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The Securitization of Love Jihad

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Abstract: The concept of ‘love jihad’ has typically been studied within the context of feminism, nationalism, or religion. However, a singular approach fails to recognize the interconnected impact that each of these has on the development of India’s security policies. This article analyzes how the archetype of the dangerous Muslim male is used to shape India’s securitization strategies. This paper argues that these policies reflect Hindu paranoia of decreasing dominance vis à vis Muslims. This will be explored within three contexts. First, it explores how the perceived threat of an increasing Muslim population shapes state-level and national policies. Second, it explores how the threat of love jihad has shaped India’s policies with its borders and neighboring countries. Third, it examines the international impact of the securitization of love jihad. This paper will demonstrate that at the foundation of these policies is a fear of Muslims strategizing to increase their population via intermarriage and migration. The perceived threat of love jihad has been increasingly utilized as a Hindutva campaign tactic to promote fear and create support for increased securitization policies both domestically and internationally.

Keywords: love jihad; securitization; South Asia; India



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1. Introduction

Nationalism is deeply embedded in gendered constructs. From lady liberty to *Bharat Mata* (Mother India), the idea of the nation as feminine, or even divine, and in need of external protection has been utilized throughout the world (Mayer 2012). The need to protect the innocent feminine from a brute external threat serves as a mobilizing force for many men and women supporters alike (Sethi 2002). Throughout the world, religious nationalist movements effectively implement exclusionary policies that frequently target minority religious groups (Omer and Springs 2013). This protection is often done to protect some real or imagined, often feminized, version of the nation. In India, Christians (Bauman 2015) and Muslims have been especially vulnerable.

Although all religious minorities in India are vulnerable to targeted violence, the increased targeted rhetoric of Muslim male is often constructed as a primary threat. Not only has he been othered to the extent that he does not belong within his own country, but he is also framed both as an internal and external threat to the nation (Anand 2011). This framework has been exacerbated through the increasingly politicized and securitized perceived threat of *love jihad*.¹ Love jihad is gaining increased international attention from academics (for example see Rao 2011; Strohl 2019; Tyagi and Sen 2020). However, there has been minimal discussion about the securitization of love jihad and how it impacts India’s security policies both within and beyond its border.

Within India, the concept of love jihad generally means love is strategically used by male Muslims to trick unwitting Hindu (and increasingly Christian and Sikh) girls into marriage, marry them, convert them to Islam, and have multiple children and ultimately increase the Muslim population of India until Muslims dominate. In some cases, the

perpetrators of love jihad may be accused of selling the targeted women to international terrorist organizations such as ISIS (ANI 2021).² Although the conspiracy may seem far-fetched, the systematic propagation of this concept, primarily by the right-wing Hindu nationalist forces (Hindutva), has led much of the Hindu population to accept this threat as material (India Today 2021). The narrative around love jihad has penetrated so deep that India's security policy seems to have become informed by such beliefs.

We argue that love jihad has been securitized and shapes not only domestic but international policies too, especially toward bordering Muslim countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan. Securitization theory argues that domestic political actors help transform seemingly non-security related issues into security concerns. These concerns are used as justification to enact, often draconian, measures that the actors claim will help protect the nation. While what becomes securitized may seem like a natural extension of domestic security concerns, securitization theory argues that it is not the case. Instead, the rhetoric of political actors frames certain issues in a way that requires state action toward a threat that may have otherwise been deemed of minimal concern.

This paper proceeds in the following manner, first it examines how love jihad is being securitized domestically through its framing of Indian Muslims as a threat. Second, it discusses how the threat from non-Indian Muslims at India's borders with Bangladesh and Pakistan shapes India's regional security approach. Third, it examines the broader international impact of India's securitization of love jihad. Finally, it summarizes the arguments and outlines suggestions for future research

2. Securitization Theory

Securitization theory is a model that explains how the notion of 'security' is a constructed concept in international relations whereby non-security related political issues get transformed into 'securitized' issues. Simply put, this theory portends the notion that national threats are not a 'natural given' but carefully designated by the policy makers/politicians (Wæver 1993). Specific social and institutional powers help transform issues from the domain of normal 'political issues' to 'securitized' issues. Securitizing an issue renders it in the domain of an emergency issue-to be dealt beyond the confines of the normal political processes. Security issues are therefore, not simply 'out there' rather they are constructed as such by the securitizing actors. Securitization theory contends that security should be seen as a 'speech act' whereby an issue can be constructed as an immediate threat in the imagination of a significant proportion of the population (Wæver 1993). Therefore, many types of issues, including non-traditional ones such as love jihad, can be deliberately staged as security threats if they are strategically 'constructed' as one by the securitizing agent in popular imagination.

