Looking Through and Beyond Conflicts: Communal Violence and the Social Order in Hyderabad (India)

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Communalism permeates the political, academic, media and everyday discourse in and about India. As a dominant interpretive framework, it expresses a particular politics of interfaith relations that normalises socio-political conflicts and violence intersecting with gender, class and caste relations. These intersections emerge in the experiences, practices and spaces of marginality and violence, revealing both the mechanisms of their normalisation in the context of communal violence and the experience of living within, through and despite it. Everyday life becomes the privileged context for reading communalism in light of a systematic reorganising of the gender-socio-economic governance, and the possibility to interrogate it. Based on an ethnographic study carried out in Hyderabad between 2009 and 2012, the paper reveals a politics of communal violence embedded in everyday social practices. It shows that the gender-socio-economic governance is not parallel to communalism but in fact constitutive of its logic and practices. The paper offers a perspective on how socio-political conflicts become actualised in a social order and how agency within such contexts unfolds as awareness of and action upon the space/possibility of their reconfiguration.

Keywords: communalism, communal violence, caste, gender, socio-economic order, intersectionality

1 Introduction

Communalism permeates the political, academic, media and everyday discourse in and about India. Any effort to comprehend past and present discussions on modern and contemporary India will have to account for communalism as a dominant interpretive framework of interfaith relations and the ways analysts, commentators and ordinary people use it to make sense of the tensions inherent in India's national project(s).

Broadly speaking, communalism has two, closely interrelated meanings: it designates conflicts between religious communities and qualifies politics and groups as sectarian.[1] Building on the literature, this paper starts from the observation that the communal lens renders invisible the workings of multiple dimen-

sions of power in the social space of interfaith relations and overlooks some fundamental historical and sociological issues at the heart of Indian politics and society (Aloysius 1998; Gottschalk and Doniger 2000; Pandey 2006; Shani 2007). In that sense, communalism expresses a particular politics and practice of interfaith relations.

In particular, the paper shows that gender and socio-economic power differentials do not unfold parallel to communalism but are, in fact, constitutive of communal material-discursive practices.[2] To do so, it delves into the mechanisms whereby communal violence unfolds at the intersection of gender, class and caste relations, between and across religious community boundaries. It then discusses how communalism

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[1] Communalism is not exclusively associated with Hindus and Muslims, but with "religious communities" in general. Here I analyze its implications for Hindu-Muslim relations. For a historical analysis of the connotations attributed to the "communal" see (Aloysius 1998; Jalal 1996, 1997; Mahmood 1993; Pandey 2006).

[2] According to Barad (2003, 822), "the relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither is articulated/articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other."

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silences specific subject positions and the possibility of alternative practices of interfaith relations, especially in situations of crisis, when tensions over relations of power unsettle an otherwise normalised social hierarchy.

This paper is part of a larger study based on a four-year-research in India, which addresses the question of how communalism affects existing analytical and socio-political perspectives and their capacity to embrace possibilities of social change. It interrogates how a politics of communal violence becomes embedded in social practices, normalising violence against certain subjects and the relations of power acted out within, between and across the boundaries of religious communities. In that sense, the paper also proposes a perspective on how socio-political conflicts become actualised in a social order and how *agency* within such contexts unfolds as awareness of and action upon the space/possibility of their reconfiguration.

All ethnographic research materials referred to in the paper – which include semi-structured interviews, group conversations, photography and participant observation – were collected in so-called "riot-prone" and "communally-sensitive" areas of Hyderabad's Old City. Besides their association with communal violence, these urban zones are also economically and socially marginalised, largely inhabited by low-class Muslims and low-caste Hindus, some of them migrants from other Indian regions.[3] These demographic characterisations are far from sociologically static, and are of great relevance in terms of how specific gender and socio-economic relations sustain or subvert the logic of a communal order.

Drawing on selected interviews with residents of the Old City, the first section discusses the entanglements of communal violence and everyday gender and socio-economic relations.

