

The Lynched Body: Gendered Realities of the Muslim Man through Salam's 'Lynch Files'

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Abstract— *Beef Lynchings have been often called the new communal riots. This essay tries to understand beef lynchings and contextualize them in the contemporary Indian scenario. In doing so it extends upon the lived realities that a Muslim man faces at the behest of mob violence. It also looks at the body of the Muslim man to understand how it is gendered in case of beef lynchings. It takes into account three cases of beef lynchings to posit the same. Thus it doubles up as a discourse on beef lynching and at the same time begs into questions of body politics of the Muslim man.*

Keywords— *Muslims, beef lynching, violence, communal, body politics.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Harsh Mander wrote in Indian Express, "Muslims are today's castaways, political orphans with no home, for virtually every political party.... Open expressions of hatred and bigotry against Muslims have become the new normal, from schools to universities, workplaces to living rooms, internet to political rallies." (Mander 1) Mander's expression is not a singular exercise in understanding the fate of the Muslim Man in contemporary India. Violence against Muslims have been a significant part of the hegemonic process underlying the democratic fabric of the nation. In April 2017, Huffington Post reported, "India was ranked fourth in the world in 2015-after Syria, Nigeria and Iraq- for the highest social hostilities involving religion." (Huffington Post 1) While there cannot be affixed any particular pattern to violence, one can only perhaps suggest that the reasons behind such hostilities and the emerging neo-journalistic labels of 'mobocracy' and 'lynching' in recent times stem from the history, culture, and politics of India.

This essay attempts to contextualize beef lynching through the narrative arc of the three cases of lynching: Dadri mob lynching and the lynchings of Pehlu Khan and Mohsin Shaikh in Ziya Us Salam's book *Lynch Files: A Forgotten Saga of Hate Crimes*. It will also depict the complexities of the gendered masculinity of the Muslim body as suggested by the narratives under the garb of secularism. Aside from ruminating over the problematic nature of retributive justice, it seeks to establish the Muslim 'other' as being touted upon at the behest of communal violence.

Historically, lynching as a micro-fascist tool emerged in America and was suggestive of racial violence. In 1905, sociologist James E. Cutler wrote of lynching, "It has been said that our country's national crime is lynching. The practice whereby mobs capture individuals suspected of crime and execute them without any process of law." (Berg, 2) Based on racial hostilities, the term originated during the American Revolution. While riots have been a part of India's mob culture for some decades, beef lynching is a comparatively new phenomenon in the modern Indian society. "It is often difficult to draw clear lines between hate crimes, riots and lynchings" (Berg, 3) But the term is characteristic of the sense of popular retributive justice, one at the fringes of legality.

II. BEEF LYNCHING: NOTIONS AND PREMONITIONS

Jignesh Mevani in his foreword to Salam's book writes, "Mob lynchings are the recent communal riots". A preliminary glimpse at beef lynching would disclose that with increased lynching in the years 2010 to 2018, "a lynch victim was never a victim alone. He was also the instigator, the one who provoked the mob into killing him, almost like inviting death home." (Salam, 10) As more and more lynchings took place there developed a sustained pattern where the body of the Muslim subject, gendered in a certain way was inciting of violence. *IndiaSpend*, an online non-profit data driven journalistic platform reported, "Since 2010, 86 attacks fueled by the suspicion of cow slaughter or beef consumption have

been reported in English media across the country.” The bone of contention was beef or the cow.

In the nomenclature of the title of his book, Ziya Us Salam combines two words, ‘Lynch’ and ‘Files.’ The word lynching, as opposed to preconceived notions of justice, stands for extrajudicial killings. The archiving process at the behest of such lynching is only symptomatic of the socio-cultural hostility based on religious hatred. The book captures the violence perpetrated and the amalgam of such incidents from 2015 to the present. While we contemplate on the nature of communal atrophy the word ‘forgotten’ perhaps reads into the fact that “the history of trauma is a history of repeated gaps and ruptures, with cyclical periods of attention and neglect, of fascination and rejection, the amnesia and dissociations typically produced by trauma”.(Schönfelder, 27) The book tries to elucidate three discourses: firstly, an exercise in describing the communal fabric of the country, secondly, a journalist's reportage of the lynching and finally, the traumatic leanings of a ‘community’ separated based on identity. The discourse that pans out from such a book is a criticism of public culture and mob violence.

