

## **Les Sacrées Vaches: Cow Vigilantism and the future of Indian Democracy**

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In any country the faith and the confidence of the minorities in the impartial and even functioning of the state is the acid test of being a civilised state.

—Justice Rajinder Sachar

The supporters of caste who would allow liberty in the sense of a right to life, limb and property, would not readily consent to liberty in this sense, in as much as it

involves liberty to choose one's profession. But to object to this kind of liberty is to perpetuate slavery. For slavery does not merely mean a legalized form of subjection. It means a state of society in which some men are forced to accept from other the purposes which control their conduct.

—B.R. Ambedkar

There is only one way to protect Indian culture: to protect gau (cows), Ganga and (goddess) Gayatri... Only the community that can protect this heritage will survive. Otherwise there will be a huge crisis of identity, and this crisis of identity will endanger our existence.

—Yogi Adityanath

Till cow is not accorded the status of 'Rashtra Mata' (Mother of the Nation) I feel the war for gauraksha (cow protection) will not stop even if gaurakshaks (cow protectors) are put into jails or bullets are fired at them.

—T. Raja Singh Lodh

We won't remain silent if somebody tries to kill our mother. We are ready to kill and be killed.

—Sakshi Maharaj

The year 2014 which saw the ascension of the ultra-right-wing Hindu fascist party BJP in power splintered the Indian society in two halves- those who worship

cows and those who are dependent on it in terms of food, trade, commerce, and agriculture. The RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha) a bigoted proto fascist Hindutva organisation (the ideological scaffold of the Bharatiya Janta Party) professes to make India the land of the Hindus. This land is exclusively for the Hindus. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, one of the main ideologues of Hindutva (a militant version of Hinduism) had clearly defined the identity of a Hindu in his book, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923) as someone who considers Hindustan as his “matribhumi” (motherland), this land as the land of his ancestors “pitribhumi” (fatherland) and his “punyabhumi” (holy land). In this vision, Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism are also qualified as part of the Hindu culture who had been converted recently. They can be reintegrated into the fold of Hinduism if they pay their allegiance to the Hindu culture. However, the Muslims are the “Other” as they are the descendants of foreign invaders, whose “pitribhumi” (fatherland) lay elsewhere in Arabia. This theory of “Otherness” is amalgamated with a classical touch of M.S. Golwalkar’s idea of racial inferiority of the Muslims in contrast to the Hindus. Golwalkar, following closely Hitler’s idea of eugenics, felt “race is by far the most important ingredient of a nation” (Jaffrelot 2007, 98). The Muslims posed the greatest threat towards achieving a racial unity as they will always remain “foreign body” lodged in the Hindu society.

Within this imagined Hindu *rashtra*, which is concep-

tually separated from the state and is defined as a cultural idea which embraces a community that resides upon a piece of land with which it shares an organic and an emotional relationship, the Muslim is first declared a free and equal citizen and then his survival is made conditional upon a number of criteria imposed by the Hindus alone. The Muslim remains eternally an outcaste, a pariah who is essentially outside the social fabric. Following the violent partition of the country, they were looked upon as the main culprits for the execution of the quartering of the holy land, disrupting its sacred integrity. As part of the postcolonial legacy of divide and rule, these two communities remain forever divided, riveted in mutual dispute and community antagonism. The syncretism of cultures, the pluralism of religious faith that symbolised India's democracy is only a veneer, a masquerade of lies. The spectral archetypes of colonial violence have erupted once again with the proclamation of reviving the figure of the "holy cow," held sacred by the Hindus. Imposing a majoritarian politics, Muslims (read beefeaters) are once again targeted as a menace, a threat to the Hindu and to the existence of cows. Various cow vigilante groups, spearheaded by Hindu right wing activists are openly lynching Muslims, browbeating them and making their lives miserable. Law and order is made a mockery and the memories of colonial violence are a lived reality among the Muslim community. In the light of these tensions, William de Tamaris's graphic novel originally published in French as *Les Sacrées Vaches*

(*Holy Cows* in English translation) becomes a very critical work. Written in a gonzo journalistic technique and covertly following the trail of beef ban in certain North Indian states, it attempts to ascertain the actual impact of such a restriction upon the lives of the common people. From the peasants who are finding it difficult to deal with sterile cows, the sudden closure of Muslim slaughter houses, the onset of black marketers who stash cattle in jeeps and transport them secretly in the dead of night and finally the rise of Hindu militant groups (gau rakshaks), mob lynching and murder, it portrays the other side of a democratic Bharat, beyond the reach of the city intelligentsia, slouched in the “false consciousness” of liberalism, freedom of speech and secularism. In the words of Tamaris, “La vache sacrée n’a pas fini de diviser la société indienne” (The holy cow has not finished dividing the Indian society) (Sengar 2017).

