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To cite this article: Aastha Tyagi & Atreyee Sen (2019): Love-Jihad (Muslim Sexual Seduction) and ched-chad (sexual harassment): Hindu nationalist discourses and the Ideal/deviant urban citizen in India, Gender, Place & Culture, DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2018.1557602

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1557602

Published online: 11 May 2019.
Love-Jihad (Muslim Sexual Seduction) and ched-chad (sexual harassment): Hindu nationalist discourses and the Ideal/deviant urban citizen in India

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenal rise of Hindu nationalism in India has fostered a number of anti-Muslim campaigns, ranging from random enforcement of vegetarianism on beef-eating communities, to highly organised communal riots. This article explores one such strain of Hindu nationalist discursive politics called ‘Love Jihad’, a moral panic against the alleged seduction, marriage, forced conversion and trafficking of young Hindu girls by Muslim men. Against the backdrop of emerging urban modernities, which offers women exposure to education, romantic choices and inter-religious marriages, employment in urban labour economies, and opportunities to experiment with religious ideologies and sexualities, the authors analyse how the discourse of ‘Love Jihad’ was modified to act as a regulatory mechanism to control the choice and mobility of young urban women. This article examines the conceptualisation of ‘Love Jihad’ in multiple nationalist sites, in order to shed light on the ways in which right-wing organisations attempted to realign the urban public sphere in accordance with a gendered Hindu civil order. By drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on the women’s wings of two prominent Hindu nationalist organisations, the authors study a range of doctrinal, informal, practical, persuasive and coercive strategies used by nationalist women leaders to socialise young women into the ideology of perfect Hindu subjecthood; by laying its foundation in the dichotomy between security of the ‘Self’ (women uncorrupted by the fluidities of modern life as ideal, permissible and desirable urban citizens), versus the danger of the ‘Other’ (migrants, Muslims and other undesirable communities in urban public space).

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 January 2018
Accepted 3 July 2018

KEYWORDS

Hindutva; love jihad; nationalism; sexuality; urban

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Introduction: ‘Love Jihad’ and politico-legal tangles

... if we proceed with interviewing the girl in question, would that not amount to the court accepting that there has been no indoctrination? (Justice Chandrachud in the Hadiya ‘Love Jihad’ case, November 27, 2017 (The Wire 2017))

We should not cross our LOC. By LOC we mean, our Location, what is the Occasion and who is our Company. If we keep these things in mind, then girls will not face harassment outside of the home.’ (The border between India and Pakistan is usually referred to as LOC, or the Line of Control) (Samiti official (Karyavahika, Hindu nationalist female volunteer at an urban nationalist camp), 2013)

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) is an elite arm of the Indian government that employs the sharpest criminal minds to investigate and prosecute terrorism-related cases. In August 2017, the High Court in Kerala, a state in southern India, directed the NIA to investigate the marriage of a 24-year old, urban-educated woman Hadiya, to a man she met on an Islamic matrimonial website. Born into a Hindu family in Kerala, Hadiya converted to Islam of her own accord when she moved away from her small town home to study medicine in one of the bigger cities in the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu. Referring to the marriage as a classic case of ‘Love Jihad’, the NIA tried to prove that the conversion was part of a terrorist plot that threatened the nation. The case evoked contentious public debates, and the battle over the legal custody of an adult woman, fought between her husband and her father, eventually appeared before the Supreme Court (SC), the apex judicial body in India. The father also reiterated that Hadiya fell victim to ‘Love Jihad’, a conspiracy by Muslims to seduce and recruit young women who have tasted romantic freedoms in the city, to fight for ISIS in Syria (Varier 2017). This notion of ‘Love Jihad’ acquired an obscure but important place in the contemporary discourse of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism, especially after the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), the most prominent Hindu nationalist political party in India, formed the Central government with an outright majority in 2014 (Jain 2017).

Hadiya’s father, the NIA, and even the judicial bodies in India, questioned her choice of religion and marriage, stressing that she was mentally unhinged and couldn’t rationally accept her indoctrination into Islam. The SC finally heard Hadiya’s plea on November 27, 2017, and despite her repeated requests to cohabit with her husband, the court sent her back to her student accommodation to ‘complete her studies’. The apex body was clear that Hadiya required ‘guardianship’ (assumed male). And even though Hadiya wanted her husband to be her guardian, the court awarded her guardianship to her college Dean, so that a young student remained accountable for her deviancy in the city (Firstpost 2017). Even though journalistic accounts were sympathetic to Hadiya, her father questioned her mental health, the intrusive details about her introduction to Islam was usurped by Hindu nationalist
propagandists, the NIA claimed her ‘case’ was part of a terrorist network, and the judiciary blatantly infantilised her. By conflating the personal matter of religious conversion and marriage with ‘Love Jihad’ and terrorism, politico-legal opinions surrounding the Hadiya case was used to stifle the basic constitutional rights of a young Indian woman. After a 15-month battle, the Supreme Court of India passed a judgement in favour of Hadiya, overturning the lower court’s annulment of the marriage. The judgment laid significance on the role of consent in the marriage between two adults (Ameerudheen 2018; Rajagopal 2018).

