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DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38050-2\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38050-2_4)

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-198320>

Book Section

Accepted Version

Originally published at:

Binder, Stefan (2020). Religion, aesthetics, and hurt sentiment: on the visibility and erasure of a Muslim minority in India. In: Balkenhol, Markus; van den Hemel, Ernst; Stengs, Irene. The secular sacred : emotions of belonging and the perils of nation and religion. Cham: Springer (Bücher), 69-87.

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38050-2\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38050-2_4)

## Manuscript (post-print)

This chapter appears in a larger collection published by Palgrave Macmillan ([https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38050-2\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38050-2_4)), SAMPLE CITATION: Binder, Stefan. 2020. 'Religion, Aesthetics, and Hurt Sentiment: On the Visibility and Erasure of a Muslim Minority in India'. In *The Secular Sacred: Emotions of Belonging and the Perils of Nation and Religion*, edited by Markus Balkenhol, Ernst van den Hemel, and Irene Stengs, 69–87. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

# Religion, Aesthetics, and Hurt Sentiment: On the Visibility and Erasure of a Muslim Minority in India

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One of the Hindi words for secularism is *sarva dharma sambhāva*. It is often translated as 'all religions are true' and is taken to express the distinct and distinctly religious character of Indian secularism. The notion of a 'secular sacred' in the sense of an intricate entwinement of religion and secularism as well as religious and national belonging are largely considered common sense in India. At the same time, however, current understandings of nationalism, democracy, and culture in India are increasingly marked by aggressive assertions of Hindu majoritarianism, within which all religions may be equally true but not, therefore, equally Indian. Within such a Hindu nationalist framework, the secular-sacred as a modern formation of religious, communal, and national belonging becomes paradoxical and precarious for

religious minorities. In this contribution, I focus on public rituals of Shia<sup>1</sup> Muslims in the South Indian city of Hyderabad in order to explore how certain kinds of aesthetic visibility may entail forms of erasure for the sacred secular identity of a religious minority within a majoritarian representational regime. After a brief introduction of dominant understandings of Indian secularism as a historically specific formation of the sacred-secular in the first section, I present a vignette from the movie set of a recently released Telugu blockbuster, whose cinematic use of Shia religious ritual offended the sentiments of that community. Focusing on the unstable affective dimensions of Shia public religion in Hyderabad, the third section locates the cause of the movie's offence in a 'perverted' commodification of Shia aesthetics that disregards and erodes the secular-sacred formation of Shia identity.

### **Religious Communalism and the Secular Sacred in India**

Scholars and public intellectuals have stressed time and again that, in India, the secular is not the opposite of religion but of so-called communalism: a politicized form of collective identity grounded in religious belonging (or caste), which is supposed to be a distinctive feature of Indian society and its colonial history (Pandey 1992; Veer 1994; Tejani 2008). Moreover, secularism has been defined not only negatively as the opposite of communalism but also positively as a tolerant, peaceful, and celebratory form of religious diversity and co-existence. The reality of this ideal has come under serious doubt, especially since the political rise of the Hindutva movement and an increasingly chauvinist and violent assertion of Hindu nationalism since the 1980s (Needham and Rajan 2007). Debates about secularism and the

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<sup>1</sup> I follow the colloquial use prevalent among my interlocutors in Hyderabad who, when speaking in English, use the word 'Shia'—rather than Arabic derivations like 'Shi'ī,' 'Shi'ite' or 'Shi'ism'—as both an adjective and noun to refer to themselves and their community.

role of religion in Indian society usually hinge on a unanimous rejection of communalism, which designates a social formation based on a more or less calculated and harmful blurring of the boundaries between religion, politics, and culture—regardless of where and how exactly those boundaries are drawn. While earlier analyses tended to attribute such blurring to the supposedly derivative nature or flawed realization of secularism—and modernity more generally—in colonial and postcolonial India, current scholarship on secularism suggests that the production of collective identities based on religious belonging as well as discourses of majoritarianism and (religious) minoritization are intrinsic to liberal democracies and nation-states in all modern societies (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2016). Precisely to the extent that modern secularism has sought to depoliticize religion by relegating it to the private sphere and the domain of culture, it has ended up emphasizing and, in some ways, creating religious difference and inequality as a fundamental and naturalized (because apolitical) aspect of civil society.

