

POPULISM OF HINDUTVA, ISLAMOPHILIA, AND THE BAHUJAN DEMOCRACY

Ayaz Ahmad*

Abstract: Laclau and Mouffe's approach to analyzing the nature of democratic societies holds special significance for contemporary Indian society, where traditionally powerful social classes have developed a specific populist method of politics, which has so far managed to tame the democratic aspirations of the socially powerless. This populism involves constructing a political frontier on religious grounds to browbeat the caste frontier. It sustains a particular kind of Savarna Ashraaf minoritarian politics, which denies most people the fruits of democratic possibilities. The challenge here is to construct a people, the Bahujan, out of the subjugated majority dispersed in different castes, languages, and faith traditions. This paper attempts to work out the language of Bahujan democracy to overcome that challenge and offer an alternative to Hindutva politics. Social, legal, and political practices co-constituted by Islamophile Ashraaf and Savarna have been the entry point of this paper.

Introduction

No society can ever escape from the totalizing effects of its constituent parts. Nor can the parts be constituted outside the society worthy of a name. Mutual imbrication between parts and the whole is precariously achieved through the hegemonic game in which a part, without ceasing to be part, becomes the whole, and the parts absorb the whole to produce successive societal effects. This hegemonic game is played under the shadow of contingency, antagonism, and power, which makes it an inexhaustible source of social and political meaning. Here, the social ultimately reveals itself as contingently articulated political inscription. This inscription is realized by the logic of difference and a chain of equivalence with an antagonistic frontier against the constitutive outside, splitting the social into “us” versus “them” polarity. This means that no individual or community can be created without power relations. However, for the same reason, nor is it ever completely powerless to take effective action against the hegemonic order or social totality. Yet, some immanent laws of history do not guarantee the displacement of an existing hegemonic order by a new order. Everything depends on the political articulation contingent historical subjects can make and their radical investment in throwing it into the discourse of hegemonic struggle. These are some important conclusions Laclau and Mouffe draw with the object of radicalizing democratic life.¹

This paper uses their social and political theory to explore the Hindutva phase of Indian democracy from its contingent origins to its current dominance. It is specifically focused on the totalizing effects generated by Ashraaf,² discourse of Islamophilia on different social and

* Dr. AYAZ AHMAD, Fulbright Visiting Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Columbia University, New York; Professor of Law, Karnavati University, Gujarat. Email: ayazahmad.adv@gmail.com, aa5363@columbia.edu.

¹ For a detailed conceptual detour of these conclusions, see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics” (Verso, 1985); Ernesto Laclau, “New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time” (Verso, 1990); Chantal Mouffe, “The Return of the Political” (Verso, 1993); Ernesto Laclau, “Emancipation(s)” (Verso, 1996); Chantal Mouffe, “The Democratic Paradox” (Verso, 2000); Ernesto Laclau, “On Populist Reason” (Verso, 2005); David Howarth ed., “Ernesto Laclau: Post Marxism, populism and critique” (Routledge, 2015).

² Note on the terminology used in this paper: the social term “Ashraaf” has been used to refer to upper castes who self-identify as socially superior castes by birth using Islamic symbolism. The term “Savarna” has been used to refer to upper castes who self-identify as socially superior castes by birth using Brahminic symbolism. Jointly, they have been referred to as “Alpjan.” The sociopolitical term Bahujan has been used to signify Dalit, Pichda, Ati-Pichda, Adivasi, and Pasmanda groups. The legal terms Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) have been

political formations since the advent of Hindutva. The paper narrows to several inconsistencies and contradictions induced by Ashraaf practices in articulating Bahujan democracy as an alternative to the Hindutva project. It is further narrowed down to those existing legal and social practices guarded by Ashraaf that expand the distance among constituent Bahujan groups, jeopardizing the prospects of Bahujan democracy.

At present, Indian social and political imaginary is characterized by the BJP-RSS-led vocabulary of pro-hindu nationalist politics, which is denounced as anti-muslim majoritarian politics led by Congress and its allies. Scholars aligned to the former present their discourse as hindu nationalism, and intellectuals sympathetic to the latter express themselves as secular, liberal nationalists encompassing capacious hindu as well as ordinary muslim. It is clear that hindu and muslim form two poles around which all social and political meaning radiates as far as the language of electoral politics and democratic resistance is concerned. Social and political articulations outside these channels are submerged under the weight of hindu-muslim cacophony. It is widely acknowledged that the present hindu pole is cathected by the Hindutva ideology, systematically articulated about a century ago. Articulated in the backdrop of competitive reformist, revivalist movements led by Ashraaf Savarna, Savarkar's Hindutva was explicitly posited as a defense against the militant triumphalism of resurgent Ashraaf performing as a "muslim minority" aided and abetted by the colonial patronage.³ Sayed Ashraaf's triumphalism in the north, rooted in the memory of military and theological superiority spanning preceding centuries, engendered a profound sense of lack, animated by memories of shame and humiliation among the Brahmin Savarna. This lack must be overcome by the Brahmin Savarna performing as "hindu majority," at the cost of simultaneously crushing Bahujan movements inaugurated by Mahatma Jotirao Phule.⁴ In this sense, the idea of Hindutva was constituted against the theocratic supremacist notions of post-1870s Ashraaf gentry as the constitutive outside, simultaneously subsuming the Bahujan masses as hapless inside.⁵

However, as no inside can be constituted by escaping the "presence by absence" of that which is outside, the outside throbs at the heart of everything inside. (Laclau, 2005, 133-140) In other words, although the dagger of Ashraaf norms and values cut and shaped the heart of Hindutva articulation, even after being partially removed by partition, it was condemned to live and breathe Ashraaf militancy in saffron color. This is one important reason why a century later, militant Hindutva triumphalism mirrors so closely the Ashraaf theodicy of the early 20th century in its monotheistic avatar.⁶ This is not to suggest that the Brahmin Savarna did not have a heart before; they surely did, and a very casteist and

used in their present legal sense, whereby Pichda, Ati-Pichda, and Pasmanda are absorbed in the OBC category. At the same time, tribal Pasmanda is included in the ST category, but Dalit Pasmanda is excluded from the SC category.

³ Hamid Umar Dalwai, "Muslim Politics in Secular India" (Nachiketa, 1968); Mushir U. Haq, "Muslim Politics in Modern India" (Meenakshi Prakashan, Meerut 1970); Mushirul Hasan, "Indian Muslims since Independence: In Search of Integration and Identity," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 818-842 (1988); B R Ambedkar, "Pakistan or the Partition of India," Vol 08 pp. 265-268 (BAWS 1946).

⁴ See Jotirao Phule, "Slavery" (1873) and "The Whipcord of the Cultivators" (1881); Gail Omvedt, "Jotirao Phule and the Ideology of Social Revolution in India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 6, No. 37, 1971.

⁵ For the argument that "Hinduism" itself acquired its naming and meaning in an effort to distinguish social practices from what was named and identified as "Islam." See David N. Lorenzen, "Who Invented Hinduism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 41, No. 4 pp. 630-659 (1999).

⁶ For the ideological affinity of liberal Hinduism and conservative Hindutva, see Anustup Basu, "Hindutva as Political Monotheism" (Duke University Press, London 2020); Jyotirmaya Sharma, "Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism" (Harper Collins, New Delhi 2018); Perry Anderson, "The Indian Ideology" (Verso, London 2015); Prakash Chandra Upadhyay, "The Politics of Indian Secularism," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4 pp. 815-853 (1992); Gyanendra Pandey, "The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India" (OUP, New Delhi 1990).

patriarchal one.⁷ However, Gandhi, Nehru's secular nationalism, and Savarkarite communal nationalism shared one important characteristic. Both projects were built on the systematic repression of anti-caste democratic aspirations represented by the Phule-Ambedkar-Ansari-Periyar quartet. These aspirations far exceeded Gandhian and Savarkarite attempts to absorb them completely and eventually erupted in the 1980s in the form of various Bahujan anti-caste movements, which the liberal secular camp of Savarna Ashraaf could not contain anymore. This gave conservative Brahmin Savarna of the Hindutva camp a renewed sense of urgency. At this juncture, Ashraaf propagated Islamophilia preserved as 'the permanent muslim minority' again emerged as the most reliable building block for the Hindutva project as "return of the repressed histories of caste".⁸

I. Ashraaf Islamophilia as the Erasure of Democratic Language

Once the British began to gradually introduce limited representative government in India from the late 19th century, Ashraaf began to close themselves against democracy around specific Islamophilic ideas. The author of this paper will attempt here to briefly elaborate on the phenomenon named 'Islamophilia' from its present sedimented meaning, which will be used throughout this essay. Islamophilia can be defined as a sense of superiority that Ashraaf assert over everyone else who does not conform to their notion of society. For an Islamophile, it is not enough that someone considers all religions to be equally valid, or does not believe in any religion, or even believes in some form of Islam. One must believe in the same version of religion held sacred by Ashraaf to be worthy of equal treatment and dignity. Integral to this sense of the sacred are patriarchal notions of society. Thus, Ashraaf mark themselves by a triple sense of superiority: caste,⁹ religion,¹⁰ and gender. (Siddiqui, 2014) Different disciplinary channels can explore whether the sources of such a supremacist sense are theological, colonial, epistemological, social, political, or cultural. However, the problem remains that from whichever side the question of democracy is broached with Ashraaf, it gets stuck in Islamophilia. Ashraaf, owing to their triple sense of superiority, cannot sincerely attempt to establish a chain of equivalence with different sections of society considered inferior.

