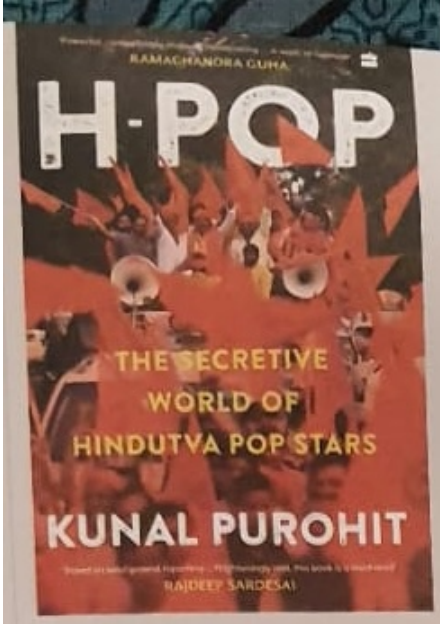

H FOR HATE

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H-Pop: The Secretive World of Hindutva Pop Stars by Kunal Purohit.

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The scene is as follows: two members of the Bihar chapter of the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha have imposed upon two Hindi poets for a *kavi sammelan* ("poets' gathering") in their hotel room in Patna. It is an odd mix of characters, but their coherence becomes clear as the scene unfolds: the characters are allied not only by their ideological orientation towards Hindu nationalism but, more practically, a desire for political power via the most electorally-relevant proponent of the ideology, the Bharatiya Janata Party.

As their interaction plays out, we witness the Mahasabha apparatchiks courting favour with the BJP's poet cadre to gain "access" to the party's machinery, and reap the material benefits of their beliefs. They volunteer political analyses and debate the policy nuances of implementing a Hindutva utopia. At the climax of the exchange, one Mahasabha member declares, "All the blueprints are ready, sahab… *Saara kucch ready hai*. It's all there in our books" (104–5). The senior poet he seeks to impress with this mic drop proclamation has been lying on the bed in a subtly scornful state of dishabille; he now "opens a single eye, looks straight past" the pitcher and exhorts the other poet to get ready for the *sammelan*: "'*Aap jaldi se shave karke aao*.' Go and get a shave quickly" (106).

This extract, from journalist Kunal Purohit's *H-Pop: The Secretive World of Hindutva Pop Stars*, is a summation of the book's two principal concerns: one, illuminating how an ecology of Hindu nationalist propaganda-as-popular culture has been developing in India over the past decade; and two, presenting a fine-grain typology of the characters involved in this matrix through close observations of their human—and often, as the opening anecdote illustrates, comical—facets.

In an important way, *H-Pop* is less a book about the present than a book about how this present was arrived at, in plain sight. It is an examination of the Sangh Parivar's rhetorical affect in the age of digital production through the trajectories of three individuals. These protagonists of Purohit's narrative get a dedicated section each, comprising multiple chapters that chart their story from 2019 to 2024: Alwar/Rewari's singer Kavi Singh, Gosaiganj's poet Kamal "Agney" Verma and Darbhangha's YouTuber and publisher Sandeep Deo.

The objective of the book is to show how the rise of India's saffronised popular culture, especially its viral transmission over the country's low-cost internet, is connected with Hindutva consolidation. And one of the techniques for this, as is widely acknowledged, is to maximise the fear of the other—here through a narrative of saving Hindus from persecuting Muslims. Purohit provides specific examples of works by each of his protagonists—giving us a sense of their process from conception to distribution—and places them within a wider network of actors, practices, infrastructures that nourish these forms and, concomitantly, the ideology. For example, his narration of the overnight production of a viral Kavi Singh song, *Dhara 370*, which extolled the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status and autonomy. The text brings to life the birth of a smash hit after many misses, due to a calculated hunch about the sudden announcement: "A song had to be written, recorded and shot within the next twenty-four hours. Their lives were going to change forever" (30). In another instance, he recounts how the influencer Sandeep Deo, who was writing a three-part Hindutva chronicle of the Indian

Left for Bloomsbury (the first of which was already out), decided to end the deal once the publisher pulled a controversial, pro-government book on the Delhi riots of 2020. Deo started a *bhagwa* (meaning "saffron") publishing house and e-commerce platform called Kapot—"Instead of having to kowtow to big publishing houses who can censor their thoughts... Sandeep's publishing house will allow everything that deserves to be printed. The disclaimer being that the end result has to be in favour of Sanatan Dharm [Eternal Religion] and the larger Hindutva cause" (232).