The logic of majoritarianism underlying the working of secular nation-states was further reinforced in the colonial setting of British India, where access to formal politics was severely restricted for colonial subjects. Since the policy of “religious neutrality” after the rebellion of 1857 entailed the colonial state’s commitment to non-interference in religious matters, public religion became the primary idiom for legitimate assertions of individual and collective identities and their political interests (Freitag 1989; Pandey 1992). Thomas Blom Hansen states that the emergence of the political field in colonial India was ‘marked by mobilization around a communal antagonism so deep that one may argue that the majority of Indians who came to know themselves as political subjects did so through categories, knowledge, and stereotypes that, one way or the other and not always explicitly, were woven around communitarian symbols and related to this communal antagonism’ (1999: 209). The concept of the secular sacred as proposed by this edited volume is an apt analytical lens to describe this historical configuration, where neat distinctions between religion, politics, and

culture break down, insofar as their entanglement constitutes the very ground on which subjectivities and forms of personhood are constituted.

In this context, questions of affect and emotion are central to the workings of Indian secularism. The depoliticization of religion in British India assumed that religion had to be not only separated but also protected from politics, as recurring eruptions of communal riots (or anticolonial rebellion) would prove that it is the font of primordial and potentially violent ‘sentiments,’ which cannot be controlled rationally or politically (Viswanath 2010). As a consequence, the protection of so-called hurt sentiment has not only become part of the political rationality of Indian secularism; it has also been structured by Hindu nationalism’s majoritarian logic, to the effect that the extent to which particular sentiments are in fact protected varies with the social, political, and economic dominance of those to whom they are ‘sacred’ (Viswanath 2016; see also Jaffrelot 2008). In other words, communal belonging is ‘sacred,’ and therefore deemed capable of inspiring potentially violent reactions to real or perceived transgressions, not primarily for being couched in religious symbols, but for constituting a sense of belonging that conflates the boundaries between religion and nation, self and community, secular state and religious society, political rights and personhood.

This does not imply, however, that communal identities or imaginaries of the nation were simply given. The supposed homogeneity of religious communities as building blocks of a pluralist nation are precarious achievements, which are in need of being continuously policed and enforced (Veer 1994; Jalal 2000). Especially in view of the ‘constructedness’ of communal identities—which does in no way lessen their ‘forcefulness’ or ‘reality’—it is important to note that within majoritarian understandings of democracy and nationalism, different communities face different kinds of constraints and possibilities not only for constructing their secular-sacred identities but also for positioning them in relation to the nation.

An important aspect of the reformulation of Hindu nationalism since the 1980s into a form of 'public culture' (Hansen 1999: 4), rather than merely a religious or political movement, pertains to the production of what Arvind Rajagopal calls 'Retail Hindutva' (2001: 66). This refers to a process whereby transforming media environments allowed for Hindu visual culture and aesthetics to be severed from socially restricted ritual contexts and to be made available for public consumption across caste and sectarian divides. The commodification of religious culture enabled hitherto excluded or segregated social groups to participate in an overarching and, therefore, majoritarian Hindu culture and identity, which could be redefined as the nation and thus become a form of political participation as well. While this was intimately tied to the transformed political economy and social setup of post-liberalization India (Dasgupta 2006), Retail Hindutva could thrive on a much longer history of Hindu hegemony within anticolonial and postcolonial projects of nation building (see e.g. Uberoi 2002; Ramaswamy 2010). Especially Muslim and Christian minorities have become not only hyper-visible, when compared to the more or less unmarked and naturalized Hinduness of the nation, but also paradoxical: due to their 'foreign' origins and global networks, the principle of their belonging, that is, their religious tradition, is simultaneously the principle of their otherness and their potentially suspect national loyalties (Jalal 2000; Sherman 2015). After 1857, and especially in the wake of Partition, Muslims were therefore thrown back onto an 'abject citizenship' (Sherman 2015: 12), since an explicitly political mobilization as a Muslim community would risk undercutting its legitimacy by raising the specter of extraterritorial loyalties towards either Pakistan or the Middle East, as well as the specter of communalism as an illegitimate form of the secular sacred.

