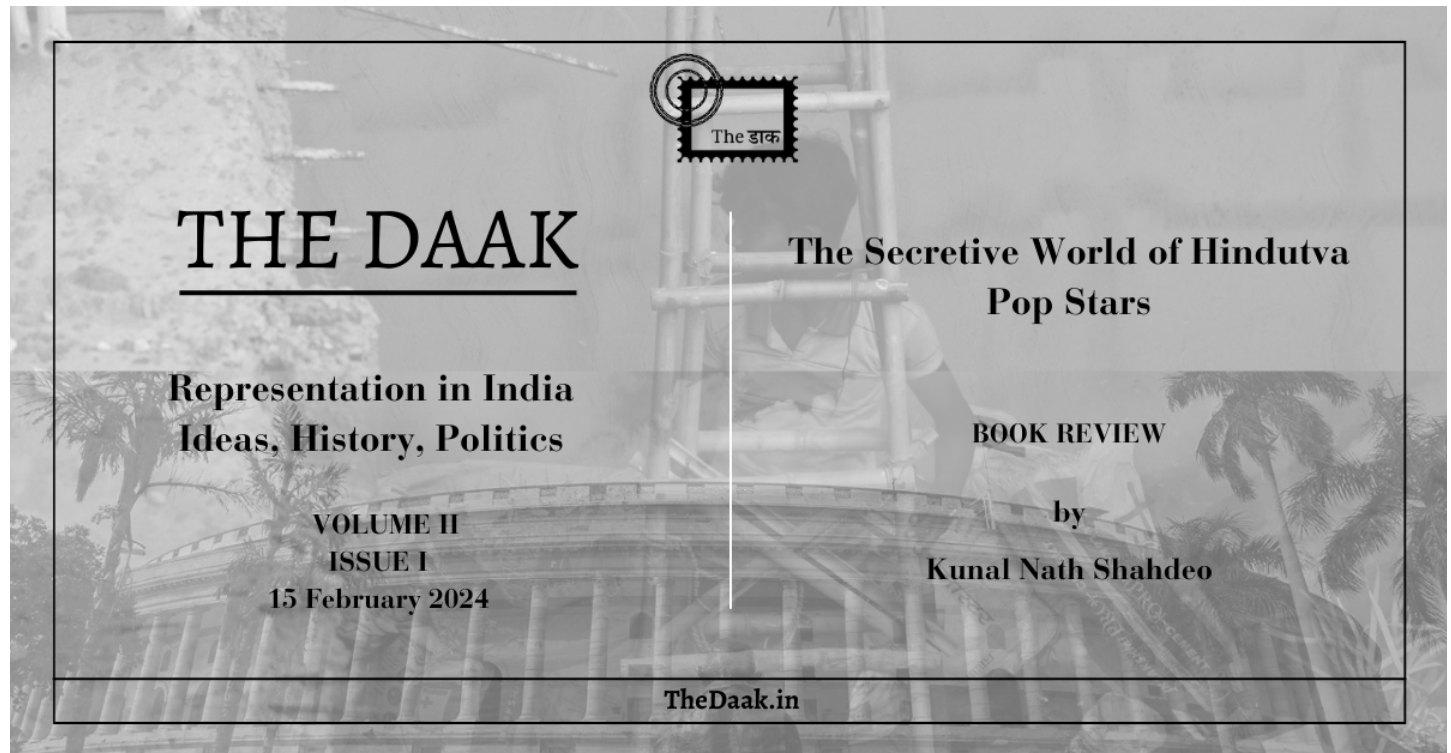


# H-Pop: The Secretive World of Hindutva Pop Stars

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**H-Pop: The Secretive World of Hindutva Pop Stars by Kunal Purohit, HarperCollins India, Paperback, Published: 22 November 2023, 306 Pages, 14 x 2 x 22 cm, ISBN:9789356995826, Rs. 499.**

By [Kunal Nath Shahdeo](#)

During my fieldwork in 2019, which centered on observing *Ramnavmi* processions in Ranchi, Jharkhand, a notable departure from traditional practices during this annual event caught my attention. Unlike previous years, the musical accompaniment took on a distinct Electronic Dance Music (EDM) genre featuring provocative lyrics against the Muslim community. This departure from the usual Hindu devotional or Bollywood songs heightened the energy and fervor of the crowds, contributing to palpable tension during the procession. The atmosphere became charged with emotion as slogans of *Jai Shree Ram* echoed, accompanied by spirited dancing and the wielding of sticks and swords. This musical shift, coupled with provocative lyrics, created a backdrop that fueled communal sentiments. The next day's news reports detailed communal tensions in various locations of Jharkhand during the *Ramnavmi* celebrations, attributing the provocative songs as a primary catalyst for the ensuing communal conflagrations across the state.