### **Was Cow always considered sacred?**

Though “cow” has played the crucial role of integrating the Hindu identity, historical texts and evidence have evinced the fact that cow meat was a very popular food item, haute cuisine during the early Vedic period. Beef eating remained a fairly common practice for a long time in India and the arguments for its prevalence are strewn in our own scriptures and religious texts. The sacrifice of the horse or of the cow, the *gomedha* (cow meat) or *asvamedha* (horse meat), appears to have been common

in the earliest periods of the Hindu ritual. P.V. Kane in his monumental work, *History of Dharmasastra* (1930) refers to certain passages in the Vedas which speaks about cow slaughter and beef eating. Cattle trade and breeding were the most important occupation of early Aryans. The Rigveda refers to slaughter of ox for offering to gods, especially Indra, the greatest of the Vedic gods. However, in the law book of Manu *Manusmriti*, there comes the first interdiction to cow slaughter. This book like the earlier law books, contains several passages on meat albeit with an exception. It legalises the eating of the flesh of animals such as porcupine, hedgehog, iguana, rhinoceros, tortoise etc but forbids devouring the flesh of the cow. Interestingly, during this time, other religious groups such as Buddhism and Jainism had gained immense popularity in the subcontinent. The virtues of “ahimsa” (non-violence) preached by Gautam Buddha and Vardhaman Mahavira attracted a large number of lower caste groups who converted to this religion to escape the persecution of the tyrannical caste system practiced in the Hindu society. The Brahmins were quick enough to appropriate the symbol of the “cow” and bestowed it with the qualities of a mother- nurturer, feeder who looks after the well-being of the community. They too wanted to practice “ahimsa” or non-violence in their religion. Thus “cow” entered into a symbolic order; where preserving and caring for the bovine represented an act of sacredness and consumption of beef became profane. By consecrating the cow, the Hindus

began protecting their identities and themselves transformed into a sacred community. Moreover, a dietary prohibition enabled them to maintain this sacrosanct social order.

The cow became a “totem,” and by worshipping the totem, the clan members partook in the formation of a holy order. As per Durkheim’s definition of religion which is based on the idea of sacred and profane, construction of the Hindu social order rests upon this essentialism, this binary and the concomitant sacralisation of beef renders other religions, which sanction its consumption, impious. Later, in the 19th century, when the Hindu nationalist resistance forces gained pre-eminence, the myth of the holy cow was reified once again. It became a key symbol to construct the image of a glorious Hindu past, challenge the colonial discourses of enlightenment, science, reason, and rationality. The embedded discourse around cow quickly became contagious as thousands of people joined in the call of Swami Dayanand Saraswati’s “back to the Vedas” when he founded the Arya Samaj (1875). The first cow protection association (*gaurakshini sabha*) was established in 1881 in Agra under his tutelage to oppose cow slaughter. The upper-class elites, majorly belonging to the Hindu community, declared the worshipping of cows to unify the Hindu cultural groups, promote a strong cultural bond with the nation thereby engineering racial superiority over the other minorities. Even post-independence, when there was a concerted

effort by them to ban cow slaughter permanently in India through promulgating it in the Constitution, B. R. Ambedkar placed this contentious issue under the Directive Principles of State Policy. The provision under Article 48 entitled “Organisation of agriculture and animal husbandry” reads: “The State shall endeavour to organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall, in particular, take steps for preserving and improving breeds, and prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle” (Illaiah 2019, 22). He ensured that Article 48 cleverly elides any religious lines.