2.1. Securitization of Love Jihad

Some scholars have termed the fear of replacement by the other as a 'demographic fever dream' (Gökarksel et al. 2019, p. 566). Others have called it 'demographic nationalism' (Melegh 2016) or 'The Great Replacement' (Davey and Ebner 2019). As anxiety about demographic shifts or "replacement" increases, political actors and their supporters engage in 'national mythmaking' and frame their concerns as part of a broader geopolitical battle, where the state must securitize their external borders and carefully police their internal territory (Van Evera 1994). This type of rhetoric has been widely utilized throughout global right-wing movements to frame the fear of demographic decline and promote natalism among their in-group (Bergmann 2016; Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018). Scholars have termed such weaponization of sexuality and reproduction as reprosexuality (Warner 1991, p. 9). When reprosexuality is securitized, the state must secure its boundaries in order to win its demographic battle. In the case of India, this demographic threat is both internal (Indian Muslims) and external (Muslims at the borders). This anxiety has helped nurture the securitization of love jihad (Lahiry 2019).

The terminology of love-jihad has been systematically securitized by right-wing forces spearheaded by the Sangh Parivar,³ which includes the BJP, India's primary Hindu Nationalist party. The fear of the Muslim other has helped create increased polarization in an already divided society (Jaffrelot 2019, pp. 194–211). The basic idea behind this strategy has been the patriarchal trope of seeing women's bodies as a colonizable territory in need of saving (Banerjee 2003). Scholars such as Anand (2011), Khatun (2018), and Gupta (2009) underline how the concept of love jihad helps in the construction of the Hindutva imagination of a mythical past, and perception of the majority Hindus as a historically marginalized victim at the hands of a minority group that is threatening Hindu demographic dominance. Although the use of the term love jihad is relatively new, the concept is not. The preoccupation with an external threat toward Hindu women (Gupta 2001) has been very much present in the Indian discourse long before the most recent manifestation.

During the early 20th century, Hindu nationalist groups such as the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangha (RSS), among others, were influenced by the writings of early Hindu nationalist thinkers such as U.N. Mukherji, who wrote a pamphlet entitled "Hindus: A Dying Race" (Mukherjee 1909). In the pamphlet, he warned that a demographic shift was underway as low-caste Hindus convert en masse to Christianity and Islam. He also noted that Muslim men were marrying Hindu widows, which is typically a taboo in Hinduism. He warned that if the Hindus did not unite like other religious communities in India, they would eventually become the minority (Mukherjee 1909). Hindu women, therefore, need to be saved from the prying eyes of Muslim men (Anand 2011). This popular depiction of the vulnerable Hindu women has continued in the 21st century and even revitalized through popular media depictions (Piedalue et al. 2021).

2.2. Love Jihad in Modern Context

Although elements of the 'endangered Hindu woman' and the 'violent outside others' have been present since at least the colonial era. Love jihad as a term became popular in 2009 in the southern state of Kerala, when two women were supposedly abducted, forcibly converted, and allegedly coerced into marriage with Muslim men (Rao 2011). This case led to immediate intervention on behalf of the state, although the state found no conclusive evidence of love jihad and instead said it was part of a campaign to spread religious hatred and false propaganda' (Mahanta 2014). The Kerala High Court, however, later declared another interfaith marriage between a Muslim man and Hindu woman as invalid because of 'love jihad' (The Tribune 2017). The husband filed an appeal with India's Supreme Court whose related investigation found no prosecutable evidence of love jihad (Ahuja 2018). The Kerala case was key in the securitization of love jihad in the popular perception of Indians. Such cases became increasingly referenced in the consolidation of Hindutva forces and led to increasing polarization (Aga et al. 2021).

Since 2014, the BJP and Hindutva groups have scaled up efforts to warn about love jihad. States throughout the country such as Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and Gujarat began passing anti-conversion laws popularly known as 'love jihad' laws that sought to criminalize religious conversions that happened following marriage. Police organizations also increasingly investigated alleged instances of love jihad. The BJP and Hindutva organizations began to mobilize voters around the age-old fear of demographic shift (Strohl 2019). During the 2019 elections, BJP officials and their allies campaigned on the urgent threat within and at the borders by potential infiltrators and radicalized Muslims (Chandra 2019). If something was not done to address these security lapses, Hindus faced uncertain doom. The tactic was successful at mobilizing the party's base. In 2019, the BJP gained what many would consider a super-majority (Ziegfeld 2020). Once in power, the party secured their ability to pass measures that would protect *Bharat Mata* from internal and external threats.

Despite appearing to be a domestic political issue, love jihad took an international tone from its inception. Following the love jihad arrests in Kerala in 2009, pamphlets began

being distributed at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University (Das 2010). Within the pamphlet, the text warned that Pakistani terrorist organizations were financing love jihad efforts by giving money to Muslim youths to entice young Hindu women throughout the country to help wage jihad in India. The pamphlet warned that 'Jihadi Romeos' would 'trap' Hindu women, brainwash them, convert them, marry them, and breed 4 children in a short period of time (Das 2010, p. 381). Thus, love jihad quickly became framed as both an internal and external threat that needed immediate attention.