The Hadiya case becomes an important prism through which we enter the debate about ‘Love Jihad’ in the city. The idea of ‘Love Jihad’ was not just a theoretical tool employed within nationalist discourses to hasten apathy against a section of people. Against the backdrop of emerging urban modernities, which offers women exposure to education, socioeconomic empowerment, employment in urban labour economies, alternative and delayed marriage arrangements, and opportunities to experiment with religious ideologies and sexualities, ‘Love Jihad’ was also a regulatory mechanism to control the choice and mobility of young urban women identified as subjects of the imagined Hindu Rashtra (the Hindu nation). This article examines the conceptualisation of the discourse of ‘Love Jihad’ in multiple nationalist sites, in order to shed light on the ways in which right-wing organisations attempted to realign the urban public sphere in accordance with a gendered Hindu civil order. The authors explore a range of doctrinal, informal, practical, persuasive and coercive strategies used by nationalist women leaders to socialise young women into the ideology of perfect Hindu subjecthood; by laying its foundation in the dichotomy between security of the ‘Self’ (women uncorrupted by the fluidities of modern life as ideal, permissible and desirable urban citizens), versus the danger of the ‘Other’ (migrants, Muslims and other undesirable communities in urban public space). Instead of giving emphasis on the specific cultural milieus of the cities (as in other articles in the special issue) where these anti-Muslim campaigns were developed, the authors will analyse the ways in which these discourses produced and reproduced nationalist decrees on women’s sexuality in the city. Despite the hegemony of nationalist sermons, we eventually show that this form of propaganda can be subverted by ordinary nationalist cadres, through their polemical engagement with a debate around the infamous Delhi rape case in 2012.

The article draws on ethnographic research on two nationalist organisations: the Shiv Sena Mahila Aghadi (the female wing of a regional, right-wing political party in Mumbai) and the Rashtra Sevika Samiti (the women’s front of a pan-Indian Hindu nationalist organization). The ethnographic vignettes on the Mahila Aghadi emanates from Sen’s anthropological study of women’s participation in nationalist slum politics in Mumbai (cf. Sen A. 2006,
2007). Discussions on the Rashtra Sevika Samiti (the National Association of Women Volunteers) are developed through Tyagi’s fieldwork in their urban residential camps: first in Meerut in 2013, and later in Delhi in 2017. Both Sen and Tyagi’s research projects are based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with Hindu nationalist women, and their young, dominantly female supporters. The Meerut nationalist camp, the main source of data for this article, was attended by approximately 300 girls, aged between 14 and 25, who came from nearby communally sensitive districts, including Muzaffarnagar. Their mobility was relatively restricted, and the camps were a ‘safe space’ where they were allowed to stay away from home. Girls from the Delhi camp came from an urban setting, and had more access to the city. Both camps were dominated by upper-caste Samiti organisers, and had a heterogeneous caste representation among young women. The nationalist leaders and cadres in the Shiv Sena-dominated poor housing areas, which were informal sites for addressing the problem of ‘Love Jihad’ in the city, came from lower and middle caste backgrounds; but the women had a strong presence in the shadow labour economies of Mumbai (as maids, cooks, cleaners and low skilled support staff in upper-class residential sectors).

**Teaching ignorant girls: rural riots, urban rhetorics**

Four years before the Hadiya case unfolded in the southern part of urban India, around 14,000 people from villages around the Muzaffarnagar district in Uttar Pradesh, a state in northern India, left their homes in the wake of communal riots. The immediate cause of the Muzaffarnagar riots was attributed to a fight between three boys (two Jat, caste Hindu brothers and a Muslim boy). According to news reports, this was locally identified as a case of ‘Love Jihad’– the Muslim boy had molested the minor sister of the Jat boys. Provoked by this transgression, the Jat brothers had killed the Muslim boy (Pandey and Pathak 2013). A congregation of Muslims in the village, in turn, brutally beat up and murdered the two Jat boys. This incident took place on August 27, 2013, at Kawal village, in the Muzaffarnagar district (BBC 2013). After the killings, local authorities implemented a legal ban on public gatherings. Despite that, influential Jat and Hindu leaders organised large meetings, and launched the much-touted slogan ‘Bahu-Beti Bachao’ (save daughters-in-law and daughters) from the epic danger of Muslim men (All India Democratic Women’s Association [AIDWA] 2013, 2–3). In the days that followed, people were killed, displaced, looted and sexually violated during the outbreak of riots. Media reports showed that in spite of the deployment of army personnel, various political parties and the state administration developed no effective response to curtail the violence (Angre 2014). In the midst of this crisis, the President of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP; Global
Organisation of Hindus) said in Outlook noted, ‘…for waging ‘Love-Jihad’ money comes from the Gulf nations. They provide money and motorcycles to lure girls and this has been happening across the country. The people of Muzaffarnagar have shown that they will not tolerate this’ (Outlook 2013). Despite the post-riot endorsement of anti-Muslim violence and the BJP’s vicious electoral politics, the communal clash itself raised questions about the swift turn towards the language of ‘Love Jihad’ in relatively isolated district areas with little history of religious discord.

The distance between the city of Meerut and Muzaffarnagar was less than 35 kilometers. It was in the former that the two main bodies of the Sangh Parivar (Sangh Family) – Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, the National Association of Volunteers, camp attended by 500 male volunteers) and Rashtra Sevika Samiti (the RSS female wing, henceforth Samiti) – had organised their annual residential camps in the sweltering month of June 2013. The RSS, the first Hindu nationalist organisation active since 1925, historically used multiple social and political discursive practices, including the organization of urban indoctrination camps, in order to counter ‘westoxification’ in India. The RSS and their affiliates (involving the Shiv Sena) were together referred to as the Sangh Parivar or Sangh Combine. The Samiti, which began 11 years after the launch of the RSS, was a prominent part of the Sangh, and played a key role in disseminating doctrinal knowledge about ideal Hindu womanhood (cf. Sarkar 1991, 1998, 1999). During the camp, three months before the riots in Meerut, girls as young as eight were enlightened by camp leaders about the modus-operandi of ‘Love Jihad’– a Muslim man, young and attractive, ties a kalava (sacred red thread tied on the wrist among Hindus), wears a teeka (vermillion on the forehead worn by Hindus), buys Hindu girls expensive gifts, and tells her that he does not believe in caste or class. The alleged perpetrator traps the girl, uses marriage for religious conversion, and then sells the victim to an old, Muslim man for a large sum of money. While some camp attendees nodded their heads vigorously in acknowledgement, as there were many girls who appeared to know about this phenomenon, others looked at each other in disbelief. We suggest that this fear of ‘Love Jihad’ fundamentally encapsulated within it the anxiety of Islam overtaking the Hindu nation, through the body of the Hindu woman. Thus the urban camps became sites where girls from rural and peri-urban backgrounds, who were poised to make social and spatial choices between community and freedom, gained experienced knowledge about the ‘Other’. While lectures and social interactions in the urban camps instilled the terror of ‘Love Jihad’ among attendees, the Samiti and other fringe nationalist women’s groups, such as the Shiv Sena Mahila Aghadi, continued to used this discourse of ‘Love Jihad’ to create a vision of the gendered but empowered Hindu nationalist subject, who could easily identify and counter the advances of the ‘Love Jihadist’.
Saving Hindu women: the everyday discourse of ‘Love Jihad’