To a large extent, public debates on communalism and majoritarianism focus on the question of Hindu–Muslim relations. While other religious minorities (Christians, Sikhs, Jains, etc.) may be conspicuous by their absence, the case of Shia Islam is ambivalent because

it is often hidden in plain sight within the category of Muslim minority. In fact, Shia Muslims<sup>2</sup> have consolidated their sense of identity as a distinct community primarily in relation to the intra-religious majority of Sunni Muslims, rather than in contradistinction to Hinduism (Jones 2012). The following ethnographic vignette is intended to provide an entry point to the contemporary dynamics of sentiment that structure Shia identity in its specific location as a ‘double minority’ in Hyderabad.

### **The Precarity of Shia Visibility: Between Hurting Oneself and Being Hurt**

‘Ok! Now, very serious; I don’t want to see any smiles! Lots of grief and pain. Three, two, one, action ... Cut!’ yelled the director for the 136<sup>th</sup> time, and the slightest sigh of frustration flowed through the plywood set of Hyderabad’s Old City erected on an open field around thirty kilometers outside of the city. We were in the midst of an action scene for a major Telugu blockbuster movie. Each take lasted only a couple of seconds and showed the film’s hero, famous ‘mega power star’ Ram Charan Teja, thrashing a villainous antagonist against the dramatic backdrop of a Shia Muharram procession, the most important event in the ritual calendar of Shias in Hyderabad. Hero and villain were flanked by a cordon of bare-chested

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<sup>2</sup> The category of ‘Shia’ is, of course, by no means internally homogeneous and is itself structured by majoritarian configurations. By speaking simply of ‘Shias,’ my own contribution engages in a process of sectarian subsumption, where the specificities of various groups of Ismailis, for example, are occluded by the dominance of a majority of Twelver-Shias in Hyderabad. This also demonstrates the fractal nature of majoritarianism, and the Twelver-community is itself fragmented in different sectarian—and unequally ‘large’—factions of *ūsūlī* and *akhbārī* (further subdivisions could be retraced at ever more granular levels of ethnographic specificity).

Shia mourners (*mātamdār*) engaged in *zanjīr mātam*, a spectacular and highly contested form of ritual self-flagellation with scourges made of blades attached to a metal chain, while the whole shot was framed by a colorful cinematic imagination of ‘Muslim’ onlookers. Squeezed under a small arcade of a fake storefront in order to escape the midday sun, I was watching the scene together with a group of around twenty youngsters from the main Shia neighborhood in Hyderabad’s Old City. Dressed as Shia mourners, we were waiting for our scene; we were, it would turn out, waiting in vain.

The previous day, my friend Ali<sup>3</sup> had asked me if I wanted to come along to an educational event. He and some other youths from the neighborhood had been invited to perform a Shia mourning ritual for a group of students—or visitors, nobody knew exactly—in order to teach them about Shia religion. When we met the following day, rumor had it that we would be part of a documentary about different ritual practices of various religious communities in India. As more and more youngsters were gathering, however, it transpired that instead of a documentary, the two coaches provided for us would be taking us to a movie shoot of a commercial Telugu film. The shoot was already in full swing when the two crammed buses arrived at the bustling movie set. On entering the premises, we were earnestly warned against making any form of recording or photo, which would cost us the 500 rupees we had been promised as pay. A woman in charge of casting began splitting us into two groups by selecting the twenty tallest and most ‘light-skinned’ ones among us (me included) as the main group of mourners, while the rest was allocated to some or the other group of extras. After dressing up—or rather undressing—as ‘typical’ *mātamdār* with bare chest, white cotton pants splattered with fake blood, a black shawl wrapped around the waist, and thick *surma* (kohl) under our eyes, we began waiting.

