Antifeminism as moral governance in India: caste, religion, and the political erasure of queer and Dalit lifeworlds

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Antifeminism in contemporary India must be recognized as a foundational instrument of ideological consolidation—systematically designed, historically sedimented, and tactically deployed through intersecting casteist, patriarchal, and majoritarian religious structures (Rao, 2009; Bruneau, 2018). It is not a sporadic backlash, nor a peripheral anomaly, but the moral infrastructure sustaining an evolving regime of social control and epistemic erasure (Minj and Pandit, 2024). This consensus is enacted through the rollback of inclusive curricula, the institutional and social disciplining of gender-non-conforming individuals through legal ambiguity, moral policing, and bureaucratic denial of recognition, the silencing of trans and Dalit voices in policymaking, and the violent suppression of dissent across institutional, digital, and community-grounded platforms (Kumar and Datta, 2024; Jain, 2017). These are not disconnected incidents but deeply interwoven mechanisms of a hegemonic order that institutionalizes caste and gender hierarchies through cultural, legal, and epistemic channels. What is at stake is not merely the erosion of rights or the rollback of representation, but the deliberate construction of a moral regime that designates entire communities—Dalit, queer, trans, and Adivasi—as illegible to the normative vision of nationhood. The ideological scaffolding of this order functions through a diffuse yet coordinated network spanning law, religion, education, and media, where it gains authority through repetition, ritualization, and erasure. This ideological apparatus operates by naturalizing hierarchy, aestheticizing conformity, and transforming exclusion into moral obligation. Its true danger lies in the seamless blending of structural violence with cultural legitimacy, making domination appear not only justifiable but necessary (Quissell, 2022). Foregrounding caste-inflected antifeminism as a form of moral governance that legitimizes state authority through ideological sacrality, symbolic violence, and institutional disciplining, this article critiques the limitations of dominant political science paradigms and instead advances a postcolonial, subaltern-centered framework that situates antifeminism as central—not peripheral—to the construction of normative citizenship and moral authority in the Indian democratic project.

Mainstream analyses remain mired in liberal abstractions and Eurocentric comparativism, which fail to engage with the existential violence enacted through Indian antifeminism. Influential works on global antifeminism—such as Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, Mudde's typology of authoritarian populism, and Bjarnegård's studies on gendered institutions—often presume a secular, individualistic framework that inadequately accounts for the structural role of caste, religious orthodoxy, and collective moral imaginaries in non-Western settings (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Praet, 2024; Bjarnegard, 2013). They often rely on universalizing frameworks that obscure the

caste-inflected, sacralized nature of gender and sexual regulation in postcolonial contexts. This article departs from mainstream political science by rejecting these universal categories and foregrounding the intersectional, civilizational dimensions of antifeminist governance in India. Whereas, dominant paradigms frame antifeminism as reactionary conservatism or populist backlash, this work recasts it as a proactive moral project deeply rooted in caste and religious orthodoxy. By doing so, it reframes antifeminism not as a Western-imported ideological template— such as those analyzed through Mudde's populist backlash or Connell's hegemonic masculinity—but as a historically situated and structurally embedded moral order grounded in caste, ritual authority, and religious sacrality, thus revealing the analytical inadequacy of applying Euro-American frameworks uncritically to the Indian context, thereby challenging the prevailing tendency in global political science to treat gender backlash as ideologically homogeneous across regions. Concepts such as "gender backlash," "authoritarian populism," or "anti-woke conservatism" operate quite differently in the Indian context than in Western political discourse (Sathi, 2023). For instance, 'gender backlash' may refer broadly to resistance against feminist gains, but in India, it operates through caste-based moral codes and communal narratives. 'Authoritarian populism' often implies a charismatic leader's influence, yet in India it is deeply embedded in bureaucratic, religious, and media ecosystems that reinforce caste supremacy (Bugaric, 2019). "Anti-woke conservatism," a term popularized in Western contexts, risks obscuring the deeply entrenched caste hierarchies and religious orthodoxies that have long shaped gender and sexual politics in India (Sengul, 2025). Clarifying these terms and contextualizing them within Indian-specific frameworks—such as the embedded cultural systems of caste, ritual purity, and religious sacrality that govern modes of social inclusion and exclusion—prevents analytical oversimplification and enhances clarity for a multidisciplinary readership. These indigenous logics form the structural foundations upon which both historical and contemporary gender and sexual hierarchies are enacted in India, underscoring the importance of location-specific theorizing in political critique. Postcolonial queer theorists like Anjali Arondekar, Gayatri Gopinath, and Rahul Rao have long cautioned against the uncritical transplantation of Western queer frameworks onto non-Western contexts, emphasizing the need to read queerness alongside the sedimented violence of colonialism, casteism, and communalism (Ojeda et al., 2024; Sinha, 2022). Indian antifeminism is not simply an extension of conservative ideologies—it is a civilizational assertion, defending the moral geography of caste and the reproductive futurism rooted in caste and religious orthodoxy, where women must submit to domesticity, queer subjects must be rendered culturally invisible, and all deviations from savarna heteronormativity are construed as civilizational threats (Lang and Kuhnle, 2008; Paul et al., 2022). As postcolonial queer scholarship reminds us, the archive of Indian queerness has always been contested terrain, shaped by systems of visibility, respectability, and savarna custodianship (Sinha, 2022). These developments expose a calculated political strategy: the state and its ideological allies preemptively suppress dissent, erase non-normative identities, and reaffirm dominant caste and gender hierarchies—not only through coercive policy but also through symbolic exclusion and routine omissions. Even subtle forms of marginalization, like the absence of gender-diverse figures in national commemorations or the failure to include inclusive imagery in public health campaigns, operate as tools of erasure that make casteed and queer lives illegible within the dominant moral order.