As a result of this blockage, Ashraaf could not build a majority with any group that falls outside of their comfort zone.¹¹ To build a majority, one must accept as equal, at least in principle, those with whom equivalence is sought to be established. At the least, building a social and political majority involves voluntarily diluting some of the claims of one's own superiority. Inherent to this process is the molding of entrenched social and cultural practices to make space for the 'other' who is sought to be politically incorporated and socially

⁷ BR Ambedkar, "Caste in India: Mechanism, Genesis and Development," Vol. 1 pp. 3-22 (BAWS 1916); B R Ambedkar, "What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to The Untouchables," Vol 09 pp. 1-297 (BAWS 1945); G. Aloysius, "Nationalism without a Nation in India" (OUP, New Delhi 1998); Braj Ranjan Mani, "Debrahmanising History" (Manohar, New Delhi, 2005).

⁸ For a similar pattern of Bahujan mobilization followed by communal violence in the period between 1880 and 1947, see Dilip M. Menon, "The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India," pp. 1-31 (Navayana, Chennai 2006).

⁹ Khalid Anis Ansari, "Revisiting the minority imagination: An Inquiry into the Anticaste Pasmanda-Muslim Discourse in India," 11.1 *Critical Philosophy of Race*, pp. 120-147 (2023); Papiya Ghosh, "Muhajirs and the Nation: Bihar in the 1940s," pp. 141-161 (Routledge, New Delhi 2009); Ali Anwar, "Masawat Ki Jung" (Vani Prakashan, New Delhi 2001); Masood Alam Falahi, "Hindustan Mein Zaat-Paat Aur Musalman" (Al Qazi, New Delhi 2007); Imtiaz Ahmad, "Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India" (Manohar, New Delhi 1973).

¹⁰ See Note 3.

¹¹ On a few occasions, Ashraaf did reach out to groups falling outside their comfort zone in the 19th and 20th centuries, were motivated by Islamophilic ideals. See Barbara D. Metcalf, "Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900" (PUP, Princeton 1982).

accommodated. When such adaptation and molding are done willingly for strategic and hegemonic purposes; it is experienced as an autonomous euphoric enterprise rather than a forceful imposition.

However, for Islamophile Ashraaf, anyone who does not believe in their triple notion of superiority is unworthy of dignified social engagement. No wonder democracy becomes an object of disdain in their world. In terms of practical action, all that they can think of is to try to establish the supremacy of their version of Islam, undergirded by casteist and patriarchal notions. Sayed Ashraaf remain uncomfortable in gatherings that do not honor their self-righteous supremacism. The presence of a religiously different person, an independent woman, a political Pasmanda, or a glass of wine is enough to shatter their confidence. An Islamophile Ashraf for all practical purposes, is a socially, culturally and politically crippled man. This implies that Ashraaf can only confidently approach those persons or groups who have already been converted adequately to their views. As Ashraaf women are maximally converted to the creed of Ashraaf men, the Ashraaf chain of equivalence begins and ends with their womenfolk. Is it surprising, then, why Ashraaf have organized and agitated most successfully on issues that militate against those women whom they claim to be their own? This mode of thinking invariably pushes Ashraaf into frantic religious and misogynist campaigns.¹²

Finding an Islamophilic majority hard to come by, Ashraaf turn to preserving whatever can give them an illusion of supremacy, like segregated educational institutions, secluded Madarsa system, confessional social and political organizations, communal and patriarchal personal laws, and so on. Hence, theirs could only be a preservative minoritarian cultural enterprise. This is nothing but the logic of self-imposed apartheid. (Laclau, 1996) In Ambedkar's prescient words, "An anti-social spirit is found wherever one group has 'interests of its own' which shut it out from full interaction with other groups, so that its prevailing purpose is protection of what it has got." (Ambedkar, 1936, 52) In this process, they often cling to some of the most reactionary anti-democratic language and practices. However, by their obduracy, Ashraaf do manage to contaminate the social and linguistic practices of every other group interested in playing the 'political game' in a democratic context.¹³

The effects of Islamophilic Ashraaf on the experience and practice of Indian democracy need to be grasped explicitly in order to develop a viable alternative to Hindutva.¹⁴ In the discourse of Laclau and Mouffe, democracy means successive attempts to politically construct a people by establishing a chain of equivalence with heterogeneous groups in competition with similar other attempts. Establishing a chain of equivalence with heterogeneous groups entails moving from constitutive heterogeneity to symbolic homogeneity by an appeal to some principle of equality. Viewed from this perspective, the practice of democracy is inevitably contaminated by Ashraaf's refusal to come to terms with democracy. Suppose Ashraaf's presence in society is marked by their superiority over the rest and their refusal to partake in the game of democracy. In that case, all political players must adapt their game owing to this fixed pole. The fixity of this pole limits avenues for appeal to some principle of equality, as all political players must always take this pole as one immutable unit. As a result, many permutations and combinations are excluded from the democratic game of constructing "a people." It is like handing over a canvas with a tree or chair already drawn on it to different painters. The pre-existing image will inevitably limit any painting drawn on such a canvas. The painters' creative talents or aesthetic sense can only find limited expression due to the limiting presence of the tree or the chair on the canvas.

¹² Politics around the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937 to the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986 rested on these premises.

¹³ Here, the expression political game is used as a competitive and hegemonic construction of "a people" to occupy the universal place of power in the Laclauian sense. See Ernesto Laclau, "Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics," Vol. 32, No. 4 *Critical Inquiry*, 646-680 (2006).

¹⁴ For a similar work albeit with different social categories and methodology, see Anupama Rao, "The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India" (University of California Press, London 2009).

By firmly fixing their position vis-à-vis democracy, Sayed Ashraaf mediate the language in which different political formations could articulate democratic discourse. If pre-Gandhian Savarna wanted to make any political progress, it had to be through hindu-muslim unity pacts mediated by the Ashraaf. If the Gandhian Congress was to be converted into a mass movement, it must adopt Ashraaf's Khilafat vocabulary. Later, a section of the Savarna adopted the language of secularism to counter the Ashraaf, led by the Muslim League, to a great extent. (Ghosh, 2009) Savarkarite Hindutva, too, was explicitly articulated against the Islamophilic Ashraaf militancy to fill the Brahminic Savarna's martial lack.¹⁵ The language of Hindutva acquired its discursive presence only as an inverted version of Islamophilic vocabulary. Sayed Ashraaf emerged as the linchpin around whom the entire politics of India could be organized. Partition was its biggest casualty, where Ashraaf Savarna utilized the hindu-muslim horizon to suit their interests.¹⁶

Post-partition, the so-called Nehruvian consensus also thrived on the language of secularism developed to placate the Ashraaf self-conception and Hindutva votaries. This form of secularism became such a natural political horizon that political parties with divergent ideologies competed to carry the tag of a secular party. It was beneficial for the Brahminic Savarna. Under pressure from the anti-caste democratic discourse, Brahmin Savarna latched on to Ashraaf conceptions of a communal society, initially as Nehruvian consensus, later as Hindutva common sense. The Ashraaf fixed pole of Islamophila enables this good cop, bad cop play. The repercussions of this play on Bahujan society have been devastating so far. Savarna Ashraaf routinely deploy secular-communal theatrics to suppress Bahujan democratic aspirations and to keep them colonized. Thus, the reduction of democracy to a mere secular-communal slugfest goes on at a significant cost to the Bahujan republic.

However, the erasure of democratic language created devastating effects on the Ashraaf themselves. (Anil, 2023) Deprived of the language to play the democratic power game, Ashraaf youth increasingly took to the underworld and mafiyahood to fulfill their power drive. The less audacious were left to outrage from the comforts of congregational groups against real and perceived insults to the prophet, the book, and similar non-material facets of religion. This had a terrorizing effect on society at large, an ideal breeding ground for Hindutva 2.0.¹⁷ Thus, the terrain for Hindutva success was maintained steadfastly by Sayed Ashraaf in post-partition India.