Aartitai, was a Shiv Sena Mahila Aghadi (henceforth Aghadi) member in a decrepit labourers’ chawl (housing colony) in the Chaturvadi area in Mumbai. As a senior member of the Aghadi, she commanded respect from the chawl inhabitants. She was also the local aunty who neighbours approached for political and economic favours, or simply to seek advice about work, salaries and general gossip about marriages, break-ups, and extra-marital affairs. But Aartitai also had another important role. She was the local match-maker, and was often approached by families with young girls and boys to seek information about a suitable match for their marriageable children. Aartitai knew many young people through her political work in different slum areas in the city, and was known for setting up good matches. She often told Sen that she was ‘modern’. She encouraged young couples to meet and get to know each other before a marriage. She would also take the liberty of intervening in their marriages during marital disputes, since she felt responsible for bringing young people into intimate relationships. In recent years, Aartitai was concerned that young inhabitants in the chawl, especially those who found regular work in the city, chose their own wives and husbands, and would bypass the unwritten rule in the chawl, that even self-selected partners needed to be vetted by the Aghadi leader. She worried about her loss of respect.

Aartitai was deeply affected by all the recent rabble-rousing around ‘Love Jihad’. She did notice that young chawl inhabitants did not care about Hindu-Muslim celebrity marriages (such as the controversial marriage between Bollywood stars, Saif Ali Khan and Kareena Kapoor), but she didn’t think that lower class, caste and labouring families in a fading Mumbai housing colony would be transgressive enough to enter into such liaisons. However, when Priya, an educated girl in the chawl and also a member of the Aghadi, and Irfan, a Muslim boy living in the neighbourhood, started an affair, Aartitai felt the matter was now of serious concern. She gathered all the young people in the chawl in the small, slippery courtyard, and decided to give them a real talking to. Sitting on a high bed made of coir mats, she encouraged everyone to assemble around her with steaming cups of tea. Young people and the anthropologist (Sen, conducting fieldwork in 2013) sat around her, using the steps to the chawl and small stools as haphazard sitting arrangements. Aartitai strained her neck, looked around her to carefully observe all the people attending the meeting. She called out the names of a few young people who were missing from the gathering. Some friends of missing invitees gave excuses for their absence. All the inhabitants of the ground floor also came out to watch the show. Aartitai cleared her throat and said loudly: “Love Jihad”. She stopped to watch the reactions of the people around her. And peered with narrow eyes at Priya’s younger brother, who hung his head in shame.
Instead of using a philosophical rhetoric of superior Hindu womanhood, which would be potentially incomprehensible to the semi-literate women living in a laboring colony, Aarti tai used simple, accessible language and illustrations to explain the financial politics of ‘Love Jihad’. She argued that young Muslim men are being mobilised and heavily funded to seduce and convert young Hindu women. She displayed a poster of a Hindu girl riding an expensive scooter with an evidently well-dressed, urban Muslim man (identified by his beard) and driving away from a Hindu temple. ‘Muslim men get money and training to do this,’ she said pointing at the poster, overtly warning young girls against the fake accouterments of wealth and freedom in the city. This oft-repeated narrative of vast fiscal investment embedded within the practice of ‘Love Jihad’ was also reiterated by a 19-year old Samiti member in the camp in Meerut, as she provided the intricate financial details of the ‘scam’. During the course of Tyagi’s fieldwork in the same year, this young Samiti member gave emphasis on the monetary benefits received by those Muslims who converted vulnerable Hindu girls, and then pushed them into illegal trafficking. When Tyagi asked her to specify on the culprits, the Samiti member exasperatedly explained that the network of conversion and selling spanned across many states in India, and even spilled over into trafficking networks abroad. Reflecting on the pervasive nature of the ‘network’, the member said, ‘They (the Muslim men the girls are sold to) can be within their family, their religion; they can even be among us – these maneuvers are discreet and operate in a vast network. For example, if they take you from Saharanpur to Kerala, will you know who is who?’ Some Samiti members also mentioned that there was a ‘rate card’ that listed the monetary prize that would be given to a Muslim man corresponding to the ‘caste’ of the girl he ‘traps’. According to a camp attendee, TS, ‘A gang from Pakistan enters India. They exploit the young girls and sell them off in foreign countries.’ On being asked what these foreign countries could be, GB, a Karyavahika (a volunteer) replied, ‘Muslim countries like Saudi (Arabia) and Mecca’, which happened to be in the same country.