The following sections will explore more specifically how love jihad became securitized in different contexts: at the state level, nationally, regionally, and globally. The cases explored in the following sections are interconnected. Purported cases of love jihad within various Indian states help shape both local and national policies aimed at tackling love jihad. The fear of Muslim migration from bordering countries alongside the perpetual threat of love jihad helped shape and possibly rationalize India's domestic and regional policies, such as the NRC and CAA and the removal of article 370 in Kashmir. India's policies also created backlash from some international Muslim allies.

3. The Internal Threat

Indians of all faith backgrounds generally oppose inter-religious marriage. A 2016 survey by the Social Attitudes Research for India revealed that nearly 70% of Indians from all religious backgrounds oppose inter-religious marriage (Social Attitudes Research for India (SARI) (2016). This finding is not surprising considering that inter-religious (and inter-caste) marriage have long been discouraged. However, this discouragement of inter-religious marriage has since transformed to an increasingly broad and securitized political and cultural issue.

As of 2021, eight states across India have implemented some form of an anti-conversion law or proposal that prevents any form of religious conversion based on coercion (Majid 2020). Inter-religious marriages, while not illegal, have been targeted using anti-conversion laws to suggest religious conversions, particularly of Hindu women, were coerced by Muslim men. Five states—Uttar Pradesh (Seth 2020), Madhya Pradesh (Press Trust of India 2021a), Himachal Pradesh (Press Trust of India 2020), Gujarat (Langa 2021), and Uttarakhand (Times of India 2020)—have made specific anti-conversion laws while at least three others—Karnataka (Press Trust of India 2021b), Assam (Parashar 2021), and Haryana (Press Trust of India 2021c)—have expressed intent to pass similar legislation. Several additional states have also brought forth high-profile cases of alleged love jihad into the court system, including Kerala and Karnataka (Press Trust of India 2021b).

Speeches by Hindutva politicians and activists have been quite successful in conveying love jihad as a threat to the Hindu population. A 2021 survey found that a majority, 54%, strongly believe there is a widespread "love jihad" conspiracy to convert Hindu women to Islam and 60% supported laws against it (Karvy 2021). The survey helps demonstrate the successful impact of the speech acts by various Hindutva leaders. Love jihad went from a niche term to a widely believed conspiracy in less than a decade. To help elucidate how these threats materialized, the following sections demonstrate the securitization process of love jihad at the state level.

3.1. Securitization of Love Jihad at the State Level

The love jihad discussion in India has primarily centered on India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh has a long history of communal violence and religious polarization between its 80% Hindu and 20% Muslim population (Brass 2003). In November 2020, the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance went into effect. This ordinance, popularly referred to as the love jihad law, essentially bans religious conversions for an interfaith marriage (PRS Legislative Research India 2020b). Yogi Adityanath, the Chief Minister of UP and a Hindu monk has been able to build upon communal tensions within the state since coming into power in 2017. The UP "Love Jihad" Law was framed as an urgent security issue requiring immediate action (The Wire 2020b).

Within one month of going into effect, 51 arrests occurred on the suspicion of love jihad (Mishra 2020). Weddings between Hindu women and Muslim men became increasingly interrupted by police and Hindu vigilante groups such as the Bajrang Dal (Bhardwaj 2020). Many legal experts have questioned the soundness of UP's law saying it not only side steps existing judicial norms but also violates basic constitutional principles (Shah 2021). Retired Supreme Court judge AP Shah highlighted the fact that unlike ordinary criminal cases where the burden of proof lies on the prosecution, in this instance, the burden of proof is on the accused to prove it is not illegal (Shah 2021).

Although Uttar Pradesh has received the most focus, many other India states have implemented similar ordinances. Madhya Pradesh, India's 5th most populous state, also created an ordinance known as the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Ordinance in 2020 (PRS Legislative Research India 2020a). Like the Uttar Pradesh law, the burden of proof lies on the accused to demonstrate that religious conversions after marriages were not coerced (Ray 2020). Though state officials maintain this law has been enacted to prevent religious conversion by fraud, misinterpretation, allurement, or use of threat or force, a statement by the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh regarding this the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Ordinance suggests otherwise:

“A new era begins in Madhya Pradesh. We will never allow anyone to toy with the security and future of our daughters. Our daughters will be empowered and they will contribute to building an Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India)” (Times of India 2020).

Since its passage, the law has specifically targeted religious minorities. In the first three months since the enactment of this ordinance in Madhya Pradesh, all 21 registered cases accused religious minorities, 15 Muslim and 6 Christian men, of coercing Hindu women to convert (Siddique 2021). A senior advocate in the MP High Court highlighted the misuse of this law and alleged that it is being used to target minorities. ‘The act has empowered fundamentalists who are reaching out to families of those who either eloped or had a fight with their partner of a different religion and luring them to give false statements and getting cases registered under the anti-conversion act’ (Sahu 2021).