This incident wasn't an isolated occurrence. In 2019, on the outskirts of Gumla, Jharkhand, a mob lynching incident took place following a *Ramnavmi* procession. The incident served as a catalyst for journalist and researcher Kunal Purohit, known for his reportage on hate crimes throughout India, to undertake the authorship of 'H-Pop: The Secretive World of Hindutva Pop Stars' to delve into the

phenomenon of Hindutva pop. Driven by a commitment to understanding the underlying factors of mob lynching and communal tensions, the author conducted extensive research over a period of five years. This effort resulted in a timely examination of the intricate connections between popular culture, propaganda, and the escalation of communal tensions. The author accomplishes this by delving deep into and unveiling the 'secretive' world of Hindutva popstars.

The strategic deployment of popular culture for propagandistic ends is an established historical practice, underscored by instances such as the instrumental role played by Radio Rwanda in the Tutsi genocide (McCoy, 2009), as well as the pervasive influence wielded by Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, during the Nazi era (O'Shaughnessy, 2017). These extreme cases underscore the efficacy of popular culture as a potent medium for the dissemination of ideological narratives. In the Indian context, Akshaya Mukul's scholarly work, 'Geeta Press and the Making of Hindu India', meticulously delineates the pivotal role of print media, particularly Geeta Press, in shaping and consolidating Hindu communal consciousness (Mukul, 2015).

The book's contemporary investigation marks a departure from historical paradigms, delving into Hindutva popular culture within the internet and social media era. In this age of unprecedented information dissemination, coinciding with the ascendancy of Hindutva as the predominant political ideology, the book unravels the phenomenon of 'banal Hindutva' (Harris, Jeffrey, and Corbridge, 2017). Here, propaganda seamlessly masquerades as popular culture, integrated into the daily lives of the common populace. The study navigates the nuanced manifestations of Hindutva within the contemporary socio-cultural milieu, addressing complexities shaped by ubiquitous internet-mediated communication channels.

In the exploration of H-Pop, the book captures the potency of each instance of its consumption, emphasizing how it reinforces Hindutva beliefs, provoking rage and fear against the perceived enemy. This scholarly work provides an in-depth narrative of Hindutva popular culture, particularly its impact on small towns in the Hindi heartland. The book elucidates the role played by Hindutva pop in propagating Hindutva ideology through the intertwined narratives of three central protagonists—a singer, a poet, and a writer/publisher—all engaged in what is termed a 'cultural war' aimed at establishing Hindutva hegemony (p.182).

The book strategically revolves around three emblematic figures, each representing a distinct yet ideologically related form that has significantly bolstered the Hindutva juggernaut. Profiles of Kavi Singh, a Hindutva pop musician, Kamal Agney, a firebrand Hindutva poet, and Sandeep Deo, a YouTuber and publisher of Hindutva literature, are meticulously examined. The book is thoughtfully structured into three parts, each devoted to one of these influential artists, highlighting their collective impact in amplifying the influence of Hindutva ideology within the linguistic confines of Hindi. This deliberate choice underscores their collective contribution to shaping and reinforcing the formidable presence of Hindutva within the cultural and linguistic landscape of the Hindi heartland. The author

hints at the potential influence of Hindutva pop in other regions of the country, particularly in western India. However, the primary focus of the book remains on the Hindi belt due to factors such as accessibility and the substantial popularity of H-Pop in that area.

The first section of the book vividly recounts the compelling narrative of Kavi Singh. Her journey unfolds as a captivating odyssey marked by serendipity and ideological evolution. Born as Keshanta Singh in Rajasthan's Alwar district, her life took a transformative turn when adopted by the renowned Haryanvi singer Ramkesh Jiwanpurwala. Ramkesh assumed multifaceted roles in Kavi's life—father, manager, lyricist, director, confidant, and life coach. Their collaboration garnered attention with a song released in response to the Pulwama attack on February 14, 2019, one of the deadliest terrorist assaults in Jammu and Kashmir, resulting in the tragic martyrdom of 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel. This response inadvertently fueled animosity, leading to assaults on Kashmiris across the nation.

At the age of 25, within a brief four-year singing career, Kavi has recorded over eighty songs, positioning herself in the realm of Hindutva pop music. Her compositions echo the core principles of Hindutva, highlighting notions of a Hindu nation, Hindu supremacy, and the vilification of others, particularly Muslims, exemplified by assertive lyrics like 'Don't dare touch the temple, Or else we will show you your place' (p.7). Through her music and performances, Kavi consistently reinforces the imperative for her audience to embrace Hindutva nationalism.

Despite attempts to diversify her thematic repertoire, Kavi aligns her music with Hindutva ideology, gaining prominence and invitations to perform at Hindutva events. However, her ambitions for political prominence were hindered by struggles in her personal life, causing a decrease in her visibility both online and offline, thereby slowing her progression in the political arena. Now in Alwar, Kavi envisions a significant role in the 2024 elections, planning video releases aligned with the Hindutva cause.