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<sup>3</sup> Name changed.



During the ten hours we spent at the set, we were led three times into plywood Hyderabad, only to be told after some time to continue waiting outside, as the current scene was taking more takes than expected. At around six o'clock in the evening, it had become apparent that our scene would not be shot that day. Despite being invited to return the next day, nobody was willing to do so. In fact, after the initial excitement of being part of a cinema movie had died down, the group of 'Old City boys' became not only increasingly bored but also irritated and finally angry while wasting away the day. Initially, it only seemed a bit absurd to have two bus-loads of Shias from one of the most important centers of Shia culture in India transported to a movie set in order to have them observe one of their most sacred ritual practices being simulated by a number of 'actors from Chennai,' as my friends from the Old City sarcastically referred to the Telugu extras performing *zanjīr mātam*. The director's repeated instructions to make serious faces and look grieved seemed to jar uneasily with the deep and distinctly visible scars that actual blades had left on the chests and backs of the Shia youths watching, half-naked and uncomfortable, from the sidelines. 'Look how they stare at us,' commented Ali during one of the times we were led onto the set, 'it's because we are the real Shias.'

By the end of the day, the mood had turned sour and the group of young Shias were outraged and offended; it had become evident that in a fight scene, the hero slashes his enemy to death with one of the blades used during *zanjīr mātam*. This, Ali explained, was entirely inappropriate, as these blades are not at all weapons and are never wielded against other people, least of all as murder instruments; they are objects used exclusively on one's own body in a ritual context meant to commemorate, grieve, and participate in the acts of martyrdom through which Imam Hussain and his followers and family sacrificed themselves for the sake of Islam and a just society in the battle of Karbala in 680 CE. The young men felt offended by this misappropriation and were deeply worried about what the audience of Telugu cinema and 'other religions' would think about Shia religion when seeing that scene. After all,

Shia religion is already famous—or rather infamous—for its spectacular rituals of public self-mortification that appear extreme and unsettling to many outsiders (including the majority of Sunni Muslims) and are subject to controversial debate regarding their Islamic legality among Twelver-Shias themselves (more on this below).

I had initially interpreted the anger and outrage of my Shia interlocutors as a matter of authenticity and as a question of who had the right—or the knowledge, ability, and skill—to ‘correctly’ represent Shia religion in a popular mass medium, yet it seemed to point to a more fundamental problem of visibility. In fact, Ali and many others who refused to return the following day to the set were relieved that they were not given the ‘chance’ to represent themselves, as their inclusion in the scene would have made things worse. A contorted depiction of their ritual instrument in a Telugu movie was bad enough; but if the elders of their community ever saw them in such a film scene, they would be scandalized by the fact that their own youngsters were part of such nonsense, condoning and authenticating it, as it were, through the presence and visibility of their bodies. ‘They would kill us!’ Ali exclaimed. Feeling already humiliated and neglected throughout the day (‘They didn’t even provide tea for us,’ someone remarked bitterly, pointing out the felt lack of minimal signs of appreciation and courtesy), we were furthermore made to wait another two hours after we had gotten onto the buses that would take us home to the city. Apparently, someone had taken a selfie and we could not leave before all legal matters had been sorted out. The men who had organized our trip started scolding us, urging us to immediately delete any and all pictures we might have taken. They were disappointed at such reckless and embarrassing behavior, which would reflect very badly on the whole community; it took indeed a few days of negotiations to have the money we had been promised as pay finally reach the Old City.

It is important to note that the hurt sentiments of the young Shia men were caused by a perceived mishandling of an artefact used in a ritual practice that has come to be iconic for but

also contested among Shias, rather than any actual or explicit representation of the ritual as such; at the time of the shoot, we had known nothing about the film's plot and its actual representation of Shia religion (the film's title, *Vinaya Vidheya Rama*, and teaser were released only two months later). What elicited anger was rather a perceived carelessness and insensitivity about what the ritual blades mean to Shias and what kind of image about Shia religion their misuse in a deadly fight scene could, potentially, evoke.