Himachal Pradesh has also enacted a similar stringent Himachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act 2019 which among other things prescribed jail up to seven years for conversion by force, or for marriages solemnized for the ‘sole purpose’ of adopting a new religion. (Press Trust of India 2020). In Uttarakhand, Chief Minister Tirath Singh Rawat met with VHP members in Haridwar and underlined the issue of love jihad in his state and highlighted his government's resolve to stop it (Verma 2021). In Orissa, a woman's parents petitioned the Supreme Court to save their daughter from love-jihad after she married a Muslim man and converted to Islam (Times of India 2021). Additionally, the Supreme Court sought responses from the Chandigarh administration and the governments of Jammu and Kashmir and sent notices to them, respectively, regarding alleged cases of love jihad (Times of India 2021).

Table 1 summarizes how widespread the love jihad conspiracy has become. At least 8 states (out of 28 states) have enacted legislation or proposals banning religious conversion related to marriage, laws popularly referred to as “love jihad ordinances.”

Table 1. States with Anti-Conversion Laws or Proposals.

| States with Laws | States with Proposals |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| Uttar Pradesh | Haryana |
| Madhya Pradesh | Karnataka |
| Himachal Pradesh | Assam |
| Uttarakhand | |
| Gujarat | |

The state-level cases explored here demonstrate how elected representatives, police officers, and judges have taken swift action to enact laws that will attempt to defeat what they consider a viable threat to the majority Hindu community. While the anti-conversion laws seen in several states can quite clearly be tied to the perceived threat of love jihad, additional national acts in conjunction with local laws speak more widely about the broader attempt to tie together women's safety with citizenship and securing borders.

3.2. Securitization of Love Jihad at the National Level

In 2019, multiple laws were passed across India that may disempower Muslim citizens throughout the country. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the revocation of article 370 in Kashmir are three key examples of exclusionary laws. All came into effect following the BJP's successful 2019 election campaign, which heavily referenced these specific issues (Jaffrelot and Verniers 2020). The CAA expedites Indian citizenship for Hindus and non-Muslim minorities, including Buddhists, Christians, Jains, Parsis, and Sikhs from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan (Sufian 2020). Muslims who cannot demonstrate citizenship, however, will not have the same privileges and may instead be held in detention centers (Malik 2020).

The NRC will provide a register of all documented citizens within the country and is based upon a previously enacted register used in the northeast state of Assam to address the concern of illegal Bangladeshi migration (Sufian 2020). Because many poor Indians lack proper documentation, BJP home secretary Amit Shah reiterated that 'all Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain refugees won't have to leave the country, they will get Indian citizenship and enjoy all the rights of an Indian national' (Press Trust of India 2019). Muslims were noticeably absent from Shah's guarantee of protection.

In Kashmir, decades of terrorism and border clashes with Pakistan have allowed the government to justify and expand military presence and further securitize Kashmir. The original autonomy given to Kashmir, though never fully realized, was removed by the 2019 abrogation of article 370. This abrogation paves the way for a new type of Hindu settlements that may fundamentally alter the demographic balance in the state. One Indian diplomat even called for Hindu style settlements in Kashmir (Al Jazeera 2019).

These laws may not initially seem related to love jihad. However, combined, these laws work with existing state-level structures to help consolidate the Hindu majoritarian status by limiting Muslim migration, removing Muslims without proper documentation, and changing the population dynamics of India's only Muslim majority state. The CAA, NRC and the policies toward Kashmir are part of the broader attempt to transform the demographic landscape of the country. Together, the NRC and CAA will remove Muslims from the country that are deemed illegal, fast-track the citizenship of non-Muslims, and reduce the autonomy of India's only Muslim majority state. By allowing non-Muslim Kashmiris to now purchase land in the region, many Kashmiri Muslims fear these changes will transform the region to majority Hindu (Al Jazeera 2019). However, Kashmir's shared border with Pakistan has allowed India to defend its heavily militarized presence, particularly by claiming to fight an existential threat at the borders.

4. The Threat at the Borders

The NRC and CAA are often framed around addressing the internal problem of Muslims living in the country illegally. However, at its core, the NRC and CAA address both the internal and external anxieties of the Hindutva movement. Internally, it will remove those, Muslims specifically, who cannot demonstrate their generational history within the country through proper documents (Sufian 2020). Externally, it will prevent future migration of Muslims from neighboring countries. In order to make India a Hindu homeland and prevent the perceived demographic shifts, these actions must take place and they must be urgently addressed. However, the citizenship laws speak more broadly to the concerns at the core of the Hindutva movement- an anxiety of future domination.

Islamic terrorism and the alleged threat awaiting at the borders has been utilized to manipulate fear and support border securitization policies (Singh 2009). Combined, the internal and external threat accelerates anxiety in the population and creates an urgency to act. First, the internal infiltrators must be addressed, and then future infiltrators must be stopped. This populist approach has shaped India's foreign policy approach with its neighbors, especially under the BJP (Singh 2009). The specific link between Bangladeshi migration and the threat of love jihad in the Hindutva community is increasingly evident in India's northeast states bordering Bangladesh.