This regime of moral governance is not merely the byproduct of legislation or bureaucratic inertia—it is the deliberate outcome of a hegemonic apparatus that infiltrates every institutional, discursive, and pedagogical domain to produce conformity and eliminate dissent. It mobilizes education as a tool of indoctrination, wields regulatory language to silence oppositional thought, and rebrands critical intellectual labor as dangerous, anti-national, or morally corrupt. Feminist scholars are not only displaced—they are actively vilified, delegitimized, and rendered culturally subversive by a machinery that conflates critique with sedition and intellectual inquiry with moral threat (Lin and Wang, 2023). Queer theory is not simply dismissed—it is actively constructed as corrosive, perverse, and foreign (Friedman, 2021). The political economy of visibility ensures that only sanitized, caste-compliant, apolitical expressions of identity are circulated, while insurgent solidarities— particularly those rooted in Dalit, trans, and Adivasi lifeworlds— are rendered dangerous and disposable. Postcolonial queer critics such as Jasbir Puar and Arvind Narrain have interrogated how queerness is co-opted into the state's biopolitical machinery—where the inclusion of select queer bodies becomes a tool for reproducing exclusionary norms (Gupta, 2022; Rozpedowski, 2009). In India, this manifests in the celebration of upper-caste queer visibility as progress, while violently disciplining those who contest caste, faith, and family norms (Dasgupta and Mahn, 2023). Civil society institutions that question this order are harassed, hollowed out, or strategically defunded. This is not incidental but rather a systematic design aimed at extinguishing oppositional knowledge, erasing subaltern futurities, and institutionalizing a nationalist moral order as the sole and unquestionable framework of legitimacy (Najar, 2023). Analytical frameworks that treat caste, gender, and sexuality as separable domains of inquiry are not only intellectually obsolete but politically dangerous. They reproduce the very logics of fragmentation that uphold epistemic apartheid (Menon, 2009).

At this moment of epistemic emergency, it is no longer sufficient to critique dominant paradigms from within; it is necessary to rupture them entirely and rebuild knowledge on the foundations of resistance, refusal, and insurgent co-theorization. Ambedkarite feminism and queer of caste critique must be understood not as marginal correctives but as revolutionary frameworks that expose the structural complicity of savarna liberalism, academic tokenism, and disciplinary decorum in sustaining caste-patriarchal regimes (Kumar and Bakshi, 2022; Das, 2025). Postcolonial queer theory powerfully reveals how normativity travels through empire, how caste and sexuality are not merely social categories but technologies of governance, and how insurgent resistance must confront and dismantle these converging vectors of exclusion (LaRue, 2016). These frameworks unmask the liberal myth of pluralism and call for a radical ethical transformation in research—one that does not merely center the marginalized as subjects but recognizes them as theorists, archivists, and epistemic disruptors. Intersectionality must be mobilized not

as a gesture of inclusion but as a methodology of interruption—one that makes visible the nested layers of violence and institutional complicity that shape knowledge, policy, and public morality. This moment demands not reform, but an insurgent shift toward solidaristic knowledge practices rooted in struggle, collective memory, and radical accountability. Implementation must begin with participatory, community-led research infrastructures that dismantle extractive academic hierarchies and elevate the expertise of queer, Dalit, Adivasi, and other subaltern communities as co-creators of theory and method. Ethics boards must be fundamentally restructured to reflect community oversight and justice-oriented principles, while pedagogy must integrate decolonial, transdisciplinary, and embodied knowledges that destabilize savarna norms and reconstitute curricular canons. Insurgent archival reclamation, polyphonic oral histories, and transregional digital repositories must be built not as supplements but as epistemic ruptures—challenging the sanctioned narratives upheld by institutional memory and demanding a reworlding of knowledge in the service of liberation. Three critical research questions must guide this intellectual rupture. First, how do caste, gender, and religious ideologies operate in tandem to construct antifeminist moral authority across institutional domains? This can be answered through a comparative multi-sited ethnography and institutional discourse analysis conducted across educational institutions, religious organizations, judicial forums, newsrooms, and digital platforms. In-depth interviews with institutional actors, coupled with document analysis of court rulings, curricula, and media content, can expose the dispersed but coherent logics that sediment caste and gender normativity. Second, in what ways can community-led epistemologies reshape research ethics and knowledge governance in the context of subaltern erasure? Participatory Action Research and Collaborative Autoethnography will enable co-production of knowledge with Dalit, Adivasi, queer, and trans theorists, deploying tools like memory mapping, ethics charters, and digital storytelling to counter extractive traditions and affirm shared authorship. Third, what insurgent pedagogies and archival methodologies can challenge the savarna custodianship of history and normativity? A two-phased research design— beginning with archival ethnography of institutional repositories and followed by experimental critical pedagogy labs within grassroots education networks—can recover excluded narratives and prototype curricular disruptions. These methodologies, grounded in intersectionality, feminist standpoint theory, and decolonial critique, collectively reframe research not as neutral documentation but as intervention.