II. Hindutva as a Counter to Islamophile Ashraaf and the Bahujan Democracy

'People' as a category for mobilization to secure power emerged with the inauguration of representative government. As a result, the stage is set for people versus people confrontation, that is, the practice of populism. Under colonial epistemic and administrative presence, hindu-muslim "people" got co-constituted with Savarna Ashraaf leadership.¹⁸ From the 1870s

¹⁵ This sense of lack is captured succinctly by Savarkar through "militarize the hindu, hinduize the military," slogan. See V.D. Savarkar, "Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History," pp. 108-379 (Bal Savarkar, 1971) and "Essentials of Hindutva" (1923). Also See Vinayak Chaturvedi, "Hindutva and Violence: V. D. Savarkar and the Politics of History" (SUNY Press, Albany 2022); Thomas Blom Hansen, "The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India" (PUP, Princeton 1999); Peter van der Veer, "Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India" (University of California Press, Berkeley Los Angeles London 2003).

¹⁶ See Ishtiaq Ahmed, "Jinnah: His Successes, Failures and Role in History" (Penguin, New Delhi 2020); H M Seervai, "Partition of India: Legend and Reality" (Emmenem, Bombay 1990).

¹⁷ Anustup Basu, "Hindutva as Political Monotheism," pp. 195-207 (Duke University Press, London 2020); J. Barton Scott, "Slandering the Sacred," pp. 1-75 (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2023).

¹⁸ For philosophical arguments highlighting co-constitutive complexities of colonial and post-colonial agency, see Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, "Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously" (Hurst &

onward, they took a hostile turn over their share in British power by posing as the people's representatives. Articulated in this background, Hindutva quickly became a democratic demand in the Laclauian sense for various heterogeneous groups. (Laclau, 2005, 125-128) From Dayanand to Vivekanand, from Aurobindo to Tilak Savarkar, Hindutva ideology was gestated by the Brahminic Savarna in a formal struggle with Islamophilic Ashraaf.¹⁹ If the Hindutva politics is to be encapsulated in just one slogan, it has to be "Hindu Khatre Me Hain (HKMH)," that is, Hindus are in danger from Ashraaf, construed as muslims. (Anil, 2023, 163) From this perspective, Hindutva from the 1920s until partition was presented as a defensive demand, creating equivalence with diverse groups organized around caste, religion, language, tribe, and region. Partition not only vindicated its contingent origins but also consecrated its existence. Hindutva sentiment operated inside and outside the Congress party for a few decades after partition. (Vanaik, 2017; Jaffrelot 2007) However, since the 1980s, the Hindutva faction has been driven more by an urge to break the Bahujan democratic progress. The evolution of Dalit and Pichda politics into the Bahujan and Mandal movements threatened the Brahmin Savarna hegemony like never before. (Rajagopal, 2001) From this moment on, Hindutva renewed its anti-muslim populism as anti-dalit or anti-bahujan populism could backfire due to the democratic nature of these formations.

With anti-muslim populism, there was no such danger as the muslim pole, kept unchanged by Sayed Ashraaf, had a proven track record of not resorting to practical democratic politics even in the face of extreme brutality. Also, the long and traumatic memories of Ashraaf Savarna clashes leading up to the partition could easily be tapped to provide affective charge to anti-muslim populism. Moreover, Ashraaf's agitation against the Shahbano judgment gave ample evidence for the existence of the undemocratic muslim pole, which brilliant Hindutva strategists promptly weaponized through the institutionalized riot system.²⁰ This coincided with the period when the conservative backlash against the egalitarian drive of the welfare state was shaping up as neoliberalism globally. (Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 2014) Dislocations caused by neoliberal policies from the 1990s onward prepared the ground for Hindutva propulsion into a higher orbit in 2014 in alliance with the global power elite, keeping the hindu-muslim binary as its casting background. (Teltumbde, 2018) In this entire journey, Hindutva was consistently informed by the double logic of confronting Ashraaf aggression on one hand and suppressing Bahujan aspirations on the other. Thus, the post-partition HKMH jibe lies at the expense of Islamophilic Ashraaf and Bahujan democratic subjunctives, accounting for the renewed sense of urgency, anger, and heightened activity that the Hindutva brigade has demonstrated from the 1980s onwards.

Bahujan democratic aspirations have consistently challenged the Brahmin Baniya hegemony from Phule onward.²¹ The Bahujan movement poses a real danger to the Brahminic Savarna since it threatens to unveil them at the core of the Hindutva project and re-symbolize Indianness with anti-caste democratic norms and values. Therefore, the BJP-RSS, as the vanguard of Brahminic hegemony, do speak the partial truth when they raise the HKMH slogan. Once you displace the source of danger implied in that slogan from muslim to Bahujan, the danger becomes palpable. However, this Bahujan danger could be easily displaced to Muslims as Ashraaf, through their anti-democratic practices, keep producing a symbolically aggressive muslim camp. Violently threatening slogans like "Gustakhe Rasool Ki Ek Saza, Sar Tan Se Juda Sar Tan Se Juda" (Dehlvi, 2022) (There is only one punishment for insulting the Prophet: beheading) create the same effect as equally diabolical slogan "Jab

Company, London 2022). Also see Joel Lee, "Deceptive Majority: Dalits, Hinduism, and Underground Religion," pp. 1-30 (CUP, New York 2021).

¹⁹ See Note 6.

²⁰ See Paul R Brass, "The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India" (OUP, New Delhi 2004); Shekhar Gupta, Inderjit Badhwar, Farzand Ahmed, "Shah Bano judgment renders Muslims a troubled community, torn by an internal rift," Jan 31, *India Today*, 1986.

²¹ See Notes 4, 7.

Mulle Kaate Jayenge, Tab Ram Ram Chillayenge.” (Zaffar, Hanan and Akram, Hasan, 2021) (when muslims are cut into pieces, they will chant ram ram.) During such periodic performances by Savarna Ashraaf, the Bahujan is reduced to making benign legal and moral appeals, deserting the political terrain completely to be minted by the Hindutva forces. For Hindutva votaries, revolting against Sayed Ashraaf is an easy escape from the self-deprecating challenge of annihilating caste. Caste can be comfortably dismissed as anti-Hindutva while they are busy fiercely outraging against the Muslim hegemonized by Ashraaf.

In this background, Hindutva strategists could easily design their key agenda, like the Babri mosque, Article 370, and Uniform Civil Code (UCC), perfectly anticipating the response of every political player constituted under the stubborn spell of Islamophile Ashraaf. This is such a winning arrangement for the Hindutva players. While they know in advance all the possible moves their adversaries could make to counter them, they remain free to experiment and improvise their strategy. On their part, Ashraaf confined their social and political agenda to the preservation of Muslim Personal Law (MPL) and Minority Educational Institutions (MEI), including the archaic Madrasa system. These issues appear to be self-harm at first glance, but there is some degree of complexity involved in it. The triple axis on which Islamophilia rests implies that the women and Pasmanda sections bear the significant burden of MPLs and MEIs. Issues concerning maintenance, triple talaq, and four marriages under MPL affect women and not Ashraaf men. These issues have been fought with totemic ferocity by Ashraaf men, often by manufacturing the consent of women, deploying Islamophilic influence; hijab is only the latest addition to this list. Similarly, MEIs providing modern education exclude Pasmanda men and women and condemn them to the Madarsa system due to their financial and social limitations. The burden of communal violence also falls overwhelmingly on Pasmanda men and women. (Singh, 2024) On the other hand, Brahminic Savarna valorize and mimic Islamophilic Ashraaf to symbolically reproduce the hindu camp. Thus, Ashraaf Savarna jointly colonize Muslimness and Hinduism to kill the prospects of Bahujan democracy.

Sadly, despite all the evidence from the Pasmanda movement, the proponents of Bahujan democracy dare not to take on the casteist core of the hindu-muslim joint enterprise. They prefer to isolate the Brahmin Savarna from this enterprise for contestation, but seek to preserve the norms and values of Sayed Ashraaf in the guise of protecting minority rights. Such an approach leads to glaring inconsistencies and subverts the Bahujan project in multiple ways, manifested in weird, contradictory, self-defeating conceptual and institutional practices.

