

CLEANSING THE NATION

INDIA,

RAKA SHOME

THE HINDU
MODERN &
MEDIATIONS
OF GENDER



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BUY

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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

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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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