The second section discusses the relevance of popular religious festivals celebrated in the city of Hyderabad for making sense of the gender-socio-economic logic of communalism. It shows how statues of Hindu gods displayed and paraded during such events have

changed in connection with the growing visibility of *Hindutva* organisations in the socio-political arena.[4] As the idols increasingly embody aggressive masculine models, they come to actualise the intersecting gender-based and socio-economic regulating principles of communalism. This section relies mostly on the analysis of photos taken during the annual *Ganesh Chaturthi*.[5]

1.1 The Multiple Intersecting Dimensions of Communal Violence

The connection between communalism and caste/class dynamics has been explored in a number of studies in Indian historical sociology (Aloysius 2010; Roy 2018; Shani 2007; Teltumbde 2005). This literature shows how the reproduction of a Brahminical social order relies on the erasure of socio-economic stratification as a focal point for political action and on the mobilisation of the lower castes and classes in the context of communal conflicts. In that respect, Ilaiah's analysis of *Hindutva* is powerful exposé of how caste factors into India's communal politics:

> Suddenly since about 1990 the word "Hindutva" has begun to echo in our ears, day in and day out, as if everyone in India who is not a Muslim, a Christian or a Sikh is a Hindu. I am being told that I am a Hindu. I am also told that my parents, relatives and the caste in which we were born and brought up are Hindu (Ilaiah 1996, xi).

Adding to Ilaiah's perspective, Tharu and Niranjana discuss how both gender and caste function as organising principles of the Indian nation-scape:

> the shaping of the normative human-Indian subject involved [...] its coding as upper-caste, middle-class, Hindu and male. The coding was effected by processes of othering/differentiation such as, for example, the definition of upper-caste/class female respectability in counterpoint to lower-caste licentiousness, or Hindu tolerance to Muslim fanaticism as well as by a gradual and sustained transformation of the institutions that govern everyday life (Tharu and Niranjana 1994, 96).

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[3] For a detailed demographic account of Hyderabad's Old City see Naidu (1990). On the Muslim population of Hyderabad's Old City see Rao and Thaha (2012).

[4] *Hindutva* refers both to the ideology of the Hindu right and to the various political and cultural organisations that contribute to its promotion and reproduction.

[5] The Ganesh Chaturthi is a ten-day religious festival dedicated to Lord Ganesh It has grown over the past twenty years thanks to the increasing involvement of trusts linked to right-wing Hindu organisations. On the final day devotees join a procession to immerse Ganesh idols in water – generally lakes, ponds, rivers. In big cities like Mumbai and Hyderabad, huge Ganesh statues are installed across the city.

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This paper seeks to unpack the mechanisms whereby intersecting gender and socio-economic dimensions configure the everyday forms and contexts of communal violence. The terms intersection and intersectionality are here employed as a framework that, as Banerjee and Ghosh (2018, 8) suggest, must be capable of unveiling specific, contextual experiences of oppression. Thus, intersectionality emerges here in the actual practices and spaces of marginality and violence, making visible both the mechanisms of their normalisation and the experience of living within, through and despite them. In that sense, everyday life becomes the – albeit fragmented – privileged context for reading communalism in light of the gender-socio-economic order.

1.2 The Politics of Communal Violence and Everyday Life in Hyderabad

Together with other Indian cities, Hyderabad – the capital of the southern Indian state of Telangana – is considered communally-sensitive (Varshney 2003).[6] This characterisation refers to the occurrence of episodes of violence between religious communities in conjunction with major political, cultural or religious events. It applies in particular to the Old City, which is now a majority Muslim area inhabited mainly by socio-economically relegated groups (Rao and Thaha 2012, 191–92).[7]

While the Old City presents the complexity of a socio-economically and politically neglected social space, the northern parts of Hyderabad (Secunderabad and the so-called New City) have developed into a modern international IT hub, with educational facilities, services and employment opportunities in the formal economy – and devoid of the stigma of communalism attached to the Old City. In that sense, Hyderabad's urban geography reveals how communalism works to configure spatial boundaries of privilege and marginalisation.

Indeed, communal violence is acted out in the spatial organising of urban areas, the unfolding of family and social relations, and the forms of political representation. In particular, it plays a role in (re)marginalising certain social groups and in channelling or defusing pressure for social change. This has direct implications for the lives of those who work and live in the Old City and other so-called "riot-prone" areas.