III. Contradictions and Inconsistencies Induced by Ashraaf in the Bahujan Discourse

As Ashraaf mediate the language of democracy for all players by refusing to play the game of democracy, the Bahujan language of democracy has also been affected in peculiar ways. Let us use the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF) to demonstrate this typical tendency. Over the period, BAMCEF broke into many factions. However, they all share one common goal of organizing the lower caste majority against the anti-democratic impulses of the upper caste minority. However, all the factions of BAMCEF keep courting the “minority” community, though they construe it in a religious sense. So, while the larger aim of BAMCEF is to organize against the powerful “caste minority,” it ends up reinforcing only the existence of a “religious minority” by its title and mobilization approach. Such an emphasis on the existence of a minority, that too muslim by all means, further establishes Brahmin Savarna as the leader of the “religious majority.” How so? Because there is no way for a muslim minority to be identified as such without reference to some religious majority. What can the religious majority be except for the hindu majority, and who has assumed the leadership of this symbolic majority if not the Brahmin Savarna? In order to avoid this outcome, some BAMCEF factions have developed linguistic slights of words. They claim that they are trying to organize SC, ST, OBC, and religious minorities converted from them. This is hardly any progress, as one could always ask about the

organizational leadership of the religious majority from SC, ST, OBC, not so converted. That religious majority would still be Hindu, and RSS-BJP its undisputed leader.

No matter how much one stretches the definition, as long as the Bahujan movement retains the category of religious minority in its organizing principle, it is contaminated beyond recognition. This is not one isolated case of conceptual inconsistency by one off Bahujan organization. Numerous other Bahujan organizations keep strengthening, by their name and action, the very same class of people whom they take to be their adversaries. Slogans like Dalit-Muslim unity or Dalit-Pichda-Muslim unity are other forms of this malaise. The effects on Bahujan politics are similar, for if these unities are legitimate, then Shudra-Hindu unity is also legitimate, which again is a win-win situation for Hindutva. How does such a glaring discrepancy keep recurring in the Bahujan conceptualization? Here comes the Islamophile Ashraaf. Ashraaf, along with their Savarna counterparts, establish and sustain the myth of Muslims as a monolithic religious bloc without caste or hierarchy, forever antagonistic to all forms of pantheistic traditions.

Savarna strategists, plum with the supply of frozen Muslims, weaponize the HKMH slogan to avert the danger posed by the Bahujan movement. Bahujan strategists and activists, finding the Muslim being on antagonistic terms with the powerful Savarna, rush to rescue the damsel in distress. Ergo, frozen Muslim is incorporated into the Bahujan struggle as a distressed minority, muddying the entire Bahujan conceptualization as described above. Discursive grip of Islam, understood as an egalitarian religion informed by an essentialist understanding of religion in general and the religion of Islam in particular, contributes in ample measure to such a self-defeating approach. (Ahmed, 2016) Moreover, the presence of anti-democratic Ashraaf in the name of the religious minority eats into the democratic character of the Bahujan camp, giving a significant edge to the Hindutva camp.

A more fundamental problem exists in integrating Ashraaf and Pasmanda as a religious minority within the Bahujan movement. This relates to establishing a Bahujan democracy by annihilating caste. If caste is to be destroyed, it must be eliminated from all walks of life and all sections of society. Including Ashraaf, who maintain caste through material, theological, and political means, within the Bahujan movement is to uphold caste in a significant portion of society. The caste order cannot be eradicated if the very movement that aims to abolish caste simultaneously fosters it under the guise of protecting a religious minority. Furthermore, if caste-practicing Ashraaf can be mobilized as a religious minority, what justification exists for excluding caste-practicing Savarna? Would that not constitute discrimination against Savarna solely based on religion? To remain consistent with this logic, caste-practicing Savarna must also be included in the Bahujan movement. If such Savarna are included, who is left to confront at all?

Moreover, to say that there is casteism in any section of society today is to imply that there are caste and communal modes of identification in that section. The communal modes of identification could be antagonistic or sympathetic, but it is impossible to describe casteism without communalism. Quality and quantity may vary from group to group, but caste order today imbibes both caste and communal elements. Ambedkar's century-old thesis is that the creation of caste order involves the superposition of endogamy on exogamy. (Ambedkar, 1936) It can be reformulated to describe the present social order as involving the superposition of communalism over castesism. (Menon, 2006) Combined with the effects of multiple social, cultural, and political movements raging against caste for over a century, this raises questions about the nature of the present caste order. Did these movements change and transform the nature and mechanism of caste? Is it anybody's case that the caste order did not shake a bit from the scathing critique of Phule, Ambedkar, Ansari, and Periyar. (Veeramani, 2007)

Do Savarna Ashraaf increasingly give communal color to the caste order to subvert such a critique? Did communal partition and the associated violence leave the caste structure untouched? What about periodic communal riots leading up to the Babri mosque demolition? What was the aim of the Ayodhya movement? Was it not an ambitious attempt to displace the

caste sense of Brahmin Baniya power about lower and middle castes to the communal sense of power about the muslim other? Whether the symbolic inclusion of SC, ST, and OBCs in that movement, from laying of first brick to the distribution of first prasada, from soil collection to making of trust and priests, to including 10 out of 15 Jajman/patron in prana pratishtha at Ayodhya temple was not directed against the Bahujan movement? Has communalism not displaced untouchability as the coercive force of the caste order to a certain extent? Has communalism not emerged as the organizing principle of maintaining the caste order in contemporary times? (Teltumbde, 2020) Whether the untouchables have not been replaced with muslims as the 'constitutive outside' of the 21st-century caste order? (Mandal, 2022) Under such circumstances, is it possible to dissolve the present caste order in any sense of the term without dismantling the structures of communalism as well? If not, then how justified is it to court Sayed Ashraaf and leave them in peace to co-breed caste and communal structures with Brahmin Savarna while the latter is singled out for special treatment? If communalism has become a necessary ruse to the caste order, then how wise is it to leave untouched its co-author in the name of the religious minority? Therefore, either we find the courage to take on the Islamophilic Ashraaf or watch helplessly the death of the Bahujan democratic dream.

IV. Challenges to the Common Education System

What does it mean to take on the Ashraaf to progress towards the Bahujan democracy? There are quite a few specific issues. Take the fundamental Bahujan democratic ambition: Common Education System (CES). One cannot make any real progress towards CES without confronting the Ashraaf obsession with MEIs, inscribed as a fundamental right under Article 30 of the constitution. MEIs, as they stand today, erect a solid wall of separation between different sections of the Bahujan class in four distinct ways. Firstly, the rights of MEIs are invoked directly by Ashraaf Savarna to undercut the steps towards CES.²² Secondly, MEIs providing modern education are used to deny reservation in admission and staff appointments to the SC, ST, and OBC candidates, despite the last two categories being formally inclusive of the minority category as well.²³ Thirdly, MEIs have been used to constitutionalize the privatization of education since the early 1990s.²⁴ Fourthly, MEIs of the Madarsa variety are so designed that no other section of the Bahujan except for the helpless Pasmanda inhabit that space. The combined effect of such an arrangement is the creation of three exclusive educational spaces highly incompatible with the Bahujan upbringing. Ashraaf share one, MEI spaces providing modern education as muslims and some of their Savarna counterparts as hindus. The Brahmin Savarna almost exclusively occupy second, private educational spaces. Third, the Madarsa variety of MEIs are almost exclusively populated by the financially weak Pasmanda.

The general public educational space is the only place where the possibility of a joint Bahujan presence remains open. However, Pasmanda remains conspicuous by its absence, owing to the interruption caused by the above three exclusive educational spaces. It is not difficult to see how this whole MEI business makes it impossible for different components of the Bahujan class to come together in common educational spaces and develop a shared language of Bahujan democracy. CES is crucial to transform different sections of the Bahujan formation dispersed by graded inequality into a democratic Bahujan unity. Ashraaf Savarna keep up the business of MEIs in order to reproduce the "muslim," which in turn is made the

²² See In Re Kerala Education Bill AIR 1958 SC 95.

²³ This operation was conducted by the Supreme Court from In Re Kerala Education Bill AIR 1958 SC 95 to St. Stephen's College v. The University of Delhi AIR 1992 SC 1630.

²⁴ T.M.A. Pai Foundation v. State of Karnataka, AIR 2003 SC 355. For detailed analysis of the judicial process behind these conclusions see, Ayaz Ahmad & Nachiketa Mittal, "Constitutive Functions of Minority Rights and Social Justice in India," *Journal of the Indian Law Institute*, Vol. 64: 3, (2022).

constitutive outside of the 'hindu' symbolically absorbing Dalit, Pichda, Ati-Pichda, Adivasi in its fold. Ashraaf, through MEIs, make the Bahujan unity so much more difficult than it already is.

