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Down a Devious and Dangerous Road

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An analysis of Hindutva popular culture in the small towns of north India explores its performers, audiences, and the resources supporting it. Seemingly simple songs by ordinary people fuel powerful emotions and ignite social divisions, building a culture that is covertly reshaping the country.

Kunal Purohit dedicates his book to his parents, but there is a second part to the dedication which reads: “And to my country, increasingly unrecognisable”. The book is about this unrecognisable side of Indian politics, which at some point was on the margins but has gradually built itself up to occupy the social imagination. It uncovers an activism which has not made any attention-grabbing media headlines, it has not been on the big canvas of mega events, but is taking over the imagination of millions both in the virtual and real worlds.

The terrain of this activism is removed from the big cities and happening places, it lacks the glamour and glitter of glitzy events, it is not advertised through online sites but is acquiring a following that equals the popularity of star shows. This is the world of Hindutva pop or H-pop. Purohit delves deep into this world to bring home to us the troubling transformations under way in a country whose Constitution upholds syncretic togetherness but is witnessing its citizens violating it.

He writes that some of the most important stories are discovered accidentally. As a journalist, Purohit found himself in a small town on a dusty evening in southern Jharkhand. Over tea with the locals, he was told a story about a Ram Navami procession that had the history of communities mingling peacefully but which turned loud and ferocious one evening in 2017. What followed was a crime of hate in that small town—a crime that had no basis except a difference in religious faith.

The book also highlights H pop’s popularity, especially its songs, which Purohit saw in Jharkhand—on its streets, in concerts, in public buses, and on phones as ringtones.

But how could a religious procession known for bringing together the town’s Hindus and Muslims turn hateful? Purohit kept probing and discovered a flourishing world of Hindutva popular music, or what he calls H-Pop, on a mission to generate *desh bhakti* (patriotism) for a Hindu nationalist India but deepening the religious divide to dangerous levels. Friends turned foes overnight. Those who had lived together for generations and had a shared cultural past now saw themselves as two inimical communities who could not be together any more. This story of bitter hostility and communal polarisation in towns away from big cities, developed through popular culture, unfolded itself before Purohit and led him to write this book.

The book presents the ecosystem of H-pop—songs, poetry, and popular writing—that does not dominate news but is zealously involved in the process of othering and demonising minorities and vilifying its critics. It also highlights H-pop’s popularity, especially its songs, which Purohit saw in Jharkhand—on the streets, in concerts, in public buses, and on phones as ringtones. Incendiary lyrics, messages, and posts lay the ground for starting a fire and fanning its flames.

Purohit brings out the varied aspects of Hindutva popular culture, its stars, and audience. Also, the resources and efforts that go into producing it, its political effects, and the kind of India it is sculpting. Its performers are ordinary people, living far away from the metropolitan world. They have seen economic hardships and have middle-class aspirations about life and work. Their creations stoke emotions and lead to social rifts, but they are also a means of livelihood and popularity, which sustain them in their daily lives.

The popularity of H-pop must be seen in the context of the vibrant popular culture that India is home to. A country that loves its songs and dance, where Bollywood, Tollywood, Mollywood, and Chollywood not only entertain but also set the tone of lyrical and sentimental values, India is home to multiple genres of creativity. Entities such as All India Radio and Doordarshan were once influential links between the state and the people.

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The growing diversity of electronic media now provides an assortment of entertainment and recreational content. This space has opened up after the coming of smart phone technology and social media platforms through which people can express themselves and disseminate their creativity to a very large audience—near them and far away. They have followed “influencers” and themselves became influencers who inspire scores of “followers” to emulate their style and manner.

Their performances have gradually acquired a fan following. H-pop has grown but is popularising an exclusivist and vitriolic worldview that can only poison community relations and lead to violent outbursts against the minority. Its following has grown not just in areas where it is performed but almost everywhere because thousands have become fans of this divisive content in the virtual world.