In the northeast state of Tripura, Bangladeshi migrants have been accused of both love jihad and cow slaughter by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in 2018 (Deb 2018). Tripura, which has an 856 km border with Bangladesh, has been the site of recent development projects, such as the Bharat Bangla Maitri Bridge, which connects Tripura with Bangladesh. Tripura's VHP President stated, without evidence, that the migrant workers were engaged in an organized jihad and defilement of Hinduism. These concerns prompted his call to the administration to "publish a list of photo identity cards for all workers who are engaged on contractual basis at these brick kilns so that no communal flare-ups happen" (Deb 2018). In 2020, Hindu nationalist organizations took to the streets and blocked a bridge near the border. The protestors, which numbered in the hundreds, demanded laws such as the one seen in Uttar Pradesh, prohibiting inter-faith marriages and curbing instances of love jihad (Barman 2020). The bridge protest was spurred by nine recent allegations of love jihad in the state. Although the alleged cases were not tied to Bangladeshis, the group ultimately conflated Bangladesh, love jihad, and the bridge into one. Tripura's Minister of Agriculture, Transport and Tourism, who belongs to the BJP, even addressed protestors at the site and informed them that they will pursue the cases because "nobody is beyond the law" (Panday 2020).

In Assam, which also borders Bangladesh, BJP members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) called for the return of a 'kidnapped' Hindu woman from Assam who married a Muslim man, converted to Islam, and moved to Bangladesh. The MLA warned that "Hindu girls have been targeted by the radical Muslim boys to fall in love with them and then kidnap them to Bangladesh illegally. Once trapped, they are forcefully converted to Islam and then engaged in various illegal activities such as arms smuggling as well as drug peddling" (The Sentinel Assam 2018). One alleged victim of love jihad in Assam was said to have been forced across the border by a Bangladeshi man that entered through an unfenced border in Tripura. Once across the border the Hindu woman allegedly converted to Islam, wore a burqa, and considered Bangladesh her new home (The Sentinel Assam 2018).

In a memorandum by select BJP MPs from Assam, they allege that love jihad is taking place in Assam on behalf of Islamic extremist organizations based in Bangladesh who target college women (Roy 2018). The memo uses the instance of love jihad to call attention to the lax border policies with Bangladesh that allow 'infiltrators' to enter into India. Further it calls attention to the misuse of visas that allow Bangladeshis to use the guise of business and tourism to hide their 'jihadi activities' while also taking jobs from the youth (The Sentinel Assam 2018). The memo ends with a call for harsher policies that strictly monitors any Bangladeshi Muslims coming to India for business, tourism, or healthcare. The state of Assam is frequently used to serve as a warning about the potential demographic future for the rest of India. As of 2020, Assam is approximately 40% Muslim, the largest percent Muslim population after Kashmir (Deka 2021). Calling attention to the threat toward Assamese identity, Assam's Chief Minister from the BJP declared, "Hinduism is 5000 to 6000 years old. We all are children of Hindus. Even the Muslims in India were children of Hindus some generations ago" (Karthikeyan 2021). Such framing rationalizes the *Ghar Wapsi* campaigns, which seek to "re-convert" Muslims and Christians to Hinduism (Rajeshwar and Amore 2019).

This fear of the threat from Bangladeshis and love jihad has also been encapsulated in popular and social media. In a 2021 Assamese TV serial, *Beharbari Outpost*, Assamese Muslims of Bengali origin are depicted infusing drugs among the youth, annihilating

Assamese culture and ethnicity, uprooting indigenous people, and raping daughters and daughter-in-laws (Das and Chakraborty 2021). On social media, the link between the two is also clearly elucidated. One private Facebook group with 22,000 members, entitled the “Love Jihad Prevention Committee,” states its goal is to protect Hindu women in India and Bangladesh from alleged love jihadists who want to “capture West Bengal’s land and the wombs of its women” (Nayak 2021). The group frequently posts screenshots of supposedly Muslim men, often from Bangladesh, saying how they plan to carry out their love jihad plot against Hindus. Another public Facebook group entitled “Girls—Beware of Love Jihad,” with over 20,000 members posts alleged cases of love jihad with the pictures of the Muslim male “Romeos” who have lured Hindu woman into relationships. The name and the details of the men are often posted along with a narrative describing how the plot took place. In other posts, members provide updates about the victims of love jihad, often referencing a tragic end such as the woman’s involvement in terrorism or murder by her partner. The group’s coinciding Telegram page provides frequent daily updates with calls to action for group members.