V. Challenges to the Shared Family, Living, and Spiritual Experience

Let us now turn to the social effects of Ashraaf's obsession with MPLs. The strongest social relations are generally developed through familial ties. Ashraaf's insistence on separate MPL means that the constituent parts of the Bahujan class born into different religious worlds cannot easily form family relations. Persistence of hindu-muslim laws is a huge source of their social and political reproduction. They contribute significantly to the feeling of permanent division based on religion between Dalit, Pichda, Ati-Pichda, Adivasi, on the one hand, and Pasmada, on the other. Add to it the periodic Ashraaf eruption, such as the one against the progressive Shahbano judgment or in support of triple talaq, burqa/hijab, sharia law, or insult to the prophet/holy book. No segment of Dalit Pichda could ever identify with such conservative reactionary agitations. Shriil Savarna love jihad and Ghar Wapsi campaigns only add fire to the fuel. The effect again is reduction of Pasmada combined with Ashraaf to the muslim minority and partial absorption of Dalit, Pichda, Ati-Pichda, Adivasi as the hindu majority, with Brahmin Savarna. Once Ashraaf imposed MPL on one part of the society, then the law for the remaining part had to be the "Hindu Code Bill." It did not matter that the latter was spearheaded by Babasaheb Ambedkar himself, for there was no way he could name it a "Common Family Code." Where is the space for constructing a Bahujan identity in such a scenario?

Ashraaf's segregational practices are so pervasive that when the constitution reduces the question of social welfare and reform or the throwing open of religious institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of hindus, inclusive of Sikh, Jaina, or Buddhist religions, it hardly raises an eyebrow.²⁵ Whatever little existed by way of shared spiritual space in the form of Sufi shrines or Mazar culture has been systematically cleansed of everyone except muslims by Devbandi, Wahabi, Tablighi, Shuddhi, and Ghar Wapsi movements. Ashraaf ensure that even spiritual conversations remain strictly communal within the Islamic monotheistic imaginary. Those conversations ruthlessly denigrate everything remotely perceived as polytheistic or un-Islamic. Islamophilic Ashraaf cannot stand a Baudh Vihara, a Raidasiya/Kabir temple, or even a modest bust or portrait of Phule, Ambedkar, Ansari, or Periyar. Naturally, this creates an equivalence among Dalit, Pichda, Ati-Pichda, Adivasi polytheistic, including atheistic spiritual traditions, vis-a-vis the Brahmin Savarna. For reasons discussed above, segregation of living spaces among Bahujan groups along religious lines is Ashraaf doing to a great extent. However, the violent contribution of Brahminic Savarna towards such segregation has risen considerably in recent times. Therefore, efforts to establish a Common Housing System for Bahujan communities must overcome Ashraaf Savarna's joint resistance. Similarly, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Polytheistic, Atheistic, Rationalist, and Agnostic faith traditions as internal diversity of the Bahujan class must struggle against the joint Ashraaf Savarna resistance to them.

A plurality of carousal and spiritual aspects of religion may give in cheerfully to the more merrier sobriquet. In any case, what needs to be contested is not that various Bahujan communities or Ashraaf Savarna practice similar or different religions, but that Ashraaf Savarna attempt to make religious difference the "only or primary" principle of social organization. Latter is a definite power move to reserve the fruits of democracy exclusively for the Savarna Ashraaf. Against this power move, one can deploy Akeel Bilgrami's characterization of secularism as a clear political stance regarding religion only so far as it affects the polity and leave the process of secularization to the wisdom of time. (Bilgrami, 2014)

²⁵ Explanation II - sub-clause (b) of clause (2) of Article 25.

Several other linguistic, cultural, and theocratic practices of Ashraaf produce communally reductive effects on the Bahujan discourse. For instance, it took decades for the Bahujan movement to establish Savitribai Phule as the first woman teacher and a great social reformer. Fatima Sheikh was also brought to life along the way as a co-teacher and supporter of women's education from the time when Sir Syed and Tilak were dead against women's education. For a long time, Ashraaf Savarna ignored Savitri Fatima's contribution. However, after their legacy took hold among Bahujan activists, somehow Fatima Sheikh began to be endorsed as the first muslim woman teacher of India. (Azeem, 2022) The effect of such a move on both Bahujan icons is epiphenomenal. If Fatima Sheikh is India's first "Muslim" woman teacher, then Savitrimai, by default, becomes India's first "Hindu" teacher. Brahminic Savarna could not be happier. The legacy of both stands dwindled, plucked out of the Bahujan universe, and placed comfortably in the hegemonic hindu-muslim binary to serve Savarna Ashraaf's interests. Thus, the limits of Bahujan discourse are firmly determined by Islamophile Ashraaf.

VI. Social Totality Co-Constituted by Islamophilic Ashraaf and Brahminic Savarna

Multifarious social segregations installed and defended by the Islamophilic Ashraaf sustain the myth that "muslim" is a singular, monolithic whole beyond the pale of *caste as an enclosed class*. (Ambedkar, 1936, 15) Similar propaganda by the Brahminic Savarna works up to produce the casteless "Hindu" unified against the muslim. Thus, Savarna Ashraaf guard the caste order through strong communal fencing. If the caste order is to be shaken, then the communal fences must be brought down. However, undemocratic hegemonic Ashraaf practices ensure that the bulk of Dalit, Pichda, Ati-Pichda, Adivasi find greater equivalence and space sharing with Brahmin Savarna than Pasmanda Bahujan. Sometimes, such spatial distances manifest in active opposition to the measures aimed at reducing the distance within a particular Bahujan segment, like removing communal bar from the SC list or sub-classifying reserved categories. (Ansari, 2023)

Under these conducive circumstances, how difficult is it for the resource-rich, organized, and determined Brahmin Savarna to rope in a section of Dalit, Pichda, Ati-Pichda, Adivasi against distant muslims, including Pasmanda, framed as a danger to the Hindus? Is it really possible to build the Bahujan republic without establishing a clear frontier between the Bahujan majority (Dalit, Pichda, Ati-Pichda, Adivasi, and Pasmanda) on one hand and the Alpan minority (Brahminic Savarna and Islamophilic Ashraaf) on the other? Recognizing that the Brahminic Savarna and Islamophilic Ashraaf constitute two antagonistic poles of the same discursive Alpan formation operating against the Bahujan interests is essential.²⁶ These Alpan jointly reiterate the hindu-muslim horizon and trap the Bahujan democracy in it. 'The term Alpan encapsulates Savarna and Ashraaf and has the practical advantage of covering upper castes' ideological and organizational spread across the liberal secular, conservative communal, and socialist communist spectrum. No group can be described as hegemonic without such an ideological and organizational spread.

One can immediately anticipate the objection to Ashraaf and Savarna's clubbing together in the Alpan camp: that it is a false equivalence. Ashraaf hardly have any power today, and they are mainly at the receiving end of Hindutva power. However, such an objection completely misses the co-constitutive nature of Savarna Ashraaf's relationship. (Ansari, 2018) When it is claimed that two elements constitute a singular totality, it is asserted that both elements are necessary for the constitution of that totality, not necessarily that both carry equal weight or measure. It is like two black dots on a white sheet or two white dots on a black sheet. The unified image created here is black plus white or white plus black. One can

²⁶ Ashis Nandy argues that they even share similar motivations and inhabit the same psychological world. See Ashis Nandy, "Secularism in Crisis," *India International Centre Quarterly*, SPRING, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 35-64 (1995).

never describe such an image by simply asserting that it is black or white. It would be a wrong description of the image. There is no way to describe this image correctly without discussing the presence of both colors. One can still manage by saying it is a white image with only two black dots, and vice versa.

What is involved here is describing the presence of two colors, not that they are in equal proportion. This can be further specified with the example of black tea. Black tea is made tasty by shaking the tea leaves in hot water. The quantity, taste, or fragrance of tea and water in the preparation is never equal or identical. However, the only way to correctly describe black tea is to say it is made of tea and water. Removing either from the picture would not get you the tea. In the same fashion, the power of the Brahmin Savarna in the hindu form is produced with the support of the muslim form taken by Sayed Ashraaf and vice versa. In this sense, the author of this paper insists that Ashraaf Savarna co-constitute the hindu-muslim social totality, which can be best described as Alpjan's image or tea, if you like. This hindu-muslim horizon encompasses secular liberal, conservative communal, and communist socialist objectivity to constitute the social totality of the Alpjan from which the Bahujan is excluded by intuition, legal and judicial reason, and social and political perception. Social, political, legal, and judicial perception of the Alpjan is so constituted. that even their critical intellectual work remains very much within the zone of reaffirming the status quo.

Thus, the Alpjan camp's present form cannot be maintained without Sayed Ashraaf and their minoritarian politics. Brahmin Savarna decided on their agenda and formulated strategies to anticipate Ashraaf's response to the last comma and full stop. Events and programs designed in this manner often give the impression that both are tied to the same bullock cart. For instance, the whole Kamandal against Mandal movement was designed on the assurance that Ashraaf would give only one specific response to the Babri mosque issue, even if a few thinking heads could suggest some alternative course that could preempt that political move. (Anand, 2022) Three decades later, the inauguration of the Ram temple after razing the mosque demonstrates how well the Brahminic Savarna understand the nature and temperament of Islamophilic Ashraaf.