Ethical measures essential to this undertaking must exceed procedural consent to ensure justice-oriented, community-defined principles of research conduct. This includes the implementation of continuous informed consent, community-controlled data governance, reciprocal knowledge validation processes, and the non-extractive use of stories, symbols, and lived experience. The first step involves co-developing a community-led ethics charter that outlines clear boundaries, rights, and protocols for collaborative authorship and dissemination. To operationalize these ethical foundations, a three-phase implementation strategy must be enacted. Phase One emphasizes groundwork: building trust through listening circles, collective archival reclamation,

and cross-generational oral histories that map erasures and resistances. Mutual ethics workshops must be conducted where researchers and participants co-design research questions, define relational accountability, and establish Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) to protect shared rights. Phase Two focuses on embedded experimentation: working alongside activist collectives, grassroots educators, and community archivists to develop and pilot radical pedagogies, counter-canon curricula, and insurgent digital repositories. This phase must be accompanied by rigorous documentation and iterative feedback loops. Outcomes include multilingual podcasts, visual narratives, and open-access repositories that circulate knowledge back to its communities of origin. Phase Three involves institutionalization: establishing permanent infrastructures such as subaltern-led research centers, counter-public ethics review boards, and justice-accountable funding mechanisms. The success is not measured by academic metrics but by community trust, policy relevance, and the resilience of epistemic alternatives. The research must remain dynamically responsive—constantly recalibrated through dialogic community feedback and collective reflexivity. This is not a call for reform, but for insurgent reimagination. It is a praxis of research as justice—grounded in refusal, rooted in relationality, and driven by the possibility of liberated futures.

Unlike antifeminist regimes in the West that are frequently interpreted through populist backlash, charismatic leadership, or reactive conservatism, Indian antifeminism is constituted through a bureaucratized moral regime that sacralizes exclusion and embeds caste, gender, and religious hierarchies across institutional domains. Distinct from the centralized authoritarianism observed in Brazil or Hungary, India's caste-theocratic apparatus operates diffusely through education, media, law, and healthcare— legitimizing exclusion as tradition, and naturalizing hierarchy as civic virtue. This structural entrenchment demands a theoretical reorientation that centers caste not as a social category but as a foundational technology of governance and exclusion. Antifeminism in India, therefore, must be theorized not as a backlash but as a strategic ideological enterprise that continuously produces normative citizenship through the marginalization of Dalit, queer, trans, and Adivasi lifeworlds. These are not residual conservative impulses but active modes of moral engineering that shrink democratic imagination, suppress pluralities, and institutionalize epistemic violence. The proliferation of curriculum erasure, cultural censorship, gender surveillance, and bureaucratic coercion underscores the urgency of developing a decolonial, caste-conscious research paradigm capable of mapping, resisting, and transforming these convergences with theoretical precision and political resolve. This research must prioritize sustained inquiries into the architecture of moral regulation, the role of communal masculinities in statecraft, and the mechanisms through which digital platforms reproduce savarna hegemony. It must also generate new epistemic infrastructures—community-led archives, decolonial ethics boards, and inter-movement coalitions—that are rooted in praxis and sustained by collective accountability. To reconfigure the moral architecture of governance in India, a set of decolonial policy interventions must be prioritized: (1) Curricular transformation, which mandates intersectional content on caste, gender, and sexuality in national education policy and

ensures the inclusion of historically erased narratives, taught by educators with lived experience or community endorsement; (2) Ethics reform, by establishing subaltern-led research ethics boards grounded in feminist and community-defined principles, with binding review authority and transparent reporting mechanisms that hold researchers institutionally accountable; (3) Funding justice, through the redirection of public and private research funding to Dalit, Adivasi, trans, and queer-led initiatives via designated grant pathways, capacity-building fellowships, and participatory budgeting; and (4) Intersectional audits, requiring all state agencies, ministries, and judicial bodies to conduct periodic caste-gender-religion impact assessments of policies, programs, and legislation, with results published in publicly accessible formats and accompanied by institutional response plans. These interventions constitute not peripheral adjustments but central acts of epistemic and democratic restoration. Without such a research paradigm, the ideological machinery of antifeminism will continue to expand unchecked, further narrowing the democratic imagination and reinforcing structural injustice. This is a call for research that refuses complicity, resists co-optation, and reclaims the terrain of knowledge as a site of struggle, solidarity, and emancipation.

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