Peripheral politics and identity bias is principal to the lynching of Muslim men in India. With the rise of Hindu majoritarianism, a selective and systemic violence has ruptured the so called secular nature of the nation. Achin Vanaik in his book, ‘The Rise of Hindu Majoritarianism: Secular Claims, Communal Realities’ observes, “The oppressed and exploited lower classes are much larger, and therefore the political churning from below that is taking place – and that represents the main source of optimism about the future of India – is much more threatening to this IMC (Indian Middle Class), which consequently feels insecure, frustrated, fractious and resentful.”(Vanaik, 92) This insecurity has often led to violence akin to that of riots in recent times, gendering the exploited subject in the spate of it.

III. GENDERED BODIES, MATERIAL REALITIES

“Bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others.”(Ahmed 5) Taking after Sara Ahmed, it can be posited that gendered bodies are equally malleable. They acquire paradigms from society's ‘given’ and acculturate themselves to the normative. The normative shapes the everyday realities of men, women and institutions alike. Modern societies have built and rebuilt themselves around gender presuppositions. Such indictments profusely bleed of gender divisions and

constraints. But often these peripheral bodies do so under violent predispositions. This continuum of violence is dominant among conflict groups, minorities or peripheral subjects. A “violence (that) stands at the limit of law, as a reminder of both law's continuing necessity and ever present failing”.(Sarat & Kearns 2) Violence as Thomas Blom Hansen calls it has a repertoire of being ‘a purely reactive, spontaneous’ category.(Hansen 1085) The policing and politicizing of the body also alludes to what Ortner calls the ‘ethnographic refusal’ to learn about the ‘other’, the gendered body in the heteronormative space. This refusal is a part of the violence that essentializes and genders the body to elaborate on the material, social and institutional subjectivities that surround it.

With increased violence and consequent lynching, the Muslim peripheral subject has been gendered and misgendered in multiple ways. Up until early 2000s the social fabric of the country did not quite reflect its communal sectarian developments in the ordinary everyday lived experiences of Muslims. In train and other public areas “it was not unusual for non-Muslim passengers to make room for a Muslim passenger to offer his namaz sitting on the seat, or even a group to offer a quick prayer in congregation.”(Salam 3) This was reflective of an intimacy and courtesy based on humanitarian grounds even if religious affirmations were absent in the crowd mentality. The mass was more understanding of food and clothing choices of this ‘religious other’ and willing to accommodate. But a preliminary glimpse at communal politics in the 2000s would reveal otherwise. *The Wire* reported, “ We who used to make space for namazis in train, in our homes, offices, and even offer a prayer mat to them have gone silent. Goondas have become our voice. This silence will drown India if we allow it to spread.”(The Wire 1)

The talk about body politics, especially in cases of mob lynching is dichotomous. There is an imposition of power and based on it an extension to retributive justice, quick and unforgiving. The dialectics of the Muslim body against other bodies rest on a quantitative signifier of pain and torture. "It covers the two sides of the power body relations: the powers to control bodies on the one side, and resistance and protest against such powers on the other. Mapping body politics is an exercise in complexity reduction."(Amenta, Nash & Scott 348) But the lynch subject, even in all his docility is never a silent one, as is evident in most of the cases. "As a language, it(the body) talks of the subject beyond his or her intentions, and as a body, it is never silent: 'although an individual can stop talking he cannot stop communicating through body idiom, he must say either the right thing or the wrong

thing. He cannot say nothing”.(Amenta, Nash & Scott 315) In Pehlu Khan's case, his body presupposed notions of a Muslim man's corporeality. 'My father was killed because he had a beard', Salam quotes Irshad whose father was brutally murdered by cow vigilantes in a cattle fair. For Salam and many other Muslims, the trauma stems from a pre-ordained set of identity markers, a beard, a skull cap or anything that might mark one as a Muslim even if he is not one.