Both Aarti tai and the Samiti officials also stressed on the inevitability of violence from various quarters faced by women, when they entered into liaisons with men not sanctioned by their communities. Aarti tai ranted on about the aggressive role played by Islamic organisations in ensuring Hindu women’s coerced conversions through illegal marriages. She also talked about how the Shiv Sena in Uttar Pradesh, had launched a Love Trishul (trident, the weapon of male Hindu martial gods) campaign. The latter involved gangs of Hindu men roaming around the state, violently ‘intervening’ when they spotted a case of ‘Love Jihad’ being played out in the streets. Aarti tai warned young people that this was not yet the case in Mumbai, but if couples didn’t take responsibility for their bad behaviour, then surely they would
face similar consequences. The Samiti members also gave examples of women (quoted in Sangh magazines) who were tortured after ‘falling into the trap’ with Muslim men. A Samiti member vividly recounts,

*Unko pratadit kiya jaata hai* (the girls are exploited). They harass in the name of religion. They force them to have 10 children. What can I say more? What can be worse than this? There was this one incident; it came in the paper as well. For three years, a victim of ‘Love Jihad’ was locked in a room by her perpetrator. They had shown the girl a photo of her before and after her captivity – she had lost her hair, her eyes … Basically, such a beautiful girl became scary to look at. What more can be said about their mentality?

Viewing it as a matter of national importance, NB, a young camp *Shikshika* (teacher), remarked, ‘The first time I heard about ‘Love Jihad’ was in a Samiti camp at Saharanpur (around four years ago-2009/10) in a *charcha* (discussion) session. It sounded dreadful. These men convert, exploit, and then abandon the girls’. When Tyagi asked the camp attendees whether they had really witnessed any such incidents, a student replied, ‘No. But there is a book called ‘Rashtrader’ (of the nation), a Sangh monthly. I had read it in that.’ An influential Samiti member from Delhi region explained the implications of ‘Love Jihad’ to Tyagi as, ‘Muslims consider *Jihad* as victory. In the case of ‘Love Jihad’, they want to use Hindu women to conquer the nation’. Aartitai however did not develop an account of Hinduism being diluted through inter-religious marriages, nor did she generate a high discourse on Hindu women’s social and embodied relationship with the nation. She posed practical questions about everyday love and marriage in the city. For example, she asked: ‘Why would you want to be beaten up by a Muslim husband?’ She contended that marriages would always be rocky, and if girls married men chosen by their families then there would be benefits. For example, the bride’s parents or even Aartitai usually lived nearby, and retained the moral authority to intervene and chastise the son-in-law in case of domestic disputes. ‘Running away from your parents with Muslim boys only makes you more vulnerable to violence. Save yourselves by marrying Hindu men,’ she argued. She also talked about how marrying Muslim men would make the girl’s families embarrassed, as they would lose their prestige within the *chawl*. ‘In any case poor people have very little prestige that they have earned through their life, why take that away in the name of stupid love? What is love for poor people?’ she asked. She also stated how Muslim families were ‘not modern’. ‘So many of you are now educated, earning money and supporting your families, why throw that away, bear a *burqa* (veil) and sit at home?’ she asked. By focussing on the ‘local’ repercussions of marrying by choice, Aartitai brought to life the more quotidian consequences of not following societal decrees.

According to Michelutti (2007), who explored the ‘vernacularization’ of democratic politics, it is the local idioms (of caste, kinship, kingship, religion,
and politics, i.e. ‘the vernacular’ and the everyday) that inform popular perceptions of the political world. In her work on the politicisation of the Yadav caste groups in North India, Michelutti (2004, 2007) argues that popular politics adapts to wider political rhetoric; not necessarily through conventional political participation in the form of demonstrations and elections, but through embedding political processes in everyday practices and processes (such as recasting Krishna, the primary male god worshipped by the Yadavs, as the original politician), and subsequently entrenching politics in the cultural consciousness of a social group. Aartitai’s recasting of ‘Love Jihad’ as a potential threat to poor women workers in the city also opens up a similar line of enquiry on the successes of popular politics. Aartitai subtly modified and localised a wider nationalist discourse to implant a quotidian urban anxiety in the *chawl*, which spoke to the daily concerns of marginalised communities. Even though she wanted to moderate the mobility of women in the *chawl*, she emphasised that certain urban choices and responsibilities acquired through poor women’s work and education needed to be protected against predatory practices of minority communities. And this is where Aartitai’s crude, vernacular and spontaneous retelling of ‘Love Jihad’ and its functional consequences for poor, young women in the city diverged significantly from the well-rehearsed, doctrinal and strict discourse on ‘Love Jihad’ developed within the remits of Samiti politics.

Tyagi and Sen eventually observed how discussions on ‘Love Jihad’ became quite rampant in conversations with both old and young women who had Hindu nationalist affiliations. While outsiders or new entrants had little idea of ‘Love Jihad’, the initiated women claimed that it was the biggest concern of the Hindu Right. Apart from borrowing the conceptual framework from the Sangh ideology, women nationalists on the ground added an alarmist strain by repeatedly representing ‘Love Jihad’ as a ploy by the lustful, money-hungry Muslim male to distract the naïve Hindu girl from her social duties. The city was regarded as a liberatory space where these young women, who are unmindful of their own social and bodily boundaries, became especially vulnerable to seduction, conversion, violence and trafficking. Das (1998) argues in her study of the Partition of the Indian sub-continent, that women’s bodies “became a sign through which men communicated with each other (Das 1998, 56).” This article shows that even though the discussions on ‘Love Jihad’ involved a communication between young women and women nationalist leaders in multiple sites, the campaign remained a masculinist project about masculine anxieties.