Purohit mentions the lyrics of some of these songs. To quote,

*Kuch logon ki toh saazish hai,
Hum bacche khub banayenge.
Jam sankhya hui humse zyaada,
Fir apni baat manayenge.*

*Some people are conspiring,
That we will produce many children.
When their numbers go past ours,
They will make us dance to their tune.* (Translation by Purohit)

The people/community are not mentioned in the lyrics, but, as Purohit points out, there is no doubt who is being referred to. Another set of lyrics:

*In desh drohi, makaaron ko,
Karo bahar gadaaron ko.
Manavta ke hathyaaron ko,
Karo bahar gadaaron ko.*

*These anti-nationals, their ungrateful wretches,
Throw these traitors out.
These destroyers of humanity,
Throw these traitors out.* (Translation by Purohit)

Terms such as treason, anti-nationalism, and throwing out are regularly used and woven into catchy tunes that build up an emotional frenzy and incite passions.

Right-wing politics turns to popular culture for popular mobilisation. The H-pop performers are regularly called by Hindu nationalist leaders to perform at their public meetings. This helps both the host and the artists. It spreads the word about the political leaders both on the ground and online, and it boosts the popularity of the performers because they get platforms to perform before a big audience. It is a win-win situation for both.

Purohit highlights that this popular culture is political to the core and is meant to further the political fortunes of the Hindutva leadership. Through their work, the artists give voice to the Hindutva line on all significant issues. Political events, especially controversial ones, are frequently invoked and form a part of the lyrical content. To name a few, the Shaheen Bagh protests, the violence in Jawaharlal Nehru University, the “tukde tukde gang”, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, and the change in the status of Jammu and Kashmir.

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What is reiterated is unflinching patriotism for the Hindu nation and condemnation of those whom Hindutva has designated anti-nationalists. The Hindus are asked to boldly project their love for their nation and militantly fight for it, if need be. Here, political propaganda wears the garb of a popular culture through which hate and anger towards an “enemy” are spread. H-pop builds on the political effects of creations like *The Kashmir Files* (2022) and *The Kerala Story* (2023), both films that were based on the unease

between communities, and amplified religious divides.

History is rewritten to promote Hindu nationalist ideas. The singers and influencers of Hindutva paint the present as abhorrent and stoke insecurities and fears about the future in their audience. Purohit points out that this music and poetry helps in the slow radicalisation of people, adding to the unending supply of everyday communalism. This leads to a gradual build up of hate, which at some point is going to result in overt violence against rivals.

It also so happens, as Purohit points out, that these artists at times feel that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is not doing enough for its Hindu constituency, that it is not promoting Hindus enough, which it should as a “Hindu” party. Sometimes the feeling is that it is better to become *atmanirbhar* (self-reliant; a term that became popular after Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s call to the country amidst the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 to become *atmanirbhar*) than depend on political parties that only work for their own goals. This idea of self-reliance has become a motivation, Purohit writes, for some Hindutva influencers on social media to have their own digital platforms—websites and apps—to stream their content. This not only gives them freedom to upload their videos and messages, but also shields them from bans and removal of content.

Today, the social and electoral impact of this popular culture is felt more in towns of north and west India than countrywide, but it is just a matter of time before many more come under its sway.

Purohit’s fearless and impressive groundwork has unearthed a “secretive” world that is no longer encased in the domain that it has created for itself, but has spilled out to convert many to the Hindutva cause. Its social presence shows that the Hindutva *parivar* (family) provides educational, health, and administrative support at the local level and has also established its presence in the recreational world of youngsters through which it fortifies its existence on the spectrum of ethnic nationalism.

Today, the social and electoral impact of this popular culture is felt more at the constituency level in towns of north and west India than countrywide, but it is just a matter of time before many more come under its sway. *H-POP* is hair-raising but it is also a thoroughly researched and excellently written work, which makes it a must read.