However, the symbolic social totality of the Alpjan camp would not remain stable unless a critical mass from the Bahujan camp also subscribes to it. This effect is achieved by providing token representation to different Bahujan sections in Alpjan-controlled social, cultural, and political institutions. Sayed Ashraaf mock such inclusion by claiming that one section of the Bahujan has become "Hindu," while Brahmin Savarna ridicule another section for being exclusively "muslim." Indeed, Alpjan seems to have mastered the art of symbolic inclusion by placing a few Bahujan faces prominently in decorative positions while retaining decision-making powers to themselves. Such efforts go a long way in universalizing particular Savarna Ashraaf norms and values into hindu muslim collective political identities. However, the material gains of such symbolic inclusion remain negligible for the Bahujan masses. For instance, the Hindutva camp falls short on all substantive representation parameters and can be seen actively subverting them.²⁷ However, to overcome this challenge, one must move away from the politics of symbolic representation to a programmatic commitment to constructing a Bahujan system. I now turn to this important subject, which has the potential to transform India from anemic third-world health to first-world health.²⁸

²⁷ See Prannv Dhawan, Christophe Jaffrelet and Kalaiyaran A, "Supreme Court's EWS verdict: Why diluting caste-based reservations is a counterproductive move," *The Indian Express*, November 18, 2022; Namit Saxena, "Disproportionate representation at the Supreme Court: A perspective based on Caste and Religion of judges", Bar and Bench, May 23, 2021; Shyamlal Yadav, "Reservation candidates are under-represented in Govt's upper rungs," *The Indian Express*, January 17, 2019; "Who Tells Our Stories Matters," *Oxfam India Report*, August 2nd, 2019; IDIA Diversity Survey Report, 2018 – 2019.

²⁸ See Naren Bedide, "The Brahmin Keeps India in the 18th Century," *Prabuddha: Journal of Social Equality*, Vol. 2:1 pp. 26-33 (2018); Gail Omvedt, "Dalit Visions: The Anti-caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity" (Orient Longman, New Delhi 2006); Kancha Ilaiah, "Buffalo Nationalism: A Critique of Spiritual Fascism" (SAGE, New Delhi 2004).

VII. Building the Bahujan System

The discussion so far makes it clear that the Bahujan democracy directly espousing the cause of 90% people cannot make much progress by aiming to get accommodated in “the system” designed to serve the Alpjan. There is no way a system structured to serve just 10% of the population can accommodate an additional 90% of the Bahujan people. That is why the Alpjan autocracy tries to manage Bahujan aspirations with the high-decibel hindu-muslim Hindutva rhetoric. Hence, the Bahujan democracy can only be a movement of constructing a radical democratic future transcending the hindu-muslim binary.

That future for the Bahujan lies in building specific democratic systems made evident by the history of Bahujan movement which can be listed inexhaustibly as follows: 1) Common Education System, 2) Common Health System, 3) Common Housing System, 4) Common Family System, 5) Proportionate Employment System, 6) Creative Knowledge System, 6) Social Security System, 7) Land Redistribution System, 8) Proportional Representation System, 9) Representative Media System, 10) Representative Police and Judicial System. The Alpjan communal hubris actively blocks the institution of these systems. Nevertheless, Bahujan society must carry on this affirmative program as part of the struggle to abolish the Alpjan plutocracy. Sadly, most of these democratic concerns are starkly missing from the constitution since its inception. Therefore, efforts to inscribe these demands in the constitutional body itself have to be carried out even in the face of a threat to the existing constitution, whether perceived or real. Radicalizing the constitutional infrastructure by translating Bahujan concerns in legal language is necessary. Political struggle around a common constructive program alone can generate the social cement necessary to keep various Bahujan castes and tribes together for the radical democratic mission.

The common constructive program of the Bahujan majority is also necessary to dispel another notion fashionable among certain liberal and secular sections of the Alpjan who characterize BJP-RSS governments as majoritarian. If the BJP-RSS government functioning since 2014 was indeed majoritarian, it would have taken some steps towards implementing this programmatic agenda to empower the majority. Instead, all that one can produce is legislative and executive action to empower and benefit a small minority of 9 to 10% Brahmin Savarna at the cost of the Bahujan.²⁹ This operation is covered up by hyper-religious action through direct political and media channels. However, even the most informed liberal and secular sections of the Savarna Ashraaf keep confusing the issue by calling such a profoundly minoritarian government majoritarian. Such is the perverse effect of Ashraaf politics that you cannot even call a completely minoritarian politics “minoritarian.” This limit of liberal secular objectivity, rooted in the Alpjan ethos, displays stunning continuity from the British Raj to the Brahminic socialist and capitalist republics. (Patel, 2009) The moment we abandon the seductive charm of Ashraaf Savarna's constructed “muslim as minority” and “hindu as majority,” the vacuity of majoritarian claims becomes too glaring to ignore in the face of empirical data as well.³⁰

However, universal functions of particular struggles in transcending their particularity to produce the Bahujan subject do not mean that particular struggles lose their particularity. On the contrary, particular claims of representation and empowerment to overcome different historical disabilities have become more relevant to elevate the Bahujan democracy. Particular struggles bring to the surface asymmetric social, economic, and political status in the present society, caused by different historical experiences, some of which can be remedied only through a differential policy framework. Therefore, every organization and institution

²⁹ Recalling Demonitization, EWS Reservation, Lateral Entry Scheme, GST, Low Capital Gains Tax, NEP and so on.

³⁰ See Nitin Kumar Bharti, Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty, and Anmol Somanchi, “Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj,” *Working Paper*, World Inequality Lab, March 2024; Atul Kohli, “Poverty Amid Plenty in the New India” (CUP, Cambridge 2012).

designed to create the Bahujan public must incorporate the democratic demands of Dalit, Pichda, Pasmanda Ati-Pichda, Adivasi Bahujan (DPAB) struggle. Towards this end, demands for representation in existing public and private institutions acquire a new militancy. It is one of the most important means of transforming the present institutional apparatus to serve the Bahujan society. Present institutional arrangements, so transformed with the new set of institutions needed to implement the above programmatic agenda, can not only reverse the democratic slide but also put India on the revolutionary road to progress and prosperity, catapulting entire South Asia. (Ilaiah, 2009)

In a caste society characterized by ladder-like graded inequality, breaking the hierarchy chain at some point is necessary for the caste order to fall apart and the Bahujan society to become a reality. Naturally, a caste or a group of castes from DPAB willing to break the ladder rung at some point would assume a central signifying role in the Bahujan democracy. Which specific caste or group of castes would do it cannot be foretold. As there is no privileged agent of historical change, (Laclau and Mouffe, 1996, 48-49) all castes have an equal chance of destroying the hierarchy chain and becoming the core, irradiating the Bahujan society. A caste or group of castes that can rise above caste and communal considerations to address the problem of pitting one constituent of the Bahujan against another would acquire increasing centrality. This is not to say that the wrongs committed by one section of the Bahujan against another can be ignored for the sake of Bahujan unity. This means that the guilt of such wrongs can be worked out as an inevitable result of undemocratic Alpan practices. This problem necessarily involves a dual struggle: one against the undemocratic Alpan world, and the second against the undemocratic impulses latent among a few members of the Bahujan world. The ambition of destroying such an oppressive world could generate a unifying effect on all components of the Bahujan republic. Thus, the immediate and remote oppressor question must be approached by considering the nature of the Alpan social totality and the Bahujan rainbow of collective life.

VIII. Bahujan versus Alpan Democracy

So far, the discussion points to the impossibility of realizing Bahujan democracy as an alternative to Hindutva without defeating Ashraaf's disdain for democracy. The mischief caused by Ashraaf's minority politics should warn all DPAB groups about the dangers of pursuing purely minoritarian interests in electoral democracy. (Laclau, 1996, 48-49) The options are clear: either expand to become something more than yourself, like a Bahujan majority, or shrink to become something less than yourself, like the muslim minority. Any social, legal, economic, or political practice that makes it difficult for different segments of the Bahujan to rub their shoulders with each other in the spirit of fraternity impedes the development of Bahujan democracy. However, it does not mean that various constituents of the Bahujan formation would lose their particularity completely by transforming themselves into Bahujan universality. Far from it, a particularity by transforming itself into a universality gains much more than it loses by diluting some of its particulars. For instance, nobody in their right mind would argue that the Brahmin Savarna by transforming themselves into the hindu nation or Sayed Ashraaf into the muslim nation incurred more loss than what they gained in the process.