‘Self’ vis-à-vis the ‘Other’: creating a dichotomous urban ideology

A large genre of theorisation about nationhood stresses the academic need for a gendered and spatial delineation of the nation (cf. Bernice 1987;
Banerjee 1995; Basu 1994, 1995; Hroch 1995). In this section we argue that the conceptualisation of the nation relied not only on the historical, exclusionary dichotomies of the ‘self’ and ‘other’, but this legacy of Othering also produced contemporary nationalist discursive disjunctions between the ‘citizen’ and the ‘stranger’, which got reproduced and reenacted in the context of the urban public sphere in India. According to many political historians, the cultural understanding of ‘us and them’ were prominently embedded in the discourse of the ‘nation-self’ (Hindu sons of the soil) and the ‘colonial-other’ (Christian invaders) during the presence of the British empire (cf van der Veer 1988; Ludden 1996). To give this Othering treatise public legitimacy, the nation was represented in popular discourse (from nationalist songs to anti-colonial literature) in the image of a pristine land. This genealogy gave rise to the notion of the pure Vedic land, that fuelled the conceptualisation of the undivided, Hindu nation, the ‘Akhand Bharat’, an idea that the RSS sought to re-create through its doctrinal activities (Jaffrelot 2005; Sen A.P. 2003). A discursive strand that emerged strongly from the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ dichotomy, was the division between the ‘corrupt’ public versus the ‘pristine’ private sphere. To maintain this socio-cultural difference between ‘us’ natives versus the ‘other’ colonisers, the Hindu woman, an embodiment of the nation, was to remain unsullied from the corrupt influences of the public sphere, contaminated by colonial advances (Chatterjee 1987). In postcolonial India, however, the RSS along with it’s affiliates, turned towards the figure of the Muslim male as the treacherous Other; who not only fractured the physical boundaries of the Indian subcontinent to create an Islamic nation (Pakistan) but continued to carry out violent and covert terrorist activities on domestic/Hindu soil (cf. Freitag 1989, 2005). According to many scholars addressing questions around the rise of Hindu nationalism in India (cf. Ludden 1996; Sarkar 1991), the most brutally violent manifestation of this politics of Hindu homogeneity through the annihilation of the other lay in the demolition of a historical mosque in the north Indian temple down of Ayodhya. After a prolonged nationalist campaign to build a temple dedicated to the Hindu male god Ram in place of the mosque, Hindu nationalist cadres travelled to Ayodhya in December 1992 and reduced the mosque to rubble. This episode sparked a series of communal riots, and reconfigured the urban as a space for spectacular communal politics in the region. Cities (such as Delhi and Mumbai), that were affected by the post-Ayodhya riots, followed by years of serial blasts and unpredicted terror attacks organized by violent Islamic outfits, became particular sites for regurgitating the fear of the violent Muslim stranger.

After the Gujarat communal riots in 2002, which was concentrated in the city of Ahmedabad in western India, a new version of ‘Love Jihad’ became prevalent in the media- in which Muslim men were accused of
honey-trapping mobile, unsupervised Hindu girls in various urban contexts, in order to rapidly procreate and impact their minority demographic statistics (Dixit 2017). Tyagi’s field encounters with female camp leaders in Meerut and Delhi showed that the Samiti essentialised the role of women as child bearers, in accordance with the nationalist vision of the Hindu female body as producers of new sons of the soil. Thus the women volunteers objected vehemently if the child was to be borne out of a Muslim sperm. Samiti leaders appropriated conventional stereotypes that Muslim men can marry multiple times, and created a current discourse on illicit sexual union with Hindu girls within the framework of convoluted modernities. Significantly, this discourse implicated both young and old Muslim men: it was the young, urban and suavely dressed Muslim men who trapped Hindu girls, and then sold them to older, Muslim men. This contemporary belief propagated by the Samiti, was synonymous with historical, nationalist assertions that all men who practiced Islam were disloyal (to women, and consequently, the nation), greedy (because they received money to carry out ‘Love Jihad’) and hence, should be identified as the everyday ‘enemies’ hidden within our quotidian lives.

Gupta (2002), in her research on the historical roots of Love Jihad, argues that these discourses were recyclable tropes to control women, and they were not just a product of anti-Muslim campaigns in postcolonial India. In the 1920s, for example, Hindu revivalist organisations generated similar narratives around the sexual exploitation of Hindu women in the form of rape/abduction/forced marriage by Muslim men. These organisations distributed pamphlets, books, written testimonies, myths and rumours, with a similar imagery of the ‘passive victimised Hindu woman at the hands of inscrutable Muslims’ (Gupta 2002, 13). The distribution material also identified colonial modernisation processes as a diluting influence on strong religious divides between Islam and Hinduism (Gupta 2002). Such allegations fuelled riots in Kanpur in 1924 and Mathura in 1928 (Gupta 2002), which were Hindu holy cities emerging as important urban centres in colonial India. In her work on such images created by Hindu nationalism, Brosius (2005) also uses Stuart Hall’s approach to representation and meaning, and concludes that these images are not static, but a signifying practice within a particular discourse that constitutes ‘reality’. The author states that such representations demonising Muslim men attempted to create visual imaginations, sustainable knowledge systems and everyday metaphors so that a primordial Hindu nationalist essence could be conveyed (Brosius 2005, 56). Embraced by Sangh members and sympathisers, we argue that these variegated representation of ‘Love Jihad’ as demographic war became especially significant in the context of urban public space, as the latter was scattered with vulnerable Hindu women blinded by urban emancipatory practices. Regular sexual
union between Love Jihadists and these free women could potentially lead to a decline in the numbers of Hindus (Rao 2011), a distorted Hindu lineage, and to the loss of this unifying primordial history. During the course of Sen’s fieldwork among poor communities in Mumbai, she discovered that demographic Love Jihad reinforced historical stereotypes of Muslim men as the sexually charged ‘Other’, allegedly due to the excessive consumption of blood in red meat, a liberty accorded to Muslim communities only in secular and tolerant urban environments. We suggest that nationalist leaders and cadres regenerated these tropes efficiently in multiple urban contexts in order to create a passive feminine subject who was at the center of competing discourses of ‘Love Jihad’. This subject’s access to both the urban and the nation was hinged on her positioning on the ‘correct’ side of the debate. The debate was also successful in creating an illusion of feminine choice that prodded women towards loyalty towards the community, and was designed to restrict her mobility in the city.