In an inquiry into the concept of offensive pictures, Christoph Baumgartner (2018) follows philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt in arguing that pictures that offend do so because they are perceived to violate an image about which people have come to 'care' in a way that incorporates those pictures into their very identity and sense of personhood (see also Mahmood 2009). Such cared-for images are not just pictures to which people relate as external objects, but which have become part of how people relate to themselves and their world; their power to offend is therefore not only a cognitive process but 'touches' the embodied self in a material and sensorial sense (Verrips 2018). In the case at hand, the careless cinematic use of ritual blades for self-flagellation as a casual murder weapon wielded against another gains its offensive touch precisely by transgressing and, in fact, inverting, a crucial limitation regarding the kinds of bodies those blades may legitimately touch. In order to fully grasp the offensive implications of this inversion—and its casualness—it is necessary to place the practice of *zanjīr mātam* in its larger ritual, historical, and representational context in contemporary Hyderabad.

### **Shedding Blood: Pious Embodiment and Precarious Representation**

The Hyderabadī Twelver-Shia annually commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and his followers during a mourning period ('*azādārī*') of 68 days, starting on the first day of the Islamic month of Muharram. *Mātam* is a central part of mourning practices and refers to

public or private recitations of dirges accompanied by ritual crying and forms of self-mortification, ranging from rather soft rhythmic claps on the chest, to choreographed styles of intense two-handed chest-beating (*sīnah-zanī*) performed by male mourning associations (*anjumān*), to spectacular forms of “bloody” (*khūnī*) *mātam* with different kinds of knives and blades (Pinault 1992; Howarth 2005). The arguably most important and well-known ritual event in the Shia calendar is Ashura, the day of Imam Hussain’s martyrdom on 10th of Muharram, when a large procession attended by thousands of people, including Hindus and Sunnis, is organized through the streets of the main Shia quarters in Hyderabad’s historic Old City. This procession, which traditionally includes forms of *zanjīr mātam*, was re-enacted during the movie shoot.

While the clerical establishment in post-revolutionary Iran has explicitly condemned and prohibited *khūnī mātam* as heterodox innovation (*bid’ah*), Shia authorities in Iraq and especially in South Asia tend to at least tolerate it as an expression of popular devotion with varying degrees of legal or scriptural legitimacy. Besides religious doctrines regarding the integrity of the body and the impurity of blood, a major argument raised against *khūnī mātam* concerns its potential to make Shia religion appear archaic, uncivilized, or fanatical to external observers, who may be unfamiliar with its theological, devotional, or historical foundations (see Pinault 2001: 29–56). These concerns are not entirely unfounded, as many of my (non-Shia) interlocutors in Hyderabad talk with a sort of recoiling fascination about ‘*azādārī*’ as that quite unfathomable thing that Shias do; however, many people know rather little about what is actually going on, besides the fact that, on the Day of Ashura, blood and tears will flow in the streets of the Old City for the sake of Imam Hussain. ‘*Azādārī*’ and especially *khūnī mātam* on Ashura have become emblematic for the social and temporal (‘archaic’) otherness of the Shias as a distinct community, yet they also constitute the most important trope for integrating them into the time-space of the nation. The striking aesthetics of Shia ritual provide the grounds for making Shias a maybe problematic but nonetheless

distinctly recognizable—or rather displayable—part of India’s religious pluralism. Their specific history in South Asia furthermore locates them firmly within the discourse of India’s ‘composite culture’ as the historical foundation for the nation’s secular unity in diversity (Jones 2012).

Especially in popular histories of Hyderabad, the ‘catholic’ nature of Muharram commemorations and the continuous patronage they have received by a diverse range of Shia, Sunni, and secular, that is, post-independence, governments are widely considered to be hallmarks of the City’s contribution to the supposedly intrinsic tolerance and secularism of India’s Indo-Persian composite culture. In academic research, as well as everyday discourse, communalist perceptions of ‘*azādārī*’ as an exclusively Shia event are often understood as a historical departure from its erstwhile cross-communal nature and appeal (Hyder 2006; Freitag 2007; Jones 2012). Among Shias, this registers in a pervasive temporal regime of nostalgia, which maps narratives of religious decadence onto the community’s socio-economic decline and minoritization in post-Partition India, as well as the material deterioration and ghettoization of the Old City, as the historical center of Shia social and ritual life (Mirza 2017).