IV. CASE STUDIES

Public violence and political community are inherently linked to each other through the material. “Communal violence goes beyond the human; desecration and destruction constantly reanimate religious images, sites and symbols.”(Jain 1) The material engagements represent the political communication between the lynched and the mob. Beyond the faceless crowd, lynching can be executed without the burden of guilt.

“For a Muslim to be seen with cows is to invite trouble.”(Salam 51) As much as one would like to agree with the above statement, Salam invites us to think otherwise, “it is not even about the cow. It is only about hatred of the other.”(Salam 34) If cows were the sole reason why a Muslim is lynched to death the validity of cows would be unquestionable. Eating beef is a post facto thing. In all its decency, it only shrouds the important matter at hand, the identity of the Muslim marginal.

Pehlu Khan, a dairy farmer was lynched not only on the grounds of cattle theft but because he looked like a Muslim. His sons escaped the brutality albeit narrowly. Mohsin Shaikh also suffered a similar fate. “He was made the target allegedly because he looked like a typical Muslim, with a skullcap and a beard. Shaikh was assaulted by a mob of over 20 people, with hockey sticks, bats and stones, leading to his death.”(Salam 78) Akhlaq was dragged from his home and killed on the suspicion of eating beef. Such generalizations are hegemonic and promotes religious and cultural essentialism. Ratna Kapur talks about this ‘essentialism’ that refers “to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions that limit the possibilities of change and thus social reorganization.”(Kapur 7) In lynching, the attributes are not only essentialized, but the body is acted upon by the brute force of the mob/ crowd.

Let us look at two reactions to the above beef lynchings in this context:

“Unnecessary importance is being given to lynching incidents. We will provide protection to everyone, but it

is also the responsibility of every individual, every community and every religion to respect each others’ sentiments. Humans are important and cows are important. Both have their own roles in nature.”(Firstpost)

-Yogi Adityanath (Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh)

“Whatever. See any community which eats beef, they practice violence. Not just in India but across the world.”

-Pawan Pandit(Founder of Bharatiya Gau Raksha Dal)

Incidentally, both these people emphasize on the conspicuous Hindutva ideology subtly placed in their narratives. But there are two specific aspects that seek to marginalize the Muslim ‘other’. First, is the absence of agency attributed to the Muslim man with regards to food or clothing choices particularly eating beef. The second presumption borders on the association of violence with the Muslim community as a whole, one which kills with impunity, inherent to them. This is done through subtle invocation of gory and violent images of the beef-eating Muslim, one who kills for pleasure and hangs the cow in shops for public display.

V. CONCLUSION

“In order to be able to fight a State which is more than just a government, the revolutionary movement must possess equivalent politico-military forces and hence must constitute itself as a party, organized internally in the same way as a State apparatus with the same mechanisms of hierarchies and organization of powers.”(Foucault 42) In the words of Foucault, one might see a near impossible argument for a just society. But Salam, conscious of his own historicity, struggles to be the Muslim intellectual, the one who would do “a topological and geological survey of the battlefield”.

To quote Abhijit Pathak, Professor of Sociology in Jawaharlal Nehru University, India, “Lynch Files is bound to make a sensitive reader feel the meaning of being born as Akhlaq or Mohsin Shaikh in a non-secular/non-spiritual culture that allows the nasty politics of Gau-Rakshaks (cow vigilantes) to insult the foundations of a civilization nurtured by the likes of Kabir and Tagore”. In spite of ‘horrible acts of mobocracy’(Salam 93) Salam’s endeavor at the end of his book in a chapter titled ‘Supreme Court shows the way’ is to not lose faith in the judiciary. The book explicitly documents every possible lynching missed or dismissed in collective amnesia and brings it back to consciousness.

Punishment without trial and as Salam says as one which is directed only towards certain sections of people

especially the Muslims “underlies a feeling that society overrides the state”.(Salam 18) Arun Ferreira, cartoonist, political prisoner as also the author of ‘Colors of the Cage’ agrees to this, “Those who supported the right to self-determination of Kashmiris or of the peoples of the North East were termed anti-national. Muslims who battled against Hindutva were termed jihadis.”(Ferreira 34) In a way, the book is a rejection of the unassailable state apparatus of India and also a radical learning in the psyche of the lynched and the lyncher.

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