According to almost all interviewed residents of riot-affected neighbourhoods, episodes of violence are largely politically organised and perpetrated by *goondas*.[8] At the same time, the religious community emerges as the primary social space outside the family. Accounts of everyday life in communally sensitive areas portray a context deeply affected by a legacy of Hindu/Muslim violence and constituted by endangered and mutually antagonist religious communities. While relating their personal experience of communal riots, residents of Sultan Shahi neighbourhood told of entire families either leaving their homes and shops for good or finding them occupied or burned down upon their return. They highlighted how the housing patterns in these areas reflected the resettling of people previously living in mixed neighbourhoods and later moving to and contributing to the emergence of religiously homogenous zones:

> Riots take place because people from outside come here to start the violence. Political leaders pay *goondas* from other communities to engage in violence. They do this to get popular. (Interview with S., Sultan Shahi, Hyderabad, 13 August 2009)
>
> Some people commit violence to take revenge, for money, to loot. If they know they will be safe after this they will do it. They select innocent people [...]
>
> People left their homes. Children stopped going to school. We stopped visiting the other community. (Interview with A., Sultan Shahi, Hyderabad, 27 August 2009)

Many of the interviewees also highlighted the negative consequences of curfews imposed in connection

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[6] See for example, Prem Panicker, "In Hyderabad: 'Old City' and 'Communally Sensitive' Are Conjoined", Rediff News, 18 May 2007, http://specials.rediff.com/news/2007/may/21sld1.htm; Sushi Rao, "The Communal Divide Cleaves Charminar Country", Rediff News, 19 February 1998, http://www.rediff.com/news/1998/feb/19hyder.htm; J. S. Ifthekhar, "Sitting Perpetually on a Powder Keg", The Hindu, 19 February 2009, http://www.thehindu.com/2003/12/08/stories/2003120810050300.htm. All accessed 2 October 2018.

[7] Hyderabad was the capital of the homonymous princely state, with the area now called Old City forming the centre of the court's economic, cultural and political life. After the state's integration into independent India in 1948, the Old City lost its prestige and increasingly became identified as a Muslim slum. It continued to bear relevance for Hyderabad's cultural and historical identity, however, and became a stronghold of Muslim political representation (Rao and Thaha 2012, 191–94).

[8] Individuals, often involved in petty or major criminal activities who use force and threats to settle disputes or protect vested interests.

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with riots. As most households survive on the daily wages of rickshaw drivers or casual labourers, days and weeks of curfew mean losing access to basic goods such as water, food and medicines.

> When riots happen curfew is imposed. There is no food. Food and medicine cost too much. Life is very difficult. All shops are closed. (Interview with N., Sultan Shahi, Hyderabad, 25 August 2010)

In such circumstances, the inadequate and at times non-existent state-based relief is partly replaced by that of charities, NGOs, and – mostly – political parties or organisations.

> Riots are organised by political leaders. Then curfew is imposed and families here suffer greatly so they get help from political leaders. They [politicians] cause the violence but also sustain and protect us afterwards. (Interview with M., Sultan Shahi, 1 September 2010)

In this *us* one could read the wider social space of the poor and riot-affected, although aid offered by political organisations is often faith-based and addressed to a specific religious community. The above quotes are quite representative of how residents of riot-hit areas experienced communal violence. Their sense of increasing vulnerability did not relate only to the threat of violence but also to the impending danger to their livelihoods. While this is a question often left unaddressed in analyses of communalism, I contend here that the socio-economic impact of riots on already marginalised communities is not incidental to communalism but integral to its functioning and constitutive of the social order.

> Sultan Shahi is a very poor neighbourhood. Only speaking about peace does not mean anything to the people. Respect and support for our people means we must be able to overcome our economic difficulties. Only then you can speak about peace. (Interview with M., Sultan Shahi, Hyderabad, 1 September 2009)

In fact, the words of Sultan Shahi's residents seem to suggest that the normalisation of communal politics – theorised by Paul Brass as an "institutionalized riot system" (1997) – also keeps socio-economically disadvantaged communities in a state of tension and deprivation, which limits their access to basic services and the possibility to express a political consciousness outside the *communal* one provided by political parties and organisations engaged – as Shani frames it – in "civic defence and relief for riots victims" (2007, 153). In that context, pressure for social change and demands for socio-economic improvement are mainly

absorbed by the religious communities and their (hostile) relations with one another.