Many of my Shia interlocutors emphasize and indeed welcome the continuing participation of other religious communities in Ashura commemorations, which they perceive as testimony to the universal scope of the ethical model and spiritual power of the Imams and the Prophet’s family (*ahl-e bait*). Popular narratives around the battle of Karbala and Imam Husain’s martyrdom revolve around a moral paradigm of ‘*husaini ethics*’ or *husainiyyat* (Ruffle 2011: 5; see also Deeb 2009), whose gender and age-specific ideals of moral conduct encode values of sacrifice and steadfastness in the face of injustice and adversity. Precisely because the moral paradigm encoded by the battle of Karbala has been open to both revolutionary and quietist interpretations, it has been a powerful conceptual and moral

resource for negotiating different forms of political behavior and, especially in South Asia, national belonging. In the context of Indian communalism, quietist interpretations of ḥusaini symbols of martyrdom as a form of self-sacrifice for the sake of community (rather than an incitement to revolt) have provided an apt aesthetic idiom for a depoliticized and inward-facing secular-sacred identity of Shia and Sunni Muslims alike (Freitag 2007).

As one of the most spectacular and affectively charged forms of ‘*azādārī*, *zanjīr mātām* has become an overdetermined and unstable symbol, which conjoins diverging temporalities and indices of locality, as it negotiates a Shia minority identity that oscillates between otherness and belonging. *Zanjīr mātām* may be subject to anachronizing devaluations as irrational ‘archaism,’ which locates it in a religious and ritual time outside the ambit of modernity and nationalism. However, it can also be anchored in the historicity of the nation, insofar as it indexes the nostalgic past and precarious present of India’s composite culture. The localness of that culture, however, can be challenged within a Hindu nationalist framework, where its Indo-Persian origins evoke notions of foreignness and the specter of Muslims’ extraterritorial loyalties. This is further complicated by reformers within the Shia community, who orient themselves toward religious authorities in the Middle East, especially Iran, and oppose quietist interpretations of ḥusaini ethics as self-sacrifice. These reformers tend to align themselves with a larger (Sunni) reformist discourse and historicist notions of a ‘pure,’ original Islam (Mirza 2014). They contest the legitimacy of *zanjīr mātām* by interpreting it not as a sign of the archaism of Shia Islam but as a symptom of its syncretic contamination by an idolatrous and superstitious Hindu environment.

*Zanjīr mātām* clearly demonstrates the precarity of the secular-sacred as a form of identity and citizenship for the Shia minority: as a spectacular sign of extraordinary pious commitment, which literally inscribes itself as scars into the surface of the body, it is a powerful way to embody a Shia identity that hovers uneasily between national belonging and

otherness. The majority of Shias, ‘traditional’ as well as ‘reformist,’ are acutely aware of this precarity, which manifests most forcefully in a sort of anxiety around media representations of ‘*azādārī*’ in general and *zanjīr mātam* in particular. Most of my Shia interlocutors not only tolerated me as an outsider at their rituals but actively encouraged my participation and welcomed my interest in their community. At the same time, many a conversation started with a request to tell what, if anything, I actually knew about Shia religion, followed usually by an inquiry about what ‘gain’ (*fā’idah*) I, and more importantly my superiors and those who funded my research, hoped to get out of this project; ‘academic knowledge’ often seemed to be a not entirely satisfying or credible answer. Regardless, my insistence on wanting to learn and understand was favorably contrasted with a superficial curiosity in the sensational appearance of their rituals, which was often illustrated by stories about outsiders, especially documentary filmmakers, who simply come, record, and leave.