The discourse of ‘Love Jihad’ also seemed to legitimise the Hindu right’s repeated reassertions in the urban public sphere. This was a key component in determining the codes of ideal masculinity; as Anand (2005) also found in his analysis of security as a ‘corollary’ to competing discourses of insecurity. He writes: ‘The politics of Hindutva is one where the construction of a desired masculinity (ideal Hindu male, virile yet with controlled sexuality) requires the destruction of competing masculinities and men’ (Anand 2005, 207). Sinha (1995), in her analysis of masculinities in colonial India, argues that imperial social formations in 19th century India clearly demarcated the Hindus as effeminate, non-martial (except the Rajputs), and this enfeebling of Hindu men forms the historical basis of current nationalist appeals to reclaim Hindu masculinities. These sermons under the garb of ‘security’ produce ‘insecurities to be operated upon, as well as, defines the object to be secured’ (Anand 2005, 206), which becomes conflated with the masculine safekeeping of ‘the good, Hindu girl’ in the city. This ‘good Hindu girl’ is dutiful, obedient and docile. According to nationalist dictates, for example, the conduct of the ideal woman should invisibilise her in public. This meant wearing ‘respectable clothing’ and inculcating a body language that was devoid of unnecessary movement. For example, Samiti members prescribed that sexual violence from strangers could be warded off by not attracting attention to oneself, by avoiding laughter or haphazard movement on the streets. The head of religious affairs of the Samiti, North India region, categorically stated, ‘Our look conveys the way we are. We have to dress well and keep our character safe. If you dress badly, you will sow what you reap,’ implying that sexual harassment was intimately related to the way young women conducted themselves in public. Samiti discourses recommended that the ‘gaze’, traditionally associated with men, should be internalized and
anticipated by women for their own protection. Samiti members also implied that a girl should have a purpose of being outside of the home, and should not, in Phadke et al’s (2011) conceptualisation, loiter. As a Prant Karyavahika (section leader) of the Delhi region told girls attending the camp, ‘Try not going out alone. But if you must, tell the truth and go on time. If you are truthful, then nothing wrong can happen to you’. This discourse became especially pertinent in the public sphere, where the ‘good Hindu girl’ protected herself through her virtues, and differentiated herself from women who did not subscribe to that dictate.

We suggest that nationalist decrees revive and retain such anxieties of feminine in/security, by not only making ‘unfriendly spaces’ in the city inaccessible, through the use of communal violence or infrastructural alienation, but also, through discursive concerns such as ‘Love Jihad’ and related notions of stigma and honour. Phadke (2013), in her research on women negotiating public spaces in Mumbai, found that her respondents desired safe urban public spaces. But the author suggests ‘there was also an indication towards two categories of ‘unrespectable people’- the lower class, mostly migrant, often unemployed and sometimes, uncomfortably, Muslim, and the ‘unrespectable woman’ whose carried out their illicit businesses on the streets. Phadke said, ‘The first group was perceived to be a threat to women’s physical safety, the second and by no means less important group was perceived to produce a threat to the reputation of even respectable women’ (Phadke 2013, 51). Additionally, in her interactions with young women, she found that girls were far more anxious about the ‘risk to their reputation’ than physical harm. We argue that ‘Love Jihad’ performed the all-encompassing task: of invoking an infamy (that would make it difficult for women to experiment moving beyond socially-sanctioned boundaries), of isolating undesirable populations (that should be rejected within an urban Hindu civil order), and of keeping ordinary Hindu women off the streets.

The critical question remains: ‘why are some bodies more unfriendly than others’? (Phadke 2013, 51). In a commuter train in Mumbai, Hindu men equally participate in collective taunting and harassment of poor, working women. Some scholars argue that the idea of a unified Hindu nation is easily challenged by the similarity in dress, culture, histories and masculinities between Hindus and Muslims. Flåten (2012), in his analysis of the alternate conceptions of history on the mosque-temple campaign, finds the notion of ‘alternate principles of grouping’ particularly useful. The author explains that in order to produce a united Hindu front, there must be a dissolution of dissonances that might occur in the social group. He sees the temple movement as a step towards producing ‘Hindu unity to counter caste cleavages, which were particularly deep in North India’ (Flåten 2012, p. 628). Similarly, the Muslim ‘other’ also needs to be imagined and articulated in an
essentialised image, to enable dichotomization between the communities, so as to make the process of differentiation stark. In the context of sexual encounters in the modern city, it becomes the primary responsibility of women to uphold these principles of distancing and separation between male bodies. Phadke (2013) reason that alarmist and surveillance-laden decrees for women’s public conduct do not arise from the need for safety, but from an ‘anxiety of bodies that ought to be unfriendly, becoming friendly or worse, intimate’ (Phadke 2013, p. 53). This is reflected well in Aartitai’s informal speech on ‘Love Jihad’, which underlined the politics of intimacy with ‘the Other’. Against the backdrop of a chawl in Mumbai, ‘Love Jihad’ was less related to the global threat of Islam, but more closely tied to domestic violence, familial honour, and loss of mobility in the context of urban poverty. Hindu women’s freedom as earning, mobile but respectful daughters and mothers in the city became far more important to Aartitai, than adhering to normative discussions on ‘Love Jihad’ being an affront to Hinduism. ‘Women already have so much trouble travelling to work, why compound this problem by getting friendly with Muslim men?’ asked Aartitai. This desire for feminine submission to avoiding ‘the urban Other’ is challenged by feminist scholars who argue in favour of ‘loitering’ in the city (Phadke 2013; Phadke et al 2011). In an attempt to complicate the conversation on safety and women’s right to public spaces, Phadke et al calls for the ‘right to risk’. The authors locate their argument in the larger theory of the patriarchal state, that sought to limit the mobility of the ‘Othered’ urban citizens: lower class, lower caste, women, Muslims, Dalits, unregulated and informal sector workers. Phadke et al (2011, 2013) bring to the light the ‘realities of layered exclusions and multiple marginalisations’ (Phadke 2013, 52) and make the issue of women’s right to public space a concern about restrained access to the city by all individuals.