### **BJP, “Cow” and the Politics of Hindutva**

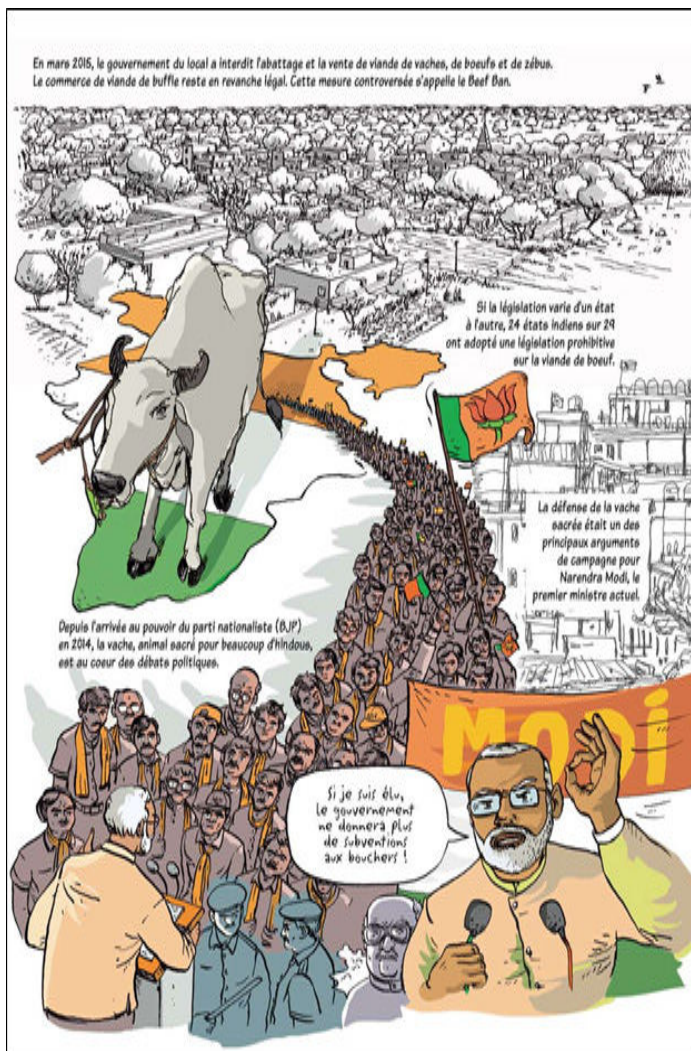
In the year 2014, BJP saw a meteoric rise to power based on the rabble-rousing talent of the current Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi. The admixture of populism and the rhetoric of militant Hindutva carved a niche in the hearts of the majoritarian sect. The twin ideas interlaced together to give birth to a new form of democracy—“ethnic democracy” by repelling “electoral democracy.” Modi stressed upon the revival of Hindu rituals, vowed to protect the cows and act strongly against the abattoir industry, cattle trade, and leather industry. It is to be noted here that a large portion of the Muslim populace are interconnected with this business. Muslim minorities were targeted by Hindu vigilante groups. These groups started to play a key role in making the de facto major-



itarian Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation). The panel below represents Modi's incendiary electoral speech where he declares, "Si je suis élu, le gouvernement ne donnera plus de subventions aux bouchers!" (If I am elected, the government will not grant subsidies anymore to the butchers).

William de Tamaris starts off his comic by mentioning the decree issued by the local government of Buldana, a district in Maharashtra regarding the closure of abattoirs and the sale of cattle and beef. This interdiction has its root in the rise of fanatic Hindutva emblazoned by the electoral campaigns of the BJP. Of the twenty-eight states in India, twenty-four have adopted for a total ban on beef and cow slaughter is a punishable offence. Interestingly, all these states are controlled by the BJP.

The announcement of beef ban was a cause of rejoice and celebration among the hardliners. But it made the lives of peasants miserable who were reeling under debt and poverty. In addition to the double whammy of drought and ban on sale of unproductive cows, the common villagers were forced to starve.



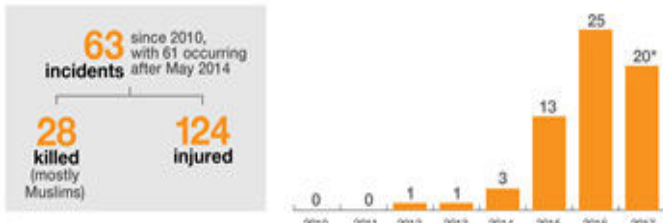
## India's cattle slaughter laws

Some states in India have completely banned cattle slaughter, while others allow it with a 'fit-to-slaughter' certificate, issued when an animal is unfit for breeding, milking or work purposes.