In fact, a deeper look at this context reveals that the socio-economic marginality at the heart of communal violence is inseparable from the gendered logic that sustains the social order. In Hyderabad's Old City, like in many social contexts in India, issues of authority and dependence within the family – that often result in relations of super/subordination based on gender, age and kin – are linked to the expectation that men provide for and defend the family.[9] This happens despite the fact that most lower class and caste women engage in productive labour inside and occasionally also outside the domestic space. In these contexts, the possibility to act upon the conflict situation seems contingent upon the possibility to reconfigure the socio-economic and gender order.

In fact, the pressure put on families' everyday sustenance when the danger of communal violence looms outside the religious community's boundaries apparently puts the gendered division of labour on temporary hold. While control on women's mobility becomes tighter, partly in the name of protecting them from the danger of sexual violence,[10] they also become responsible for fulfilling the family's basic needs.

> During riots and curfew we cannot move much, we cannot go out of our community [...] men stay hidden at home because police will arrest them, so women and the elderly must go out to look for food and medicine. (Interview with M., Sultan Shahi, Hyderabad, 1 September 2009)

And yet, M.'s words suggest that, far from subverting gendered hierarchies, emergency situations actually exacerbate their regulating logic within families, neighbourhoods and religious communities. The fact that women and the elderly become responsible for providing for the family does not really challenge social hierarchies based on intersecting gender, age and socio-economic dimensions. At times of crises, while

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[9] For an analysis of masculinities in India see George (2006).

[10] In India, sexual violence is a recurring issue in connection with communal riots: one common narrative is that riots are triggered by rumours of sexual abuse or by "eve-teasing" of a female member or members of the other community. See for example http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/jamshedpur-tense-after-communal-flareup/article7452845.ece; http://tribune.com.pk/story/601835/communal-violence-claims-21-lives-in-india/ (accessed on 30 August 2015). For a focus on Hyderabad see Kakar (1996, 34–35).

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young men fight to defend and protect the community, women and the elderly ensure the reproduction of the domestic/community hearth as the safe social space.

In such contexts, where control on their bodies and mobility becomes central to the reproduction of the religious community, women come up with specific strategies to overcome strict norms generated by the combined effect of oppressive gender and socio-economic relations. A conversation with a group of women enrolled in vocational training in the "community development" programmes run by the Henry Martyn Institute (HMI) in Sankar Nagar was particularly illuminating in this respect. [11]

> First, the teachers [women] talked to the parents and other relatives to present the activities. Then, we started to come to the Centre with our father or elder brother … or the teachers picked us up from home. Last, we became friends with the other students and we started to move in groups … sometimes someone's younger brother accompanied us but at other times it was just us. (Conversation in a women's group in Sankar Nagar, 2 June 2011)

For some of them, increasing mobility was later extended to other outings not related to the centre's activities (ibid.). The process unfolded in a constant negotiation of gender, socio-economic and, ultimately, interfaith relations. The picture they made of their position within the neighbourhood was strongly linked to the tensions their activities generated when attempting to break through the social, economic and gender boundaries reinforced in the context of the communal divide.

> It took some time for the community to understand that we were visiting families to do the *mehndi* on happy occasions.[12] People used to wonder what our association with a certain family was, why we were going there. (Interview with N., who helped to establish a small but successful house-to-house *mehndi* business, Sankar Nagar, 2 June 2011)

For some of these women, building interfaith dialogue seemed inseparable from issues of socio-economic and gender justice in the family, the neighbour-

hood and the wider social and political contexts. In the words of a school teacher trained by and working in another HMI programme in Sultan Shahi:

> First of all, we [women] need to work. Going to the *Aman Shanti*[13] centre [where HMI conducts its activities in Sultan Shahi], learning a job or teaching is important to sustain our families. Also, our personality grows because we get out of our homes and interact with other people. Third, we feel we are helping to build a new community, in which Hindus and Muslims can live peacefully together. (Interview with M., Sultan Shahi, Hyderabad, 1 September 2009)

These accounts show how the intersection of gender and socio-economic norms contributes to drawing religious community boundaries and how communal violence plays a role in (re)marginalising specific sections of society to sustain the social order. They also offer a glimpse into the individual and collective actions that constantly interrogate this very order, as they call into question the way masculinities and femininities are acted out in the communal logic with respect to their location within the family and the community. Women's practices that bridge religious and caste/class segregation are particularly relevant in this respect as they expose and thus subvert the mutually constitutive relations between communal violence and the gender-socio-economic governance.