Contesting discourses: young urban women and nationalist protectionism

At first they (Samiti) tell us she was out at 11 at night. No, she was not. And a time like 10 or 11 is completely normal for a city like Delhi. But let’s leave that. Do only boys have the right to roam around at night? (Samiti Camp participant, 21 years old, Meerut, 2013)

The idea of the link between clothes and rape is something I find ridiculous! Irrespective of what a woman is wearing, how dare a man touch her? (Samiti Camp attendee, 17-years old, Delhi, 2017)

In December 2012, a young student was brutally gang-raped in a bus in Delhi. She died after a few days, succumbing to injuries caused by insertion of foreign objects into her vagina that irrevocably damaged her internal organs. Unprecedented in the history of feminist politics in the region, this
incident sparked large-scale anti-rape demonstration in many urban centres, where both men and women across class, caste and religious divides protested against urban women’s sexual vulnerability in modern India (see introduction to the special issue for more details). While discussing this incident, Samiti officials theorised that in the event of rape, the girl was equally at fault. During the second day of the Meerut camp attended by Tyagi, the *Pracharika* (female leader) mentioned the impropriety of the girl. ‘Why did she have to be out at 11 in the night?’ she remarked. Other members of the Samiti also cited reasons that would inevitably lead to rape – the late night, sense of misadventure, not having presence of mind etc. One of the primary causes of rape invoked repeatedly by Samiti members: the deceased was ‘out’ with a male companion at night. SB, a *Karyavahika* (female cadre), remarked, ‘Nowadays, girls have to work late hours too. But when they are working, they mostly come back in a car and are safe. But wandering around late at night with your boyfriend is something I do not consider appropriate, even though I know it is common culture now. The boy then gave a statement saying that they were roaming around (*ghoom rahe the*), and that he did not intend to marry her.’

Samiti’s assessment of the rape was straightforwardly directed towards the victim’s transgression, to experiment with a modern relationship (which did not involve marriage and procreation), and also being outdoors at night. Women volunteers encouraged young attendees to show disdain towards the rape victim, and analyse the ‘fault’ of the medical student indiscreetly accessing public space after sunset. ‘I am not ashamed to say it. How can you go with your boyfriend at 9 in the night? It gets so dark by 9! Today, no one steps out at the time with their family, how can you go without them?’ (emphasis added) said KS, a young Samiti member. For some attendees, the redeeming factor lay in the possibility of a formal engagement between ‘the couple’, that was often speculated in the media. ‘See, what they (Samiti) said was that she was out with a guy … I have read the news and seen on TV – actually the guy she was with was her fiancé. Considering they were going to be engaged, what was the problem in roaming around?’ reasoned TS.

Challenging the dominant discourse of shaming the victim, many young women at the camp more bluntly referred to sexual violence as a social deprivation, not a feminine imperfection. They discussed the inherent gender bias in many urban societies, where the commercial consumption of women’s bodies had endangered women in the public sphere. Showing their displeasure at the Samiti’s stand on urban rape, the girls debated their own reading of the incident, supported by newspaper and television sources. They found that the information dished out by camp leaders was largely false. ‘The most shameful extent to which they (older Samiti members) have gone, is when they said that the girl was partly at fault. I would say that I
am ashamed that people have this mentality even today. If one goes by what they say about vastr (clothes), and recognizing a person’s intentions through the eyes, please ask them to explain the rape of a five-year old girl. How is she supposed to recognize a man’s nazar (gaze)?’ asked TM.

Many young attendees recounted their negative experience of being in the public sphere, and sympathized with the deceased girl. They asserted that sexual harassment, more commonly known as ched-chad in colloquial Hindi, was fairly normalised. Several girls argued that such events were rarely linked to external factors such as women’s clothing or the time of the day, and reflected critically on ched-chad as a violent manifestation of inherent gender discrimination in many urban societies battling to remain its patriarchal control over public spaces. ‘If girls do not go out of their homes, how will they come to know about society?’ asked TS. Another camp attendee, NS, while recounting how the Samiti women blamed the rape victim for getting on an empty bus, remarked, ‘Some people objected to the fact that she took an empty bus. My point is that: if someone is in a hurry and takes the same route daily, why would they have a problem? If girls are preoccupied with the fear of travelling alone, then I don’t think we can ever dream of becoming the Prime Minister.’ The girls even accused ‘Indian society’ of fuelling hyper-masculine identities, and undermining the worth of young girls. According to many camp attendees, girls should have the courage to battle against gender violence, and in this context, the Samiti’s endorsement of women’s ‘self-defense’ training was hailed as enabling for women’s urban futures. Thus both the conservative rhetoric on urban women’s freedoms (articulated through an analysis of the Delhi rape incident), and the support of women’s self-protection (articulated through Hindu women’s need to aggressively preserve their bodies) were accepted, critiqued and deliberated by the heterogeneous camp population. ‘The problem of deficiency of morality is a problem of society, and it cannot be compensated by blaming the girls all the time! The society needs to address that lack in boys as well’, said TM. She saw moral panic as a strategy to impede women’s progress, and stated: ‘People have opinions and girls are victims of that … girls are victims of a conscious method to push them behind’.

**Conclusion**

In this article we have shown that despite the doctrinal and practical differences in the dissemination of knowledge about ‘Love Jihad’, the fundamental discourse on love, marriage, women’s movement and conversion remained related to the control of women’s sexuality and mobility, especially in the context of the modernising Indian city. Further, ‘Love Jihad’ not only fitted into common patriarchal tropes about dominating women’s bodies,
but it also offered insights into the way legitimate citizenship in the city was represented in nationalist discourse. In fact, discourses like ‘Love Jihad’ are some of the ways in which a desired Hindutva imagination of history can be invoked- the history of a ‘constant struggle between the Hindu community, construed as ancient and indigenous, and the Muslim community, representing the alien ‘other’ (Flåten 2012, 627). Further, as Sarkar (1991) has suggested, the urgency to deny differences in gender, caste and class conflicts, and create homogenous ‘Hindu groups’ (such as the mobilisation of select caste-based and Hindu women’s organisations during the Ram Temple movement) also emerges from a need to create a stable and identifiable electoral base.