## 'Cow vigilante' attacks on the rise

Cow-related violence has seen a sharp increase in India since the Hindu far-right government led by Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in May 2014.





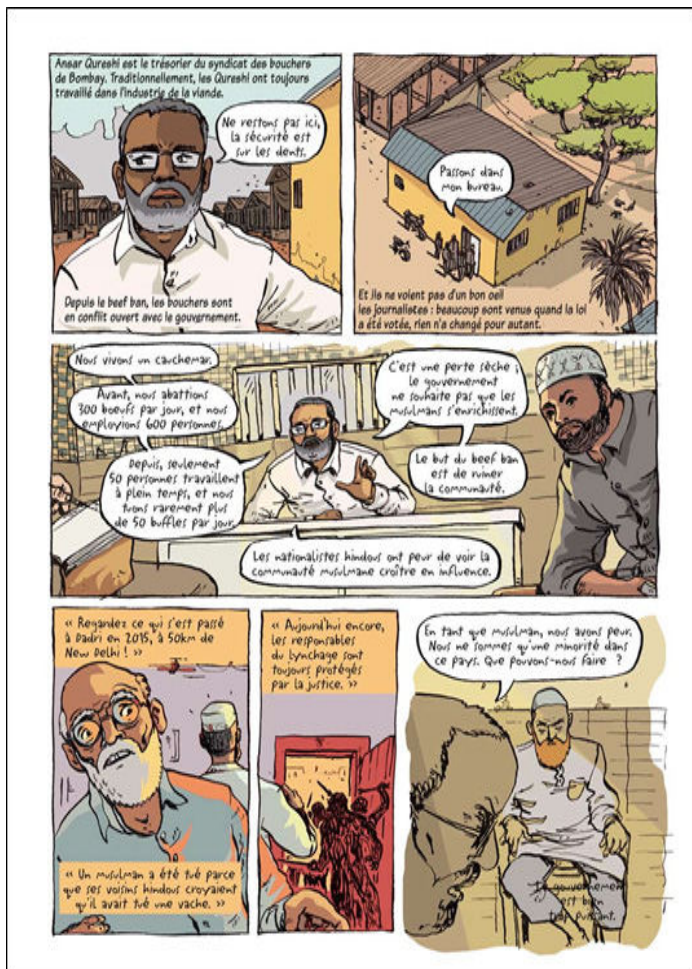
Going clockwise the five panels talk about the distress and suffering of the peasants, 1st Panel- “Une vache produit du lait pendant huit à dix ans. Mais elle ne meurt que plusieurs années plus tard” (A cow produces milk for eight to ten years, but she dies only years later). 2nd Panel- “Avant la loi, on échangeait nos bêtes improductives au marché, contre un veau” (Before the law, we could exchange our barren cows in the market against a cow). 3rd Panel- “Puis l’acheteur les revendait aux bouchers musulmans, qui s’abattaient” (Later, the buyers would sell them to Muslim butchers). 4th Panel- “Tout le monde s’y retrouvait” (Everyone was in it). 5th Panel- “Aujourd’hui, soit nous nous occupons d’elles jusqu’à leur mort...soit nous les donnons à des ONG” (Today we either take care of them until they die... or we give them to the NGOs).

The bellicose Hindu nationalists have spawned numerous vigilantes, and here we meet a character called Vijaykant. He describes himself a hardcore vegetarian with the only goal of protecting “la mere de tous les Hindous” (the mother of all Hindus) i.e the holy cow. Fig 1.5 depicts the creation of “gaushala” (cow shelter) for the cows who are retrieved from slaughterhouses and at the end a character named Vijaykant introduces himself to the readers. In Fig 1.6 he describes his mission of rescuing cows and looking after their welfare thrice a day. At the end he vociferously declares his passion towards cows, “Les vaches c’est toute ma vie” (Cows are my life).



In the above panels Vijaykant explains that eating beefs is a provocation to the Hindus and whenever he receives any information about any Muslim about to kill any cow, his team reaches there immediately, and they communicate with each other through WhatsApp (a popular social media). His fierce avowal of covering himself with the blood of the Muslims rings an alarm of fear, “Je me couvrirai avec honneur du sang des tueurs de vaches. Nous devons nous protéger des Musulmans” (I will cover myself with honour with the blood of the cow killers. We must protect ourselves from the Muslims). He proudly shows his new cow ambulance which transports injured cows to the shelter. Fig 1.8 represents the creation of RSS, and how India’s economy stands upon beef export all around the world. In 2015, India was the premier exporter of cow meat in the world followed by Brazil and Australia. However, the impact of beef ban had blown into smithereens this burgeoning industry and mostly the Muslims.