Elite politicians have mobilized Assamese Hindus by nurturing an anxiety around ‘illegal Bangladeshis’ infiltrating Assam. In an interview with the Wire, Angshuman Choudhary, a researcher with the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies expressed how this language becomes increasingly prominent during election season (Das and Chakraborty 2021). During a March 2021 BJP rally in Assam, Home Minister Amit Shah compared Hindu migrants from Bangladesh to Muslim migrants. When speaking to a crowd at an election rally in West Bengal, Shah discussed the different types of citizens in the Indian state of West Bengal. The ‘infiltrators’ are those who are labeled as illegal migrants from Bangladesh. In contrast, the Matuas and Namshudras, lower caste Hindus who migrated from Bangladesh into India from the partition onward, are referred to as refugees who should get citizenship (Methri 2021). Shah claims the Hindus coming to India from Bangladesh do so for altruistic/humanitarian reasons whereas the Muslims migrate due to nefarious purposes, specifically love (and land) jihad (Pakrasi 2021). Like many migrants and people from lower castes the Matuas and Namshudras do not have citizenship papers (Chaudhuri 2020). However, Shah has made it clear that Hindus do not need such papers. During a 5 July 2020, campaign rally in Kolkata, West Bengal Shah claimed the following “The Bharatiya Janata Party government will not force a single [non-Muslim] refugee to leave the country” (Shah 2020). Non-Hindus, however, will not be so fortunate, he continued: “Refugees would be granted citizenship, while infiltrators will be thrown out” (Shah 2020).

Hindutva forces envision India as a homeland for Hindus. Therefore, religion alone qualifies for citizenship. A poor Muslim who has lived in India for generations would be subject to deportation whereas a recent Hindu migrant from a neighboring country would qualify based on religion. This sentiment is reflected in the election season rhetoric in Assam, where love jihad and its related ‘land jihad’⁴ are treated with the utmost urgency by BJP leaders. During a rally in Assam, Home Minister Shah made it clear that the fight for Assam’s identity and future was under way. Thus, when Shah speaks of Muslim political leaders, such as Assam’s Badruddin Ajmal, the threat of love jihad and the future of Assam’s identity are mentioned within the same context. During a 27 March 2021 rally in Assam, Shah said the following (translated from Hindi):

Tell me—can Badruddin Ajmal ever be the identity of Assam?...Congress and Badruddin Ajmal’s alliance means that if they come to power again, then they will fill Assam with infiltrators. Do you want a flood of infiltrators to come to Assam?...“The BJP’s manifesto has several items. But the most important amongst them is that the BJP government will work towards bringing laws against love jihad and land jihad...No matter how the Congress party tries, I assure you we will not allow Badruddin Ajmal to become the identity of Assam” (Shah 2021).

The fear of a Muslim becoming representative of Assam’s identity reflects the nature of the threat. Within one speech, Shah highlights the threat from the domestic Muslim (Badruddin Ajmal), the threat of migration (infiltrators), and the threat of love jihad

(Saha 2021). Announcing his intent of bringing laws against love jihad demonstrates the prioritization and securitization of love jihad within the BJP agenda and its specific link to the internal and external threat from Muslims. Securitizing the threat of migration and tying it to love jihad builds upon the anxiety facing many Hindus within the region about their female relatives being victims of love jihad. Consequently, the BJP, and affiliated parties and organizations, are able to gain support for their stricter migration policies, increasingly securitized borders, and exclusionary policies.

The religious nationalist vision of India as a Hindu nation means that the concern for Hindu women has transnational flows and extend beyond India. Social media posters frequently refer to what they call 'conversion factories' where Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan are forced to convert (Khattak 2021). Even in the UK, Hindu and Sikh organizations have accused Pakistani men of targeting Hindu and Sikh women for 'love jihad' (Leidig 2019). The UK love jihad comments came after UK's former secretary Jack Straw said Pakistani men in the UK target vulnerable young white women (Rana 2011). Drawing attention to cases beyond India builds upon a narrative of an assault upon the broader Hindu nation, not just at its borders, but globally.

By drawing attention to young Hindu women that have married Bangladeshi Muslim men and converted to Islam, it provides a dire warning to the Hindu community about the broader demographic challenge taking place, especially in border states. Consequently, if borders are not secured and Bangladeshis are not monitored and/or deported, more Hindu women will be lost. Love jihad is seen as a battle taking place on the frontlines of the demographic war. Broadly speaking, if immediate action is not taken to address love jihad, Hindus may eventually lose their women and become minorities in their own country.

5. The Distant Threat

As love jihad became securitized it has created a type of 'two-level games.' Two-level games in the international security literature are considered the negotiations between states that must keep both the international players and the domestic audience satisfied (Putnam 1988). In India, the political leadership must craft its foreign policies with both the international community and domestic audience in mind. For India, this means the state must craft its position carefully, not isolating potential Muslim ally countries while simultaneously satisfying its domestic audience. Laws that are deemed overly Islamophobic risk isolating international Muslim allies. However, failure to take a strong stance against alleged Islamic extremism within the country, including love jihad, risks losing the Hindutva base.