2 Pious Warriors, Muscular Gods: Violent Masculinities and the Religious Community

The experience of communal violence in everyday life also permeates rituals, religious festivals and anniversaries that come to be regarded as communally-sensitive. Indeed, their association with communalism effects changes in the practices, imagery and symbolism around the religious community. In certain cases, the danger of violence becomes integral to the event, with security measures and the police becoming characterising elements.[14] At the symbolic level, violence gets embedded in specific figures embodying the community, its internal organisation and its external boundaries. This section unpacks the intersections of gender and socio-economic dimensions in these religious communities' practices and how they become central to a politics of communal violence. It proposes

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[11] The Henry Martyn Institute is an international centre for research, interfaith relations and reconciliation located in Hyderabad. Besides its academic activities, it runs community development and peace-building projects in conflict-torn areas in India and South Asia http://www.hmiindia.com/

[12] Henna decorations that women traditionally apply to their hands and feet on festive occasions

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[13] Aman and Shanti are the Urdu and Hindi words for peace.

[14] On the ritualization of violence in "communal" conflicts see Féron and Hastings (2003).

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an argument linking the figure of the *pehlwan* (Indian traditional wrestlers) with the changes in iconic representations of Hindu gods during religious festivals.[15]

In his work on the 1990 riots in Hyderabad, Kakar highlights the *pehlwans'* sense of loyalty to their religious community as they trained at dedicated gyms belonging to local organisations linked to the All India Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) or the Sangh Parivar (1996, 81–85).[16] While the wrestling tradition is not necessarily associated with interreligious antagonism, the wrestlers' training is imbued with religious zeal and a sense of morality. They are occasionally hired by local businessmen and/or politicians to participate in riots, settle land disputes or gain political leverage through the threat or actual use of violence. In the context of communalism, the *pehlwans* come to embody an idealised masculinity – the strong, pious warrior, protector of the community (Kakar 1996, 52–86; Brass 2004). Their violence epitomises the response to a perceived external threat and reaffirms the community's unity around a strong masculine figure who embodies violence and tolerance, religious zeal and body building, reflecting the multiple positionings the *pehlwan* must accommodate within the space of the religious community. Such hybridity is particularly striking when this figure is incorporated in representations of Hindu gods during religious festivals.[17] This particular version of the wrestler – serving the purposes of a communal logic – cuts across not only religious but also socio-economic and gender dimensions, structuring a Hindu social hierarchy and positioning it vis-à-vis the non-Hindus.

The statues exhibited during the *Ganesh Chaturthi* in Hyderabad represent a case in point.[18] This festival has grown in the city and other parts of South India in the past twenty years and has been widely associated with attempts by certain sections of the *Hindutva* movement to reinforce the image of a homogeneous and strong Hindu identity. As the celebrations have grown, some representations of deities have lost their classical androgynous features in favour of muscular bodies that evoke the figure of the wrestler (see Figures 3 and 4). In 2010, Begum Bazar – a majority Hindu neighbourhood and a popular shopping area – became the site of a massive Ganesh Pandal (the platform where the statue is installed) carrying the label "*Ganesh Pehlwan*". During the religious parades of the ten-day festival in September 2009 and 2010, many similar large statues appeared all around the city of Hyderabad. These representations have particular significance in terms of religious symbolism. Ganesh's traditional round belly represents bounty and harmlessness, the god being commonly regarded as benevolent and deeply moved by the affection and faith of the devotees. By transforming Ganesh into an aggressive, muscular god in the context of a festival strongly associated with Hindu identity politics, the cultural and political groups providing for the realisation of such statues resituated the Hindu community through a specific understanding of Ganesh's symbolic role within Hinduism. This is significant, as the festival was and is still considered "communally-sensitive" both in Hyderabad and other Indian cities.[19] In these representations, the symbols around which Hinduism is homogenised and through which religious difference is affirmed present a strong gender connotation defined by a combination of violent masculinity and religious piety.