In the figure in the next page the fear of Ansar Qureshi, who runs a business associated with the selling and slaughter of beef is reflected deeply. The Muslims are worried about their livelihood. He compares their status before the ban on beef and the aftereffects “Avant, nous abattions 300 boeufs par jour, et nous employions 600 personnes. Depuis, seulement 50 personnes travaillent à plein temps, et nous tuons rarement plus de 50 buffles par jour” (Earlier, we used to slay three hundred



cows every day and we employed six hundred persons. Since the ban, only fifty persons are working full time, and we rarely kill more than fifty buffaloes every day). The mob lynching incident of Mohd Akhlaq at Dadri,



in Uttar Pradesh in September 2015 petrified the Muslim community. “Un Musulman a été tué parce que ses voisins hindous croyaient qu’il avait tué une vache. Aujourd’hui encore les responsables du lynchage sont toujours protégés par la justice” (A Muslim was killed because his neighbours believed that he had killed a cow. Even today, the people responsible for the lynching are always protected by justice). Gruesome incidents of mob lynching episodes are reported in some states of India. Celebrations of such heinous acts are shared and spread all through the social media to teach a lesson to the “Other” community about their status in India and why they should keep a distance from the sacred mother of the Hindus, i.e., the cow. Below we have listed some major case studies.

### **Cow and Mob Lynching Episodes in India**

The Muslims are the largest target of attacks in all the cases of mob lynching. Based on suspicion, they are brutally beaten up, hands tied, gagged, and in certain cases even murdered in cold blood by the mob. “As of February 2019, India Spend, a policy research think-tank, reported that of 123 instances of cow related violence between 2010 and 2018, 98 percent occurred after the BJP came to power in 2014. Muslims account for 56 percent of the victims of such violence and for 78 percent of those killed because of it.” (Ilaiah 2019, 24).

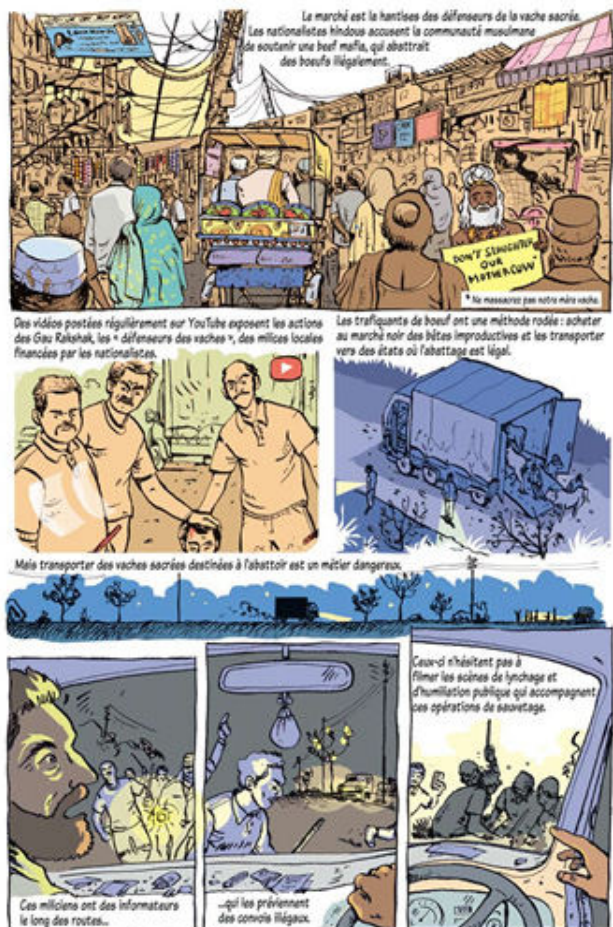
- Mohammad Qasim, 45 years, was beaten to death on June 18, 2018 by a mob that accused him of attempting to slaughter cows near the village of Pilkhuwa in the Hapur district of Uttar Pradesh. Qasim was a trader in bulls and goats.
- Akbar Khan, 28 years in Rajasthan was killed by a mob in the Alwar district on July 21, 2018. Akbar and his friend Aslam, residents of Nuh district in Haryana were returning from buying two cows when they were attacked. Aslam Khan managed to flee, but Akbar was brutally beaten up by the mob.
- Mustain Abbas, aged 27 years, a resident of Saharanpur district in Uttar Pradesh, was killed in Kurukshetra district in Haryana, where he had travelled to purchase cows.
- Pehlu Khan, a dairy farmer in Rajasthan was attacked by a rampaging mob on April 2017. Khan had officially purchased cattle but the miscreants tore his receipts and he died after two days.
- Finally, the case of Mohammad Akhlaq, 52 year old resident of Bisara village near Dadri in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh was lynched to death with his 22 year old son critically injured. He was purportedly alleged to have slaughtered a cow and had stored beef in his house. Police rounded up 18 suspects in the case but

