operating as a security state, although none wed it to the governmentality of the Hindu modern. See, e.g., Chatterji (2019), and Rai (2019).