We have argued that the possibilities of undesirable and uncontrolled relationships between heterogeneous individuals in the context of urban modernity, threatened the utopic visions of gender and religious boundaries in the city. And in more strictly developed nationalist discourses, these transgressions subsequently challenged the boundaries of the wider nation. While the patriarchal foundations of the imagined ‘Hindu nation’ could not function without strict endogamous reproduction of Hindu citizenship, in the same vein, the gendered nature of Hindu social orders could not be reproduced for the nation, if the very structure of that society was threatened by unregulated urban cultures and practices. In both the formal setting of the Samiti camps and the informal ambience of ‘chawl talk’, we show how nationalist women attempted to create a dread of sexual vulnerability among young women, and by commodifying the same young women that they sought to caution (by viewing them as objects of Muslim lust, or even late-night rape in the city), they aspired to limit the possibility of gendered urban mobilities. As Gupta (2002) points out, exclusionary discourses ignore any agency on the part of the Hindu women in love. She said: ‘Portrayal of Hindu women as victims of false love shows the need felt not so much to protect them but to discipline and control them by restricting their movement, as various public places are declared unsafe for them.’ (Gupta 2002, 14).

According to Anand (2005), the dangerous and lustful figure of a Muslim man is used to ‘mobilise the Hindu male and female, and awaken the Hindu nation’ (Anand 2005, 207). Many communities have consistently accused Muslim men of sexual harassment of young girls. They have set up urban vigilante groups, such as the anti-Romeo squads, which patrolled schools, colleges, parks and shopping malls to identify deviant urban couples (AIDWA 2013). In the process of creating discourses against sexual violence, we suggest that ‘Love Jihad’ performs particular nation-making functions, which also sustains the flow of nationalist verdicts between rural and urban areas. First, it creates an idea of the ‘self’ (as a good Hindu) by successfully identifying, dehumanizing, and stereotyping the ‘other’ (Muslims, women who love
them) as the deviants in the city. Secondly, it makes a case for unleashing ‘good male violence’ (e.g. anti-Love Jihad proponents and activists) in the name of women’s security (Iyer 2017). Thirdly, the campaign creates segregated spatiality by marking out desirable and undesirable bodies in the urban public sphere. And lastly, it is a campaign that is used to create the image of the ‘ideal’ Hindu nationalist citizen, as one who subscribes to the idea of a regulated Hindu society, despite being exposed to the temptations of urban modernity. Citizenship remains a measure of exclusion, where it is ‘… always a historically specific act of boundary making, with the ‘not-yet’ or ‘less than’ citizens always standing in the shadow of the term’ (Petryna & Follis 2015). Apart from serving as the ‘other’ in the Hindu nationalist discourse, the ‘less than’ citizen, also fits into the narrative of the unwanted figure in the rise of developmental nationalism in contemporary India. Stereotypes of excess pitted against Muslims (e.g. religious backwardness, ‘beef-ery’, sexual aggression in public, hedonism, and ‘innumerable’ children) are pitched against the planned nature of ‘smart cities’ promoted by the current Hindu nationalist prime minister, which also upheld the image of the future nation. Appadurai (2006), while addressing this global terror of unknown Muslim terrorists living amongst us, states: ‘… globalisation could expose severe pathologies in the sacred ideologies of nationhood’ (Appadurai 2006, 1). We suggest that ‘Love Jihad’ is a byproduct of such a pathological obsession of the Hindu Right over the Hindu woman’s body, and this article has analysed how the latter can become a symbol and site of contemporary nationalist conflict over the urban public sphere. However, our ethnography has also shown that young nationalist cadres can critically engage with debates on women’s sexual vulnerability, and actively challenge the protectionist decrees embodied in nationalist ideals. Through their own experiences of navigating the public sphere, even young female nationalists retain the potential to review and reassess the success of anti-Muslim and anti-women campaigns in the modern Indian city.

While honour killing of both men and women over romantic choices are more prominent in rural areas, such as the Muzaffarnagar case, inter-religious marriages continue to incur the wrath of both communities. The recent brutal murder of a young Hindu photographer in Delhi, Ankit Saxena, by a Muslim family for his liaison with their 20-year-old daughter, Shehzadi, became quickly communalised, and attracted a range of actors, actions and agents, including the Hindu nationalist politicians, the secular media, appeals against communal politics from the victim’s family, and the legal justice system (DailyO 2018). Whether the women lovers are Hindu or Muslim, the Ankit murder case highlighted the ways in which urban women who expressed their desire for free love continued to bear the brunt of social ostracisation and endured the fear of communal repercussions, including
death. In the case of Shehzadi, for example, her lover was killed, her family was imprisoned for it, and she was evicted from her community. Since Shehzadi’s mother was the key instigator of Ankit’s murder, she had little hope for gendered solidarities from feminine, familial networks. Mody (2008), Goli et al (2013) and Sezgin and Künkler (2014) show how police interventions, overtly disapproving officials in charge of legalising marriages, and the bureaucratic organisation of marriage/civil courts in India, dissuade inter-religious couples from accessing the law. Despite these obstacles, inter-religious couples continue to defy communal directives and enter into inter-religious marriages. However, this article has shown how both the prominence and dominance of aggressive and violent anti-Other campaigns, even in modern Indian cities, are shrinking the space for experimenting with freedom of choice and mobility in urban life.

Declaration Statement
The authors certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers’ bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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