There was, however, no general objection or sense of censure with regard to witnessing or making recordings of religious events. Even though it was made plain that it would take a lot of time and effort for me to even begin penetrating the spiritual and philosophical depths of Shia religion, it was nonetheless expected that I would be recording videos and taking photographs. My reluctance and perceived tardiness in doing so seemed curious to many people. Again, my answer that, in terms of technical quality, there was already plenty of well-produced documentation available—especially on the internet—seemed unsatisfactory. Despite the aforementioned discourse of nostalgia and religious decadence among Shias, my interlocutors also tend to report a drastic increase in ritual activity since at least the 2000s. This has been accompanied by continuously expanding private as well as commercial practices of visual and audiovisual mediations through local TV channels and especially social media. All large, public ‘*azādārī*’ events can be watched through multiple live streams on Youtube and Facebook, but also many organizers of smaller, private mourning gatherings hire people to record and document their rituals.

Such media practices can be understood in reference to the important role of public ritual for collective self-assertions within the secular-sacred framework of Indian communalism but also with regard to an economy of spiritual merit and social prestige characteristic of a ritual life that depends largely on private patronage. However, I want to focus here on the fact that the simultaneous desirability and anxiety surrounding mediated representations of controversial ritual practices like *zanjīr mātam* turn out to be linked less to actual processes of consumption than to the larger social circumstances and conditions of production within a secular-sacred public. The images commissioned and produced by the Shia community are hardly distinguishable from those made by outsiders as far as their ‘content’ is concerned. More importantly, their open accessibility leaves them always vulnerable to being ‘de-contextualized’ and ‘re-contextualized’ (see Bauman and Briggs 1990) in uncontrollable, potentially adverse ways, once they circulate on the internet and in other media environments (like journalistic or anthropological texts). As Ali told me during the movie shoot: ‘Our religion is very famous... but, unfortunately, not in a good way.’ In the conclusion, I want to return to the shoot of Vinaya Vidheya Rama and further unpack what I mean by social conditions of production and how they regulate the affective impact of media images in relation to issues of agency and power.

## **Conclusion**

I argue that the outrage and hurt sentiment experienced by my Shia interlocutors during the movie shoot, as well as the more general anxiety surrounding mediations of ‘*azādārī*’ and *zanjīr mātam*, are tethered less to explicit messages and media texts than the current conditions of their production. Rajagopal’s concept of ‘Retail Hindutva’ (2001: 66) captures an important aspect of those conditions, namely the possibility of national belonging and political participation via the consumption of a commercialized aesthetics of Hindu religion



refigured as the cultural foundation of the nation. At a fundamental level, this process of refiguring the nation has a gendered dimension, insofar as Hindu nationalist discourse has premised the wellbeing and ascendancy of the nation on the ‘recuperation’ of Hindu masculinity, which in turn required an ‘expunging’ of a threatening Muslim Other through both actual and symbolic acts of violence (Hansen 1996: 138). Next to print media, television and cinema have been the foremost vehicles for the nationalist aestheticizing of a majoritarian Hindu identity by either marginalizing, excluding, or vilifying Muslim men in representations of the nation (for an overview of Muslim themes in Hindi cinema see Dwyer 2006a: 97–131). While film scholar Rachel Dwyer (2006b) cautions against conflating the predominance of Hindu practices in Hindi film with Hindutva ideology, especially in the absence of explicitly anti-Muslim texts, it is important to also pay attention to how Retail Hindutva’s ideological and affective force operates beyond the level of explicit media texts.

Indian cinema’s relative resistance to overtly Hindu nationalist and anti-Muslim messages is often explained by a confluence of state censorship, the uncertain commercial viability of radical stances for a risky and capital-intensive enterprise like cinema, and the disproportionately large number of Muslims working in the film industry. However, the example of *Vinaya Vidheya Rama* suggests that Hindu majoritarianism does not necessarily operate by vilifying a Muslim Other; rather, it may ‘expunge’ his potentially threatening presence by reducing it to a ‘merely’ aesthetic background in the service of Hindu masculine power. *Vinaya Vidheya Rama* opened in cinemas in January 2019 during Sankranti, one of the most important Hindu festivals and holidays in Andhra Pradesh and thus a prime season for film releases. The film received overall crushing reviews, especially in the English press, for a weak and unimaginative story relishing in toxic masculinity: the plot revolves around a Hindu hero, Rama (Ram Charan), who single-handedly kills hordes of criminal goondas in extravagantly violent feats of martial prowess in order to protect his family from a terrifying Bihari crime lord, who has come in conflict with Rama’s eldest brother, an upright election