5.1. A Bourgeoning Christian–Hindutva Alliance?

Actions and events carried out by militant Jihadi groups in distant countries, in conflict zones such as Syria or Iraq, feed into existing stereotypes of Muslims as violent. As such, global jihadism helps reinforce the threat developing at home. With the rise of such groups there is the concern of domestic Muslims using love jihad to marry Hindu women and then traveling abroad to fight in a 'jihad'. This concern is categorically different from the one seen with Bangladesh, of Muslims from abroad coming into India to commit various types of 'jihad' within India. Instead, there is the concern of domestic Muslims and Muslims in bordering countries using love jihad to marry Hindu women and then traveling to fight for radical groups such as ISIS. When four couples from Kerala, two of whom were recent converts to Islam, were reported to have traveled to Syria to fight with ISIS, BJP Kerala Chief K Surendran framed it within the context of love jihad: "ISIS is targeting Hindu-Christian girls, especially students. Why are they sending couples to Syria if there is no love jihad?" (ANI 2021).

Although Christians have historically faced persecution by the majority Hindu community, increasingly there has been a growing alliance between certain Christian communities and Hindus. In Kerala, Christians have vocally expressed their concerns about love jihad targeting their community. Viral Whatsapp messages among Christians in Kerala,

who are 20% of Kerala's population, spoke about Keralite Christian girls being sold to ISIS by local Muslims (Minj 2019). These concerns are not just being spoken by members of the community, but their leaders too. For example, the Kerala Catholic Bishops Council's commission for social harmony and vigilance stated that there had been 2868 victims of love jihad from 2006–2009 (Minj 2019). The Syro-Malabar Church even issued a statement warning that Christian women are being targeted through 'love jihad' (Khan 2021). One Keralite Christian mentioned how love jihad had become an international phenomenon, with local men coercing non-Muslim women into marriage only to sell them as sex slaves in the Middle East. In his words, "Muslim fundamentalists [are] taking our girls to Syria" (Khan 2021). Another Keralite Christian mentioned how global issues impact local issues "The global issues combined with the 'love jihad' cases have been very upsetting, so of course we are in fear for our women" (Khan 2021). This response indicated the growing concern of 'love jihad' among Kerala Christians. Although Christians throughout India have also been targeted by love jihad laws, the rhetoric used by the Christian leadership in Kerala suggests a potential bourgeoning Hindutva-Christian alliance, at least in Kerala.

5.2. International Responses to Love Jihad

Since its inception, love jihad has been contextualized as a broader conspiracy against India by foreign nationals against India. Arvind Bhadoria, a cabinet member for the state of Madhya Pradesh, explained that love jihad is a foreign funded conspiracy (Sabarwal 2020). Who exactly these foreign nations are, is not always clear. Popular Hindutva sympathetic news agencies such as Zee News have run segments exploring how love jihad is a Pakistani funded conspiracy that works through Indian Islamic organizations such as Popular Front of India and Student Islamic Movement of India (Zee News 2020). Despite these claims, official police investigations (SIT) into inter-religious marriages have found no foreign funded conspiracy (Pandey and Alavi 2020). Other non-contiguous Islamic countries with problems of jihadi groups are much less frequently referenced. Instead, Pakistan remains the primary threat.

Despite internal policies and rhetoric that may be labeled Islamophobic, economic relationships with Gulf countries have nonetheless improved during Modi's tenure (Kumaraswamy 2019). Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia have proposed massive energy and industrial investments of \$70 billion and \$100 billion, respectively (Ahmad 2020). Modi has also been awarded several of the highest civilian honors in the region. In 2019, he was awarded the UAE's "Order of Zayed" and Bahrain's "The King Hamad Order of the Renaissance" (Jaffrelot and Rizvi 2020). In 2016, Saudi Arabia conferred "The King Abdulaziz Sash" to PM Modi (Jaffrelot and Rizvi 2020). These close ties to the Gulf countries are key given the large presence of Indian migrant workers in the region (Ahmad 2020). Indians are the largest expatriate communities in UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar (Ahmad 2020). Inflammatory words or actions toward Muslims in India threaten to harm this relationship, and there's evidence that is occurring with some countries.

Increasingly, India's policies toward Kashmir and the NRC and CAA have created tensions with some Muslim countries including Turkey, Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia. When asked if India's policies were making it lose friends, Foreign Minister S Jaishankar responded "Maybe we're getting to know who our friends really are" (Bhaumik 2020). In the wake of the CAA-related riots in New Delhi, Iranian leader Ali Khamenei called on the Indian government to "confront the extremist Hindus" and to stop the "massacre of Muslims," which may result in India's "isolation from the world of Islam" (Jaffrelot and Rizvi 2020). In 2019, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad expressed sharp criticism of India's policies following the passage of the CAA and the removal of Kashmir's special protections. Mohamad said that India had "invaded and occupied" Kashmir and that the government was "taking action to deprive some Muslims of their citizenship" (Jaffrelot and Rizvi 2020). Turkey's Erdogan has also increasingly expressed concern about India's relationship with Kashmir, especially since the removal of Article 370 (Jaffrelot and Rizvi 2020). Likewise, Indonesia formally summoned a meeting with India's ambassador to discuss the riots after

pressure from Islamic organizations within the country to “take diplomatic measures and be involved in any efforts to bring peace to India” (The Wire 2020a). Indonesia’s minister of religion condemned the actions of Hindu rioters saying the violence by some Hindus “did not reflect the teachings of Hinduism but is the result of an extreme understanding held by some Hindus about their own religion” (The Wire 2020a). The statements released by the Indonesian government were not as critical as others, however. Indonesia’s foreign ministry released a statement saying it had complete confidence in India’s ability to control the riots.