Ashraaf Savarna managed to expand their particular cultures significantly in the name of muslim culture, hindu culture, secular culture, Hindutva culture, Indian culture, Pakistani culture, and so on. Similarly, the transformation of DPAB groups into the Bahujan nation will only universalize the particular cultural interests of each group jointly. As the flowering of Hindutva took place in the geographical stretch of South Asian Islamophilia in the 1920s, its displacement by the Bahujan Republic in India cannot be without consequences for the rest of the region. With the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, pan South Asian die has been cast afresh, reminiscent of the pre-partition geographical power play. Suppose Bahujan democracy manages to subvert the Alpan power this time around. In that case, South Asia's social,

economic, and political life might witness greater social, economic, and political integration than what has been experienced so far.

However, the Alpjans are committed to maintaining communally segregative practices at any cost, including through violent means like riots, police atrocities, and lynching. Developing a Bahujan Defense Force (BDF) to counter Aljnan communal violence is imperative. Reproduction of hindu-muslim antagonism to wean away parts of Bahujan society for their hegemonic purposes is the mainstay of Aljnan morality. For the same purpose, the token representation of a few Bahujan faces after their ideological orientation in the Aljnan camp is encouraged. The Aljnan energy is never spent on any affirmative program to empower the Bahujan significantly. Even Sayed Ashraaf, despite their dwindling fortunes, never considered taking up the Bahujan affirmative program in their remaining zones of influence, for instance, MEIs. On the contrary, the Aljnan remain hell bent upon trampling Bahujan dreams through institutional power and social control. This is evident from the little progress on most Bahujan empowering programs delineated above. Instead, what we are witnessing through massive privatization of public sector enterprises including education, increasing concentration of private corporate entities in the hands of few, emasculation of thought, repression of civil liberties, and perversion of public discourse is that the Aljnan power is determined to undermine whatever little progress could be made since the commencement of the constitution. India has been held hostage to the minoritarian imagination of the Aljnan. The challenge is to beat civilizationally destructive Aljnan through constitutional and radical means of the Bahujan democracy.

At this juncture, one must acknowledge the Pasmada movement's extraordinary contribution to developing a language through which democracy can serve the interests of the Bahujans. Ali Anwar's inauguration of the Pasmada movement and Khalid Anis Ansari's scholarly articulation of it as a 'post minority' have supplied the missing vocabulary to the Bahujan democratic project. (Ansari, 2023) The tireless, creative work of the Pasmada activists and scholars has made the ideas expressed in this paper thinkable. However, the success of a democratic project is not guaranteed a priori. (Laclau, 2005, 150-156). It depends on how social mobilization and joint action spaces are conceived, articulated, and worked out. Any conception of Bahujan democracy that leaves out Pasmada from its imagination will fail to dent the hindu-muslim binary, and hence cannot provide an alternative to the Aljnan plutocracy. Such a project, so to speak, is doomed from the beginning. Therefore, all the proponents of Bahujan democracy trying to resist the Aljnan oligarchy would listen more seriously to the notes and concerns raised by the Pasmada ideologues, activists, and scholars. The Pasmada movement has already taken a democratic turn, bypassing the hindu-muslim horizon signified by the slogan "Dalit Pichda Ek Saman, Hindu Ho Ya Musalman" (dalit, pichda are alike whether they are hindu or muslim). Pasmada have long discarded minoritarian politics and firmly placed themselves in the Bahujan democratic project. Practically, it means that in states like UP, Bihar, or West Bengal with a significant Pasmada presence, every third or fourth Chief Minister can be a Pasmada. Creation of a real possibility for Pasmada Chief Ministers in other states, as well as a Pasmada Prime Minister, is necessary in order to decimate the hindu-muslim binary decisively. For this to become a reality, the Aljnan minority's politics must be defeated fairly and squarely.

IX. The place of Aljnan in the Bahujan Democracy

There is no such thing as identity by birth or natural identity, only contingent social forms of identification and embodiment. To the extent a person is brought up under a particular form of identification, she embodies or lives that collective identity. (Mouffe, 1993) However, gradual sliding away from one form of identification to another is the best evidence of the socially contingent nature of all popular identities. (Laclau, 2005, 129-138) For this reason, explanatory categories like "false consciousness," "stooge," "caste traitor," or "foot soldier" fail to explain the nature of social and political allegiance. A person is Brahmin, Savarna,

Sayed, Ashraaf, or DPAB only to the extent that he identifies with the respective universe of meaning. However, when individuals born under one universe of meaning begin to identify with a different meaning, their inherited identity undergoes a profound transformation. This process is slow, painful, and unpredictable, potentially destabilizing all collective identities. To the extent that a few Bahujan individuals identify with the Alpjan projects of a Hindu or Islamic state, they, for all practical purposes, become part of the Savarna or Ashraaf society.

There is no gain in branding them as opportunistically misled foot soldiers. This no doubt poses a serious challenge to the votaries of the Bahujan dream. There are only two ways to overcome this challenge. Firstly, make the Bahujan democracy the most meaningful experience for all its constituent sections. Secondly, attract a few members from the Alpjan camp through the stirring charm of the Bahujan republic. The first course of action involves progressively eliminating the caste, communal, gender, and tribal divide from the Bahujan society and nurturing an associated lifestyle towards a democratic, peaceful, and prosperous life. This process culminates in living the Bahujan identity so that anyone who identifies with it feels greater than herself. This alone should be sufficient to realize the second objective. However, to ascertain whether a few members from the Alpjan genuinely identify with the Bahujan democracy, some additional tests must be called for.

The test to determine whether someone from the Alpjan world has begun to identify with the Bahujan democracy cannot be a superficial formality. Mere lip service to the Bahujan project once it acquires some momentum is certainly not enough. Members of the Alpjan class are so powerful precisely because they pick up the art of camouflage quite early. They develop mastery in joining the adversary camp in the garb of progressive politics, only to implode it from within. The fate of Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Communism, Socialism, and Liberalism in India after the ruling castes joined these ideologies in cohorts is not hidden from anyone. Hence, the need for extra caution. Ashraaf Savarna, who genuinely identify with the Bahujan society, will feel an irresistible urge to bring down their Alpjan world, for they are closest to the source of stench. Once their nostrils become sensitive to stench, it would be impossible for Ashraaf Savarna to bear it. So, forget allyship or solidarity, inter-sectional or otherwise. Either one joins wholeheartedly in destroying the symbolic Alpjan world to build the Bahujan world or remains firmly with the Alpjan camp as a Bahujan adversary.

Hence, the Alpjan must pass a twin test: First and foremost, direct evidence of hammering down the Alpjan world, and second, genuine identification with the Bahujan democracy by fully subscribing to its vision and programmatic agenda. Providing a place of dignity within Bahujan society to such Alpjan who thoroughly commit to the Bahujan democratic task might expand the democratic revolution in unexpected and interesting ways. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014, 167-188) Buddhist and Sufi values of love, care, and fellowship shower the entire humanity. Hence, only the power of Alpjan, which chokes and suffocates the Bahujan dream, is expelled from the Bahujan democracy, not the retrievable humanity of the former. Individual members of the Alpjan class who pass the twin test as described above redeem their humanity and, for all practical purposes, become active progenies of the Bahujan democracy.

In any case, destroying the symbolic Alpjan world does not mean they will lose it all. Sure, they would lose some wealth, property, and space on the high table. However, Ashraaf Savarna will more than make it up through newly gained creative freedom and their humane self. At last, they could produce some art and beauty worthy of democratic deliverance. Under Bahujan democracy, Ashraaf Savarna would finally overcome their profound lack of humanity and creativity to experience unprecedented exhilaration. With the spread of democratic knowledge and education with increasing emphasis on creative and innovative life, the Alpjan might endorse the Bahujan democracy to shore up their intellectual development. In any case, a group of people becomes hegemonic only by building a meaningful cosmos capable of providing meaning to some members of the hegemonized group.

Bahujan democracy in action has enough juice in it for a few members of the Alpjan camp to be drawn permanently towards it. The slogan Bahujan Hitay, Sarvjan Sukhay

succinctly captures this phenomenon. It implies that, as the Alpan have found it impossible to transition from feudal to democratic life, they remain unhappy, miserable, violent, and dissatisfied despite all their power and privileges. Promotion of Bahujan interests through educational, economic, social, and political empowerment (Bahujan Hitay) would provide a strong helping hand to the Alpan. With the help of a strong Bahujan society, the Alpan could finally transition from feudal to a democratic way of life and eventually become peace-loving, creative, happy beings. (Ilaiah, 2009) The net result is Sarvjan Sukhay. Hence, the slogan Bahujan Hitay, Sarvjan Sukhay is used throughout the Bahujan struggle.