commissioner. While the fight scene against the backdrop of Shia ritual made it into the trailer and constitutes a climactic moment just before the movie's intermission, the Shia ritual itself is merely a backdrop and has no narrative significance whatsoever: it functions as an aesthetic device to heighten the dramatic impact of the over-the-top action sequence. Neither the main character wielding the ritual blades nor the, as far as narrative goes, expendable bodies on which they are put to use are marked in any perceptible sense as Shia. In the cinematic universe, Shia characters were not implicated in the 'perversion' of self-sacrifice into killing spree; they were arbitrarily introduced for the sole purpose, it seems, of providing a dramatic ambience and a "sensible" reason for a spectacular murder weapon to be at hand.

It matters little that we did not know the plot at the time of the shoot because, as I suggested above, the hurt sentiment of the Shia youths was not caused by any explicit misrepresentation of their ritual but by the apparent carelessness with which the choreography of the fight scene tapped into the unstable, ambivalent, and controversial symbolism and affective force of *zanjīr mātam*. Ultimately, not only the 'real' Shias watching from the sidelines of the set but also their 'fake' cinematic avatars ('actors from Chennai') in 'plywood Hyderabad' were dispossessed of any form of representational agency—whether positive or negative—as they were reduced to a dramatic aesthetic surface in the service of a narrative agenda unconcerned with the predicaments of secular-sacred Shia identity. I argue that the main cause for offence was not really the evocation of a 'bad image' of Shia religion but a sort of 'non-image.' The fight scene evokes an almost ostentatious disregard and disinterested carelessness for Shia matters, as it decontextualizes, harnesses, and expropriates the aesthetics of a spectacular and precarious ritual performance of Shia masculinity as a dramatic ambience that enhances the virility and virtuous anger of the film's Hindu hero (for the cinematic trope of virtuous anger in its relation to Hindutva ideology, see Rajamani 2016). This process of sovereign expropriation was condensed most pithily in the perversion of ritual blades into

murder weapons. It was also mirrored in a diffuse sense of denigration and expendability, which the group of young Shias experienced throughout their stay at the movie set.

The young men may have set out from the Old City with a sense that they were being invited because of their expertise and authenticity to perform *mātam*, but upon arriving on set, they were demoted rather abruptly from teaching others about Shia religion to being a mere background—something of which anybody who was ‘tall’ and ‘fair’ enough, including a white foreigner like myself, was apparently considered capable. When some of the youth started complaining about the problematic fight scene, they were told that they were free to leave any time (which would have been rather difficult, given that there was no public transport to and from the set). It became clear that their time, presence, and expertise—valued at 500 rupees per head—was expendable and, indeed, not that valuable after all; at the end of the day, it was made plain to us that the potential leak of one selfie of the set was worth more than all our time combined. What did have value, though, was the aesthetic effect of Shia symbolism—to the extent that it was included in the movie’s trailer and promotional material.

The concept of the secular sacred captures a socio-political configuration where public and communal forms of religious identity become not only compatible with but foundational for belonging—or having value—in modern, secular nation-states. However, the seeming ‘compatibility’ of the secular and the sacred is undercut by the logic of majoritarian nationalism, which requires religious minorities to embody a religious identity that simultaneously becomes the principle of their exclusion from the nation. In this contribution, I approached this constitutive precarity in the context of a popular Telugu ‘mass film,’ where the visibility of a religious minority identity engenders its simultaneous erasure. In its phantasmal cinematic rendering, *zanjīr mātam* was divested from its core function as a symbol for the precarious, secular-sacred identity of Shia Muslims; it was consumed, as it were, by Retail Hindutva.

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