Coming to the works themselves, Purohit combines translated excerptions of Singh's songs and Varma's poems as well as descriptions of Deo's videos and books with commentary that makes explicit how these works normalise hate and manufacture consent for a Hindu *rashtra* or state. However, at times, there is an almost tedious and interruptive sequence of examples accompanied by references to scholarship on hate media and its effects, which seem undercooked and lacking historical analysis. For instance, we are given a crash course in the role of poetry in oppressive and hate-based movements through an inventory of scholarly quotes and opinions rather than a synthesis of these ideas. In the same section, the author also mentions the use of poetry during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement of the 1980s—a tantalising tidbit—but misses the opportunity to trace current popular forms to older practices which date back to the early days of Hindutva's contemporary revival.

H-Pop is at its best when it is attending to the human element of its stories—perhaps a result of its writer's experience reporting on the horrific, yet complex, category of hate crimes. Purohit engagingly builds the world of these pop "stars" through the involvement of supporting actors—the poet Shambhu Shikhar who advised Verma to shave; Deo's friend, the lawyer and BJP leader Ashwini Upadhyay, known for his controversial rhetoric and whom Deo defended on his YouTube channel *India Speaks Daily*; and, the most compelling, Singh's domineering adoptive father Ramkesh Jiwanpurwala, who crafted her entire adult life and career. By paying attention to these background details, Purohit is able to breathe life into what could have become a monotonous compilation of "case and comment" studies on the Hindutva pop scene.

The book bears comparison with Snigdha Poonam's *Dreamers* for its interest in telling a story through a series of profiles—sampling individual lives to give insight into a broader zeitgeist.[1] Having studied them over a long span of time, Purohit locates them within their contexts and offers an immersive and timely look into a psyche that represents a large and powerful constituency of majoritarian citizens. However polarising the creative practices of Singh, Verma and Deo may be, they are, ultimately, not symbolic figures, but actual people with social and familial bonds, economic insecurities and emotional vulnerabilities; people who emerged from a particular material and mediatic context of the past couple of decades. In Purohit's telling, Singh's and Verma's relationships with their fathers add a dimension to their propagandism, a glimpse into their own indoctrination and ensuing devotion to the cause. Deo's double shift as spiritual guide and counsellor, to his channel's subscribers, points to the appeal of a paternal persona, and the sense of protection and authority that come with it. The backstory to the shifting ideological allegiances of recent years reveals much about the tectonics of 21st-century Indian politics: Ramkeshwar Singh's move from the Congress to the BJP, Kamal Verma's shift from the Samajwadi Party to the BJP, and the collective gravitation of H-Pop's protagonists towards the emerging cult of Yogi Adityanath—whether driven by disillusionment with Narendra Modi and Amit Shah or by political expediency.

In its form and method, *H-Pop* speaks to the approach of slow journalism, defined by one writer as "the space between journalism and ethnography."[2] Informed by traditions of long-form narrative reportage that trouble the instantly produced, quickly consumed and dubiously objective tendencies of the 24-hour news cycle, slow journalism helps make sense of a contemporaneity that is hectic, relentless and multifarious. Susan Greenberg, who coined the term in 2007, elaborated in an essay titled *Slow Journalism in the Digital Fast Lane* (2013), that it "keeps the reader informed about the provenance of the information and how it was gathered...This willingness to acknowledge the subjectivity and uncertainty that exists in factual discovery helps to allay the suspicions of an audience which has come to mistrust the language of traditional 'neutral' reporting, and arguably helps anchor the story to external reality in a more persuasive way."[3] Purohit's patient and persistent documentation of these lives, over many years and many visits, affords an obvious counter to the mendacity of India's mainstream media. But its real value lies in the rejection of reductive caricature and simplism.

In so locating these "hate music" producers as part of a recognisable milieu, *H-Pop* underscores that "popular" culture exists in a symbiotic dynamic with the society it is made in. Like all businesses, hate sells at scale because the raw material and market for it are already there. At the Patna *kavi sammelan*, to which Varma was going at the beginning of this article, Purohit shows how the enthusiasm of the audience determined the poet's words: "Kamal...'tests' his audience...starting off with content that centres around nationalism without targeting anyone. Then he progressively steps up the heat, pushing the limits of provocation" (109). By the end of the evening, the audience has been rabidly applauding for a long, long time.

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NOTES

1 Snigdha Poonam, *Dreamers: How Young Indians Are Changing Their World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

2 Ted Conover, "Slow Journalism: A Letter to Ethnographers," *Frontiers in Sociology* 8, May 2023, https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1141033.

3 Susan Greenberg, "Slow Journalism in the Digital Fast Lane," in *Global Literary Journalism: Exploring the Journalistic Imagination*, eds. Richard Lance Keeble and John Tulloch (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 381–382.