



BOOK REVIEW

Analyzing an Emerging Genre: H-Pop and Contemporary India. Review of Kunal Purohit (2023). *H-Pop: The Secretive World of Hindu Pop Stars*. Harper Collins

Swapna Gopinath

Symbiosis Institute of Media and Communication, Pune, India

Contemporary India is in a state of flux, as it undergoes paradigm shifts in its identity as a nation, the foundations of the nation being re-examined and re-defined, as a new identity emerges distinctly. In this new state, Hinduism as a religion is evolving into a political force, named Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism. Political Hinduism is widely considered and defined as Hindutva ideology, emphasizing on the Hindu pride for a nation identified as the Hindu nation. As the new nationalistic sentiments gain fervor among the public, it is imperative to analyze the cultural forces that endorse and circulate those ideologies across the state. Kunal Purohit's work titled *H-Pop: The Secretive World of Hindu Pop Stars*, probes into these creative spaces, especially that of popular music and traces the evolution of a particular form of music, which he calls a sub-genre, Hindutva Pop.

The book comes with recommendations from renowned India scholars like Christophe Jeffrelot, Aakar Patel, Rajdeep Sardesai, and Ramachandra Guha. The work is divided into three sections, thus focusing on three different artists who have been actively contributing to the growth of Hindutva politics. *H-Pop* discussing the impact and popularity of this emerging genre of music in India is a refreshingly new work and offers an insightful commentary on the new India. The work is a timely intervention that explores the world of popular music in India. The work is structured around interviews over three years of interaction, and they are attached to the text, as endnotes available by scanning the QR code.

The research began from the realization that boisterous music seems to play a considerable role in altering the character of political processions, turning them into violent ones, often directed at minority populations, especially Muslims in India. Purohit identifies and calls this new genre of music H-Pop or Hindu Pop. He

traveled with these H-Pop artists, Hindu artists who managed to grow widely popular. The work traces the immense popularity of the genre through three case studies where the author studies minutely the semiotics of the lyrics, the rhythmic patterns, and its larger implications in the nationalist Hindutva discourses. He picked three artists: first, a young female singer, Kavi Singh, who uses contemporary events to create content intended to fire up the spirit of the right-wing supporters; second, a young poet, Kamal Varma, who writes poems that reimagine history to suit the Hindutva discourses; and the third, is an older content creator, Sandeep Deo, who sees himself as a trailblazer developing new platforms for the Hindu warriors to express themselves, to train young minds in the Hindu thought and to offer alternative epistemological frameworks, founded on the Hindu ideologies.

Part I titled “Killer Beats, Poison-Laced Words” studies the work of Kavi Singh, a young woman who has recorded more than 80 songs, and her verses are highly polarizing. Purohit contextualizes her music using the genre of Hate music that originated in the West. He traces India’s tryst with Hindutva ideologies using her songs, her lyrics, and her popularity. He identifies the major tropes that establish the political Hindu positioning, through a process of othering of Muslims, and the absolute distrust of the Muslim, harbored by a large section of the Hindu population in contemporary India. Kavi Singh has four and a half million followers and is famous on various digital platforms, where she places herself as a “public persona, as a Hindutva crusader” (p. 73). Her prolific music production is targeted at the people who challenge the hegemony of the political Hindu and hence her work becomes significant, as Purohit explains in his work.

Part II of the work is titled “Weaponizing Poetry: Kamal Agney,” and describes the journey of a Hindutva poet Kamal Varma. Poets like him are integral components of the “Hindutva ecosystem” (p. 80), which blends pop culture and music with political agenda setting. Kamal is a young poet who seeks to revisit history, contextualizing the historical significance of epic texts like *Ram Charit Manas*. Poets like him have their poems structured to address the causes foregrounded by the Hindu right, and they perform at poetry recitals. They also ensure that they are present on digital platforms, disseminating toxic content. Purohit gives examples of video streaming platforms like *Namokaar*, which fails to capture the paradigm shifts in social discourses. Hindutva poetry, with its deep impact on socio-political environs, ignores the major political turmoils like Farmers’ Protest and turns away from issues like Muslim hatred, Kashmir, Ram temple, and so on.

The number of such singers and poets is on the rise, characterized by the use of aggressive words, “fiery rabble-rousing Hindutva kavi/s (poet/s)” (p. 145), loud and arrogant tonality, and where the artist and the ideology blend into one. Purohit explicates this journey using these artists and delves closely into the selective authenticity that defines H-Pop artists, as they seek to divert the attention of their audience from the real issues that plague the nation.

Part III is about 46-year-old Sandeep Deo, founder of a publishing house called Kapot, who calls himself a frontline warrior, and the section is titled “Fighting a Cultural War: Sandeep Deo”. In this segment, Purohit brings into focus the influence

of diaspora Indians as well, their active involvement being mostly in the form of financial support. Deo publishes his content on YouTube¹ channels like *India Speaks Daily*² and similar e-commerce sites. His work becomes a case study for the manner in which H-Pop artists see “publishing as a crucial ally ... to popularize Hindutva ideology” (p. 229) through “sensationalistic and bombastic rhetoric,” “graphic imagery,” and “use of bright colors” (p. 240). All three have certain commonalities, where these artists foreground the rightwing discursive patterns mostly seen in the hate for Islam, food choices, and the contested land in Ayodhya where Ram Mandir was constructed over the demolished mosque, Babri Masjid.

H-Pop focuses on music in the Hindi language that is spoken in the Northern part of India, while there are a multiplicity of languages spoken in the rest of India. Therefore, the popularity of this music, the artists, and the target audience are exclusively from central Hindi-speaking India, thus confining the scope of the work. The text is also journalistic in nature, but Purohit manages to capture the socio-political and economic dimensions of a significant and ubiquitous component of popular culture that has become an example of “Propaganda-as-pop culture” (p. xix) in contemporary India. But, above all, it manages to become a voice of the skewed concept of decoloniality advocated by the Hindu right, as the right misuses the idea of decolonial in their nationalist discourses. Purohit rightly perceives the “moral and political project” (p. 226) of the Hindutva leaders, attempting to shape the sensibilities of future generations through stories and propagate a sense of morality rooted in Hindutva ideologies, regressive in multiple ways. He succeeds in cautioning the reader against the paranoia, the Hindutva agenda of creating “homegrown, nationalistic alternatives to global digital platforms” (p. 244) and “starting knowledge clinics” (p. 252) with the possibility of spreading the message of toxic hatred to the small towns and distant lands within the nation.

¹ YouTube™ is a trademark of Google Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

² <https://www.youtube.com/@IndiaspeaksdailyISD>