Conclusion

Once the democratic revolution centralized the role of collective identities in politics, the terrain of politics decisively became a struggle about the construction of popular identities. Populist reason is the language of this struggle, which consistently attempts to constitute a social totality encapsulated in the idiom of 'us' versus 'them'. Planted on this fertile soil, neoliberal capitalism, as the conservative backlash against the egalitarian thrust of democratic revolution, proliferated as totalitarianism in democratic societies at the dawn of the 21st century. This conservative backlash often weaponizes sedimented collective identities; in the case of India, it happens to be hindu and muslim identities. However, deconstructing these popular identities reveals the contingent and antagonistic inscription of the Brahminic Savarna and Islamophilic Ashraaf on the dreams and aspirations of the Bahujan Bharat. Spread over a century, this inscription is stretched across South Asia. Translation of Indian politics in the language of Laclau and Mouffe's political philosophy has been done here to glean populist reason driving Hindutva, Islamophilia, and the Bahujan projects.

Exploration of the populist reason for Hindutva inevitably leads to Sayed Ashraaf. The origin, development, and sustenance of Hindutva over a century is umbilically connected with the Ashraaf resistance to the democratic revolution. Together, Brahmin Savarna and Sayed Ashraaf have reduced the entire social imaginary to a hindu-muslim binary with disastrous consequences for the Bahujan republic. Attempts to build the Bahujan democratic project on a unified muslim minority plank remain trapped in the hindu-muslim horizon, handing a formidable edge to the Hindutva project. In many ways, the muslim minority category emerges as the Waterloo of all counter-hegemonic democratic politics. However, the articulation of the Pasmada movement has deconstructed the muslim minority category, holding immense promise for the Bahujan democracy. It has inaugurated the possibility of a new social which is neither restrained nor obsessed with the hindu-muslim binary. The terrain is open for the first time in history to articulate a new social imaginary of Alpan versus Bahujan, expanding the democratic revolution in many interesting ways. The Alpan in this social imaginary tend to privilege religious over caste identities, while the Bahujan attempt to transcend both to achieve social justice and radical democratic transformation.

When Ashraaf lock themselves behind Islamophilia vis-à-vis democracy, they alone are not deformed; what is also deformed is the very experience of democracy. The effect of such locking on people branded as non-muslim, and on the people strictly reduced to muslim identity, is inescapable. The functioning of democracy as a whole stand mutilated, and a peculiar kind of apartheid informs the social and political life. Suppose all muslims appear to be under siege today. In that case, it is precisely because Islamophilic Ashraaf discursively allied with the Brahminic Savarna, police certain boundaries to enable that siege by the latter. Pasmada men and women of all castes get permanently condemned to silence in the name of pure muslim identity. It is common to witness Ashraaf wrongs getting rubbed on the Pasmada shoulders, making it challenging to sustain democratic DPAB consolidation. Thus, Islamophilia of Ashraaf can only be described as gangrene attached to the Bahujan democracy; it cannot be avoided or wished away. It can only be removed by an aggressive surgery. Ashraaf block a clear vision of the past, present, and the bright Bahujan future.

The whole edifice of mandir-masjid, hindu-muslim antagonism is constructed on Ashraaf caste, communal and patriarchal consciousness. Savarna, on their part, seem to be intent on keeping the Bahujan out of the corridors of power and social progress, even if it means taking communal conflagration to genocidal proportions. However, the success of Hindutva till now was not guaranteed from the beginning, as it was a result of contingent decisions taken by multiple social actors prompted by the fixity of the Ashraaf pole, and so are its future fantasies. We are not condemned to be a mute spectator of the bloodbath that it fantasizes. Things can be otherwise. Everything depends on the “decisions” we are willing to take in the light of contemporary knowledge about democratic politics and our radical investment in them to construct Bahujan democracy.

Acknowledgment: I am grateful to Khalid Anis Ansari for introducing me to the philosophy of Laclau and Mouffe and the Pasmada movement, which made this work thinkable. I am thankful to the Round Table India editors for providing the space for critical thinking at the formative stages of this article. Nachiketa Mittal and Shafiqullah Anis have provided constant encouragement and support to complete this work. Yogesh Pratap Singh and Akeel Bilgrami have been the most generous supervisors of my research work. I thank Anupama Rao and Mathew Boyle for providing immediate provocation. I thank Syeda Sadaf for passionately engaging with every paragraph of this paper and asking critical questions.

References

1. Ahmad, Ayaz & Mittal, Nachiketa. 2022. “Constitutive Functions of Minority Rights and Social Justice in India,” *Journal of the Indian Law Institute*, Vol. 64: 3, (2022).
2. Ambedkar, B. R. 1946. “Pakistan or the Partition of India,” *BAWS*, Vol 08, pp. 265-268 (1946).
3. ———. 1936. “Annihilation of Caste,” *BAWS*, Vol. 1, p. 52 (1936).
4. Ahmed, Shahab. 2015. *What Is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic*, Princeton University Press.
5. Anand, Javed. 2024. “Why Muslims should have Gifted away the Babri Masjid: The Mandir that Could Have been,” *The Indian Express*, Jan. 20, 2024.
6. Anil, Pratinav. 2023. *Another India*, London: Hurst & Company.
7. Ansari, Khalid Anis. 2023. “Revisiting the minority imagination: An Inquiry into the Anticaste Pasmada-Muslim Discourse in India,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 120-147 (2023).
8. ———. 2018. “Contesting Communalism(s): Preliminary Reflections on Pasmada Muslim Narratives from North India,” *Prabuddha: Journal of Social Equality* Vol. 1 pp. 78-104 (2018).
9. Azeem, Kaleem. 2022. “फातिमा शेख का किरदार इतिहास में नजर क्यों नहीं आता?” Jan. 20, 2022. Available at: https://kalimajeem.blogspot.com/2020/09/blog-post_10.html
10. Bilgrami, Akeel. 2014. “Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment,” Harvard University Press, Massachusetts.
11. Dehlvi, Gulam Rasool. 2022. “Who to blame for the ‘sar tan se juda’ fatwa?” *SabranIndia*, October 12, 2022. Available at: <https://sabrangindia.in/who-blame-sar-tan-se-juda-fatwa/>
12. Ghosh, Papiya. 2009. *Muhajirs and the Nation: Bihar in the 1940s*, New Delhi, Routledge.
13. Howarth, David, ed. 2015. *Ernesto Laclau: Post Marxism, Populism and Critique*, New York: Routledge.
14. Ilaiah, Kancha. 2009. *Post-Hindu India*, SAGE, New Delhi.
15. Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2007. “Hindu Nationalism: A Reader,” PUP, Princeton.
16. Laclau, Ernesto. 2006. “Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 646-680 (2006).
17. ———. 2005. “On Populist Reason” pp. 129-138, Verso, London.
18. ———. 1996. *Emancipation(s)*, Verso, London.
19. Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal. 2014. “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics,” Verso, London.
20. Lorenzen, David N. 1999. “Who Invented Hinduism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 41, No. 4, pp. 630-659 (1999).
21. Mandal, Dilip. 2022. “Under BJP, Muslims are becoming new ‘bottom’ of society. It is a message for Dalits, OBCs,” *The Print*, 22 April 2022.
22. Menon, Dilip M. 2006. “The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India,” pp. 1-31, *Navayana*, Chennai, 2006.

23. Mouffe, Chantal. 1993. "The Return of the Political," pp. 74-78. Verso 1993.
24. Nandy, Ashis. 1995. "Secularism in Crisis," India International Centre Quarterly, *SPRING*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 35-64 (1995).
25. Omvedt, Gail. 1971. "Jotirao Phule and the Ideology of Social Revolution in India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 6, No. 37, 1971.
26. Pandey, Gyanendra. 1990. "The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India," *OUP*, New Delhi, 1990.
27. Patel, Aakar. 2009. "When will the Brahmin-Bania hegemony end?" *Livemint*, Aug 28 2009. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3oKmGGV>.
28. Rajagopal, Arvind. 2001. "Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism," *CUP*, Cambridge.
29. Rao, Anupama. 2009. *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, London: University of California Press.
30. Siddiqui, Firdous A. 2014. "A Struggle for Identity: Muslim Women in United Provinces," *CUP*, New Delhi, 2014.
31. Singh, Santosh. 2024. "Almost All Victims of Mob Lynching, 'Buldozer Culture' are Pasmada Muslims," *Indian Express*, 24 February 2024.
32. Teltumbde, Anand. 2020. "Hindutva and Dalits: Perspectives for Understanding Communal Praxis," *SAGE*, New Delhi.
33. Anand Teltumbde, 2018. "Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva," Navayana, Chennai.
34. Vanaik, Achin. 2017. "The Rise of Hindu Authoritarianism: Secular Claims, Communal Realities," *Verso*, London.
35. Veeramani, K. 2007. "Collected Works of Periyar E.V.R.," The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, Chennai.
36. Zaffar, Hanan and Akram, Hasan. 2021. "Anti-Muslim slogans raised in Indian capital, suspects in custody," *Aljazeera*, 10 Aug 2021, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/10/india-anti-muslim-slogans-hindu-groups-new-delhi>.