The second segment of the book unfolds the narrative of Kamal Agney, a young poet from Gosaiganj near Lucknow. His early exposure to poetry stemmed from his father's avid participation in *Kavi Sammelans* (Poet's gatherings), where expressions of Hindutva sentiments gained prominence. Aligning his poetic pursuits with this trend, Kamal rose to prominence in Hindutva *Kavi Sammelans* across the Hindi belt. His pivotal role in the electoral campaigns of Yogi Adityanath, running for the position of Chief Minister of the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, particularly during the 2017 and 2022 elections, became apparent.

At 28, Kamal emerges as a poet adept at utilizing poetry and digital platforms for political propaganda. His distinctive approach involves simplifying messages for enhanced accessibility, using vivid imagery to portray a purportedly glorious past and casting the contemporary era in a pejorative light. Exemplified by the provocative verse, 'Had Godse not pumped that bullet into Gandhi, Every Hindu would have been praying at Mecca and Medina today,' Kamal strategically reinterprets historical events to evoke a collective identity and provoke apprehension about an ostensibly bleak future (p.94). At its core, Kamal employs poetry as a medium to not only reshape historical narratives

and sway public opinion but also to advocate for a distinct political agenda using emotionally charged and divisive language. This prompts an exploration of the multifaceted nature of poetry as an artistic expression—its potential to inspire revolutionary change alongside its susceptibility to being utilized as a tool for propaganda, contingent upon the circumstances surrounding its creation and reception (Lye and Nealon, 2022). Such contemplation initiates an investigation into the intricate dynamics of poetry, its power to shape perceptions, and the ideological messages embedded within its narratives.

In the concluding section of the book, Sandeep Deo emerges as a dynamic Hindutva entrepreneur, transitioning seamlessly from mainstream journalism to fervently advocate for Hindutva. Formerly with *Dainik Jagran* and *Nai Dunia*, Deo's departure from traditional journalism is driven by a fervent desire to champion Hindutva principles. Undeterred by entrepreneurial setbacks, he becomes an author, collaborating with Bloomsbury.

The controversy around the book on Delhi riots of 2020 by Bloomsbury propels Deo to establish *Kapot*, a publishing house, and an e-commerce platform aligned with Hindutva ideologies (p.231). Beyond the digital realm, he envisions *Shaurya Kendras*—physical bookstores/libraries in small towns serving as knowledge hubs for Hindutva ideology and arms usage training.

Deo, a well-known YouTuber, views himself as a staunch advocate for Hindutva principles. Dissatisfied with what he perceives as the RSS and BJP's moderate stance on Hindutva, he co-founded the *Ekam Sanatan Bharat Dal* with Ankur Sharma to pursue a more assertive political agenda reflecting Hindu majoritarianism. Despite reservations about figures like Narendra Modi and Mohan Bhagwat, he aspires to emulate a modern-day Tulsidas, disseminating Hindutva ideals through journalism, publishing, YouTube, and life coaching. In his cultural war against perceived adversaries, Deo stands as a formidable force, shaping the narrative of Hindutva in virtual and physical realms.

The book significantly contributes to the existing literature on the rise of the BJP and Hindutva politics by examining its grassroots operational dynamics and seamless assimilation into everyday life. Unlike many works focusing on the RSS and extremist violence, the book nuances the exploration of Hindutva as an integral facet of ordinary existence. Its work unveils the intricate interplay between economic considerations, aspirations for upward mobility, and the contemporary Hindutva ecosystem. Notably, the book addresses the alignment of economic aspirations of young artists and social media influencers with the Hindutva narrative, illustrating a contemporary phenomenon where economic success intersects with Hindutva ideology. Situating its work within the emerging scholarship on Hindutva, the book explores its diffusion across diverse vernacular contexts, idioms, and cultural expressions, characterized by some scholars as 'Neo Hindutva' (Anderson and Longkumer, 2020). The book's strength lies in its exploration of the relationship between popular culture, the building of Hindutva consciousness among common people, and the politics of Hindu supremacy.

The book, characterized by meticulous research, delves deeply into the flourishing realm of Hindutva pop culture. Nevertheless, it exhibits shortcomings, notably a dearth of ethnographic narrative elucidating the tangible effects of Hindutva pop culture, as I witnessed during my fieldwork in

Jharkhand. Furthermore, a notable deficiency lies in the absence of a comprehensive sociological analysis of Hindutva pop stars, particularly in terms of the expanding social base of Hindutva and its firm grip on youth. Despite these limitations, the book is well-crafted, offering an insightful analysis of the burgeoning domain of Hindutva pop culture and the pivotal role played by H-pop warriors at the forefront of the ideological struggle for Hindutva supremacy. It is recommended for individuals interested in the convergence of politics and popular culture.

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