even after seven years the case did not progress. The marauders are still at large

Such cases of lynching are a part of the “instrumentalist strategy” as Christophe Jaffrelot observes in his book *Modi’s India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (2021). Cow acts as a symbol to keep the Hindu nationalist movement alive, marching slowly towards the transformation from a secular state to a saffron state. The Muslims represent the exogenous threat to the community. Therefore, punishing them forms the very essential rubric of creating the brand of Hindutva.

### **Cow Trafficking and the Role of Black Market**

The ban on beef which was put by the BJP under the garb of ill treatment of animals, animal cruelty and unregulated animal trade was finally revoked by the Hon’ble Supreme Court of India in July 2017. But in the meanwhile, several illegal cattle transport corridors started functioning where illegal beef mafias whisked cows in trucks in the dead of night to carry them to those states where cow slaughter was legal. The business involved high risk as “gaurakshaks” or those enlisted in cow protection army would waylay these vehicles and violently torture the people. The interception videos would be publicly circulated through social media. The messages would be lauded by the nationalists. The panel below describes one such scene.



Brutal scenes of violence by the cow vigilantes unfolds in the daily columns of newspapers where victims were chained, stripped, beaten and in some cases even hanged from trees. Police stand as mute spectators. They are forced to say “Bharat Mata ki Jai” (Glory to Mother India) and pay with their blood the sin of touching the “cow.” Even in some cases the traffickers pay huge bribes to the police to reach their destination. This increases the cost of beef in total. This saffron agenda of rabid nationalism has not been witnessed previously. This has stoked the interest of the writer of this graphic novel to probe into the cause and depict the real situation of India’s democracy to the outside world. As he says, “People from my country are acutely surprised that Indians fight and kill over the holy cow. French are now introduced to the current India and how much it has changed since Modi came to power. It is hard to understand how Centre can build policies over religious ideologies.”

### **Cow Slaughter and the scenario in the Liberal States**

Compared to the states of the North, in South India, beef is a popular gastronomic flavour among the people and is savoured as a delicacy in states such as Kerala, Hyderabad, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The food is enjoyed especially by non-Hindu communities such as Christians, Muslims, and Dalits. But tension has started to brew in these states as well. Restrictions are imposed

upon the gustatory appetites of people and pockets of Hindu militant groups are bent on upsetting the liberal air blowing in these states. Veneration for beef has made forays in the vote bank of political parties. Therefore, even the reigning Communist Party is forced to reckon with the threat of Hindutva politics.



In the panel above, Sebastian Paul, who was a deputy in the Assembly in Kerala, affiliated with the Communist Party voices his chagrin about BJP and its divisive politics, “Notre devoir est d’entretenir la flamme laïque qui habite le Kerala. Les nationaliste ont fait des tensions communautaires leur fond de commerce. Lors des élections municipales de 2016, ils ont voulu faire du boeuf un enjeu electoral. Mais nous sommes trop attaches au bœuf” (Our duty is to maintain the secular flame that inhabits Kerala. The nationalists have made community tensions their trade. In 2016 municipal elections, they wanted to make beef an election issue. But we are too attached to beef).