In a way, the very capacity for violence that the *Ganesh pehlwan* embodies actualises a powerful and assertive masculinity within the religious community. The nexus wrestler/Lord Ganesh/religious community

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[15] Indian wrestling was widespread in the northern part of the Subcontinent, in Bengal, Maharashtra and in the princely state of Hyderabad where the art was patronised by the prince (Kakar 1996, 82–83).

[16] AIMIM (previously MIM) is a Hyderabad-based Muslim political party that has a strong electoral basis in the Old City area. Sangh Parivar is an umbrella organisation of Hindu Right groups, and a central proponent of the *Hindutva* ideology.

[17] This is in line with Demetriou's definition of masculinity as a "hybrid bloc that unites practices from diverse masculinities in order to ensure the reproduction of patriarchy" (Demetriou 2001, 337).

[18] The crowded parades, backed by a whole year of community fundraising, were introduced in Hyderabad at the end

of the 1970s by the then Congress Chief Minister Chenna Reddy, who used to participate in the final procession and address the devotees. See, (Engineer 1984; Engineer 1991).

[19] "18 held during Mumbai Ganesh Chaturthi violence", Indian Express, 20 September 2000, http://www.indianexpress.com/Storyold/160254/, "Violence Erupts on Ganesh Chaturthi", Times of India, 1 September 2003, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2003-09-01/ahmedabad/27212339_1_borsad-town-ganesh-chaturthi-kodinar; both accessed 27 November 2018. On Hyderabad see Naidu (1990, 127–38) and Narendranath (1984, 19–20).

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Figure 1: A massive Pandal at Kairatabad, with a traditional representation of Ganesh

Hyderabad, July 2009 (Photograph by the author)

Figure 2: Children dance on the Pandal of a Ganesh pehlwan

Asaf Jahi Road, Hyderabad, September 2010 (Photograph by the author)

in these particular imageries is linked to a discourse of hostile interfaith relations. This in turn feeds into the wider *Hindutva* political agenda reflecting a socio-economic hierarchy within the religious community. In fact, some of the statues of an aggressive Ganesh carry attributes of Lord Rama (bow and arrow) or are associated with a muscular Hanuman, the monkey god and Lord Rama's devoted disciple (Figures 1–4). Together with Ganesh, Rama and Hanuman occupy a central place in the *Hindutva* mythology. The latter in particular is associated with the Adivasi (tribal/indigenous) people in India (Puniyani 2009). Some sections amongst them have subscribed to the anti-Christian and anti-Muslim rhetoric of the Hindu Right, especially with the growth of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – the political wing of *Hindutva* – towards the end of the 1990s. According to Lobo, the participation of certain sections of Adivasi communities in the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat should be understood in the context, and as an integral part of the growing initiatives for social mobility and ensuing stratification among these very communities as they enter the socio-economic logic of caste (Lobo 2002).[20] As also

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[20] A similar argument can explain the relative success of *Hindutva* among OBCs (Other Backward Castes) and Dalits (Jaffrelot 2000, 86; Teltumbde 2005). Dalit refers to "untouchable" caste groups. See Ilaiah for a perspective on caste-related terminology in India (1996, vii–ix).

discussed by Julia Eckert, focusing on the opportunities for upward social mobility can help to explain why some sections within the groups discriminated against in the Hindu social order would subscribe to the *Hindutva* ideology (Eckert 2009).

The masculine, warrior-like versions of Ganesh thus recast old socio-economic relations, creating a new mythology of Hinduism that serves the purposes of the contemporary social and political discourse. A muscular Hanuman carrying Ganesh on his shoulders or kneeling at the feet of Ganesh-Rama reflects the ambiguous inclusiveness of a violent *Hindutva* ideology, reaching out to the marginalised within Hinduism by displacing tensions concerning the social hierarchy onto the "Muslim body".

Specifically in Hyderabad, the increase in the number of *Ganesh pehlwans* during the September 2010 festival followed a wave of communal riots in March of the same year. The incidents happened in conjunction with *Hanuman Jayanthi*, a festival organised by local branches of *Hindutva* groups that was celebrated in the city with a procession for the first time that year. During the same period, a movement for a separate Telangana state was gaining visibility at the political level in opposition to the political and economic

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Figure 3: Lord Rama's disciple Hanuman carrying Lord Ganesh on his shoulders

Beghum Bazar, Hyderabad, September 2010 (Photograph by the author)

Figure 4: Lord Ganesh holding Lord Rama's bow and arrow, Hanuman kneeling at his feet

Hyderabad, September 2010 (Photograph by the author)

dominance of the Andhra region's elites.[21] The year 2010 saw the strengthening of the Hindu Right's rhetoric, which progressively endorsed the cause of a separate Telangana state. Parallel to this, space for the critical voices of marginalised sections such as women, Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims was reduced.