India’s policies meant to create domestic security and appease Hindutva sentiments within the country have created certain international costs. Despite these diplomatic costs, India has been able to balance its two-level games. Because the domestic Hindutva audience is not overly threatened by Islamic Gulf countries and even sees the relationship as an economic benefit, India is able to strengthen relationships at a large economic gain and limited political cost. In fact, India’s partnership with countries such as Saudi Arabia and UAE may be seen as a long-term strategy to counter Pakistan. In return, India’s harsh policies toward its borders with Bangladesh and Pakistan alongside exclusionary policies targeting domestic Muslims have acquiesced most concerns from the Hindutva electorate.

6. Conclusions

This article has expanded upon the understanding of love jihad within the context of security studies. Using the lens of securitization theory, this article demonstrates how the idea of love jihad has transformed from a conspiracy theory to legislative action in several states. This transformation occurred with the help of coordinated speech acts and media campaigns among Hindutva politicians and forces throughout India. The threat of love jihad has been contextualized and securitized at different levels including at the local/state, national, regional, and international levels. This framing has come with certain international reputational costs, such as criticism from allies such as Malaysia and Turkey, but has not prevented strengthening relationships with others, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The rhetoric of the BJP alongside various Hindutva activists has made it clear that Muslims are considered a threat. The threat of crime, terrorism, and coercion of daughters into marriage have produced a trifecta of fear to the Hindutva electorate. The electorate consequently seeks to have their fears legislatively assuaged and thus diminish the powers of Indian Muslims. Accordingly, as securitization theory suggests, the state must quickly act to reduce the threat and for doing so the issue at stake must be tackled through emergency measures. This enables the executive to frame extraordinary laws/rules as necessary even if they contradict the existing legal norms. In India, such securitization strategies were pursued both at internal and external level.

At the local level, the state offered various ordinances against love jihad to minimize Hindu girls within the state being coerced by Muslims into inter-religious marriages and conversion. However, this does not stop the broader threat of additional Muslims entering the country, increasing their population, causing crime, and by extension stealing their daughters. Thus, at the national level, laws such as the CAA and NRC were seen as needed. In combination with these and stronger laws at the border, the Hindutva electorate could be comfortably assured through security optics that the external threat looming at the border has thus been effectively addressed. While the Islamophobic policies and rhetoric have had some reputational costs for India, overall, India has still been able to maintain, and in the cases of Saudi Arabia and UAE, strengthen its relationship.

Future research can help expand upon these findings by conducting additional in-depth analyses such as an examination of the rhetoric used in different settings. For example, is love jihad referenced more frequently by politicians in states with a stronger Hindu electorate that does not require minority votes to win? Do politicians use love jihad rhetoric more frequently in states with a history of communal violence? How do they choose which settings to emphasize the threat of love jihad? How does the rhetoric targeting

the South Asian Muslim population compare to Muslims in countries outside the region, such as in the Gulf? Such an analysis would help expand the understanding of how love jihad rhetoric is securitized in specific settings and its geopolitical consequences. Hindutva politics are transforming the local and global political atmosphere, policy decisions will continue to be guided by issues, such as love jihad, that are deemed important by the Sangh Parivar and Hindu electorate. It is critical to understand how such conspiracies may transform how India engages politically and the subsequent geopolitical consequences. Overall, the understanding of love jihad and securitization is still in its nascent stages; however, the topic has only become increasingly popular and will likely continue to shape the Indian political environment for the foreseeable future.

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Notes

- ¹ In the introduction of this special edition, Frydenlund and Leidig (2021) make an important distinction between Love Jihad as Indian trope versus love jihad as an analytical category.
- ² In the famous Hadiya case, in which the Kerala High Court annulled the marriage on the complaint of girl's father, the petitioner (woman's father) main contention in his second petition to the Court, specifically underline his fear that her daughter may end up being an ISIS. The Kerala High Court accepted the petitioner's plea and annulled the marriage which was revoked by the Supreme Court of India.
- ³ Sangh Parivar refers to the umbrella of key Hindu nationalist organizations such as Vishwa Hindu parishad, Bajrang Dal, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, Bharatiya Kisan sangh, Bharatiya Janata Party See Jaffrelot, Christophe, *The Sangha Parivar*, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- ⁴ Land jihad refers to the allegation that Muslims have settled illegally on Hindu lands.

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