### **Perilous Democracy: India in the Western Eye**

The uprising of Hindu nationalist forces and the unleashing of sectarian violence has dented deeply into the idea of India’s democracy and Western perception. Tamaris in an interview with the India Times remarks:

Westerners have a lot of stereotypes about India. French don’t know all the history of BJP, where it comes from etc. Basically, we all think that the entire India is still supporting Gandhi and Nehru’s political ideology. So, while I was working on *Hindutva*, I was willing to show that India’s recent history and politics are way more complex than we believe. And, that non-violence and yoga isn’t what India is made of. (Sengar 2017)

India's democracy is increasingly being threatened day by day. Incidents of beef-ban, implementation of CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act wherein Hindu refugees from other countries will be given citizenship status in contrast to the Muslims who will have to prove their citizenship status based on domicile documents post-independence of the country), tight controls and restrictions imposed on press and media to throttle its voice, continuous interference with state administration where the government is run by non-BJP political parties, an effort to debilitate the judiciary, distortion of electoral mechanisms usher in the new age of India's democracy, the transitioning from a Hindu rashtra (Hindu nation) to Hindu Raj (Hindu Empire). This is a dangerous trend. Memories of colonial violence and incarceration are revived once again. The draconian Sedition Act (Section 124A) drafted by Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1837, a colonial act is revoked once again. Further UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) is slapped upon anyone who dares to raise question against the State machinery. Dissents and critics are gagged and the labels such as "anti-national," "urban naxals" are thrust upon instantaneously. Rationalist voices and thinkers who challenged this bigotry are silenced. M.M Dabhoklar, M.M Kalburgi, Gauri Lankesh were assassinated by the right wing Hindu fundamentalists because they dared to raise their voice against the Hindu religion. Father Stan Swamy, an 83-year-old Jesuit priest suffering from Parkinson's, who worked relentlessly for the cause of upliftment of



the tribals in Jharkhand for more than thirty years was accused of fomenting violence in the Elgar Parishad case. The minorities are bearing the brunt of these state sponsored violence. Again, in the words of Tamaris, “Minorities have the right to exist and live freely in this country, as anywhere else in the world. It is a major asset for India. Propaganda and lies will never be sustainable to build modern policies” (Sengar 2017).

The transformation from a liberal democracy to an illiberal one, from an open, inclusive culture of mutual tolerance to sectarianism, fanaticism and bigotry is a dangerous trend facing India today. As B.R. Ambedkar once said, “Bhakti in religion could lead to salvation. But in politics, Bhakti is a sure road to eventual dictatorship” (Ambedkar 2020, 10). The father of our constitution had warned the people about such blind jingoistic zealots who create a fiefdom of their own and become fascists, suppressing the rights of others. Sadly, each day we see a violation of the freedom of speech and expression which emblazoned the true essence of our democracy, “...freedom of expression is very important. Without it, a country cannot be democratic. The government should be able to accept and acknowledge critics and criticism. Also censorship is vague, people will anyway acknowledge the truth” (Sengar 2017).

Ironically, in a special summit held in Germany titled G7, among the presence of other world leaders from In-

donesia, South Africa, Senegal, Hon'ble Prime Minister Mr Narendra Modi, has vouchsafed for the freedom of press, media and reiterated the importance of freedom of expression both "online" and "offline." However, we have seen in recent times how in our country crackdown operations are meted out upon the whistle-blowers. This comic book had tried to lambast and shred this veneer of India's liberal visage and unmask it in front of a global audience. Quoting Tamaris again, "People from my country are acutely surprised that Indians fight and kill over the holy cow. French are now introduced to the current India and how much it has changed since Modi came to power. It is hard to understand how Centre can build policies over religious ideologies" (Sengar 2017).

The hour has come to question the ongoing exclusionary practices implemented by the rise of a hegemonic Hindu Brahminic culture which is trying to stymie the growth and progress of the nation. In the Vedic society, Brahmins wielded absolute authority and power over the other castes. We have once again reverted to that time by valorising and creating a public space which will be the sole prerogative of the upper caste elites. Such discrimination has made the public space into the private space for these extremist forces. That is the reason for the intolerance and the imposition of a majoritarian politics. If the motto behind striving for independence was about to create equality in terms of wealth and opportunities, justice and achieving a common brotherhood

among all the people, the brand of religious extremism espoused by the BJP and its allied forces, will make this mission a far-flung dream, an impossible idea to achieve. We must relook into the hearts of men to find an answer and rise above the malaise of hatred. That is the greatest postcolonial challenge.

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