> Within the movement many are reluctant to leave space to women, Dalits and minorities in general [...] we are very active, especially in districts. Dalits feel the movement is dominated by upper-caste people especially at the level of the elites. It is in the universities that Dalits and backward castes are mostly active but they don't find space in the leadership. (Interview with F., a Muslim woman active in the movement for a separate Telangana state, Hyderabad, 23 May 2011..)

The March 2010 riots took place at a time when these groups' political activism was converging and organising within the movement for a separate Telangana state. In response to that, the struggle for the geographic and political reorganisation of the state – whose roots date back to the time of Hyderabad state's forceful integration into the newly indepen-

dent India – underwent a reconfiguration at the level of leadership and rhetoric, with the upper castes and classes monopolising positions of power. It is telling that a debate over interpretations of Hyderabad's history sparked by the emerging Telangana movement turned into a controversy, centered on a Hindu vs. Muslim political debate.[22]

> There is also the issue of history and how it is used to marginalise the Muslims. Muslims feel history should be re-read and re-written because the mainstream interpretations propose a derogatory image of the Muslims. (Interview with F., Hyderabad, 23 May 2011.)

The spread of the *Ganesh-pehlwan* in the religious processions was thus concomitant with the reaffirmation of a communal political discourse over the gender-socio-economic governance of a new geographical and political formation. The figure reaffirms the unity of the Hindu community around a hierarchy of masculinities, repositioning different sections of society and displacing internal tensions onto an outside threat. In that sense, it defines the community's relations with other social entities in exclusive terms,

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[21] The state of Telangana was until June 2014 a region of the state of Andhra Pradesh. The Telugu speaking people of Telangana had for long mobilised for recognition of their socio-economic, cultural and language rights. The most recent mobilisation for a separate Telangana state gained momentum in 2009.

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[22] For an insightful illustration of the debate at the time see *Anveshi* Broadsheet on Contemporary Politics, vol 1, no. 1, http://www.anveshi.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/nizams_rule_broadsheet_english_nov_2010.pdf, accessed 27 August 2015.

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while negotiating a position of power in the wider so-cial order. Finally, it homogenises the religious com-munity as the unit for political struggle, erasing the emergence of political consciousness at the intersec-tion of gender and socio-economic dimensions and naturalising the social control exercised through the (danger of) communal violence.

3 Conclusion

A perspective on how communal violence is shaped by and contributes to shape power relations in the wider social order provides some insights into its social and political meaning. Violence reorganises the spaces, re-lations and politics of everyday life. At the same time, the *communalisation* of the political discourse seems to constrain the space and visibility of socio-political consciousnesses among marginalised sections of soci-ety. In that sense, the normalisation of communal vio-lence displaces initiatives for social justice intersect-ing gender and socio-economic axes of power into a conflict between "religious communities". As the Hindu-Muslim opposition becomes mainstreamed in intellectual, political and everyday practices of inter-faith-relations, the question of the roles of the state, political and religious organisations, the academia and the media in reproducing a communalised version of political violence and its constitutive gender-socio-economic governance is only superficially addressed. The same applies to the everyday experiences of com-munalism of disadvantaged social groups and the ways it intersects gender and socio-economic regula-tory practices. While unfit for the overwhelmingly ac-cepted connotation of interfaith relations, they offer a glimpse into the systematic reorganising of the social order and the possibility of its reconfiguration.

Social, political and intellectual actions which inter-rogate communalism must begin to address the en-tanglements of contextual experiences of marginalisa-tion and political violence and the intersecting dimen-sions of power in the social order. Sticking with a un-examined Hindu-Muslim dichotomy risks contribut-ing to the invisibility and reproduction of social hier-archies and to the crystallisation of the very commu-nal puzzle one wishes to unravel.

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