

Gender and performance in South India

The ambivalent female: from the goddess's strength to the women's denial¹

Irani Cippiciani

Independent researcher
Campinas, SP, Brazil
iranicippiciani@gmail.com
orcid.org/0000-0001-8213-3816

Abstract | This text aims to discuss the gender issue within the traditional performances of southern India starting with the cult of the *Ammans* and the complex ritualistic actions that involve "keeping under control" the eruptive energies of these female deities, which includes several types of dramatic performance. An ambiguous set of signs is evidenced, which oscillate between the exaltation of this mythical female power and the suppression of its existence on the social and political level. The starting point for directing this reflection is to understand how this ambiguity is reflected in traditional performances, comprising the *Devadasi* tradition, the tradition of men who play female roles, the inclusion of transsexual women in this context and, finally, discussing the role of cisgender women in this theater and the importance of theatrical communities as spaces of resistance for all these individuals.

KEYWORDS: Gender. Performance. Indian theater.

Gênero e performance no Sul da Índia
O feminino ambivalente: da força da deusa a negação da mulher

Resumo | Este texto se propõe a discutir a problemática de gênero dentro das performances tradicionais do sul da Índia, partindo do culto das *Ammans* e as complexas ações ritualísticas que envolvem "manter sobre controle" as energias eruptivas dessas divindades femininas, o que inclui diversas modalidades de performance dramática. O que se vê é um conjunto ambíguo de sinalizações que oscilam entre a exaltação desse poder feminino mítico e a supressão de sua existência no plano social e político. O ponto de partida para encaminhar essa reflexão é compreender como essa ambiguidade se reflete nas performances tradicionais, partindo da tradição *Devadasi*, passando pela tradição dos homens que interpretam papéis femininos, a inclusão de transexuais nesse contexto e, finalmente, discutindo o papel das mulheres cis nesse teatro e a importância das comunidades teatrais como espaços de resistência para esses indivíduos todos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Gênero. Performance. Teatro indiano.

Género y performance en el sur de la India
Lo femenino ambivalente: de la fuerza de la diosa a la negación de la mujer

Resumen | Este texto se propone a discutir el problema de género dentro de las performances tradicionales del sur de la India, partiendo del culto de las *Ammans* y de las complejas acciones ritualísticas que involucran "mantener bajo control" las energías eruptivas de estas divindades femeninas, lo que incluye diversas modalidades de performance dramática. Lo que se ve es un conjunto ambiguo de señalizaciones que oscilan entre la exaltación de ese poder femenino mítico y la supresión de su existencia en el plan social y político. El punto de partida para encaminar esa reflexión es comprender como esa ambiguidad reflejase en las performances tradicionales, partiendo de la tradición *Devadasi*, pasando por la tradición de los hombres que interpretan papeles femeninos, la inclusión de transexuales en ese contexto y, finalmente, discutiendo el papel de las mujeres cis en ese teatro y la importancia de las comunidades teatrales como espacios de resistencia para todos esos individuos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Género, Performance, Teatro Índio.

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Devadasis, the mediators of the holy feminine

Throughout southern India, there was a heterogeneous class of professional artists called *Devadasis* or “temple artists.” These cisgender women used to live in temples and were responsible for mediating the relationship of individuals with female deities of ambivalent character, the *Ammans*, a denser aspect of the female energy called *Shakti*. Among their many functions, one was considered of fundamental importance for the “appeasement or satisfaction” of the goddess: singing and dancing. Ritual performance involved getting in direct contact with this dense energy, controlling it through ritual-performative actions, and offering it in a targeted way to the community in the form of fertility, prosperity, and blessings.

The *Devadasis* were considered the “wives of god” and, in fact, part of their initiatory ritual involved performing a wedding ceremony with the deity of the temple. Hence, they were called *Nityasumagali* or “auspicious women” (KERSERBOOM, 1987), because they had direct access to the sacred feminine and, for being married to a deity, they would never become widows.

Of the many rituals performed by them in temples and courts, dramatic dances stood out, especially those that told stories of deities and described or praised them. These presentations demanded from the performers an extensive technical and interpretative expertise, associated with specific knowledge such as: sacralization of space, the use of rhythm as driver of the ritual experience, the division of bodily movements into *Tandava* (male) and *Lasya* (female) principles. Every dance and every song always involved a deep and secret ritual experience, restricted to those initiated in this art form.

Despite their importance and status, the *Devadasis* also lived in an ambivalent condition as well as the female deities mediated by them. They were women who enjoyed more freedom than any other woman in their society, they knew scriptures, owned lands and properties, could have children and have sex outside of marriage. However, as members of a patriarchal society, even though they enjoyed many privileges, they were not immune to the social stigma that fell on all other women: that of being impure because they menstruate or that of being prostitutes, because they lived outside the moral boundaries established for the women of their time.

Nevertheless, these communities needed someone to mediate the powerful and dangerous energy of *Shakti*, a task that could not be done by men, in such a way it was necessary to deal with the contradictory feeling it generated within society with its rigid patriarchal morality and the desire to worship the female deities, who guaranteed prosperity and abundance for these communities.

Indeed, many *Devadasis* had patrons with whom they could have sexual relations or not; thus, in their time, such practice could not be considered prostitution as it is conceived nowadays. This understanding is developed by the latent contradiction between the values of the Hindu society and the *Devadasi* tradition and, over time, by the influence of the British empire, with its Victorian morality, which attributed to these women the stigma of “temple prostitutes.” The British government then banned the practice of the *Devadasi* system throughout India and these women, unarguably, lost their *Nityasumangali* status.

Some of them had no choice but to become sex workers; others directly

collaborated to the process of creating the *Bharatanatyam* dance style, teaching their ritual art to people of higher castes. The repertoire of *Devadasis* served as the basis for the creation of this style after the independence of India, but, contrary to what might be expected, it ultimately contributed to their invisibility in the 20th century, relegating these women and their descendants to a secondary role in a tradition that have been created by them.

It is paramount to understand this process of destruction of the social image and collective imaginary of *Devadasi* as an artist dedicated to the temple for understanding the stigma still surrounding the inclusion of cisgender women in South Indian folk theatrical forms. Seeking to distance itself from this ambivalent image of “auspicious versus prostitute,” this tradition was usurped by the highest social strata of the Hindu society to create the *Bharatanatyam*, in such a way that it could be performed by “virtuous women” of the upper classes and commercialized abroad as a “classical” art form from India.

Currently, in Tamil Nadu, the birthplace of the *Devadasi* tradition and the Bharatanatyam dance, there is a broad movement demanding a historical reparation to their creators and descendants; participants of this movement even request that the term “*Devadasi*” ceases to be used, as it has become synonymous with prostitution. Thus, they prefer to be identified by the name of the communities that have the hereditary right to this ritual performative tradition, originated from different non-Brahmin social groups: *Isai Velallars*, *Mudaliars*, *Pillais*, *Kaikkolans*, among others (SEIZER, 2005, p. 180).

Among the most prominent names that lead this movement today, we can mention the *Bharatanatyam* dancer and activist Nrithya Pillai², a powerful voice in anti-caste, gender, and cultural appropriation struggles, which allows us to know another history, written in the bodies of women who have been silenced and violently excluded from their own traditions. Nrithya Pillai is one of the strongest advocates for the term “hereditary dancers” to replace the term “*Devadasi*,” separating their original ritualistic and artistic tradition from what is left of the decaying *Devadasi* system.

The term “*Devadasi*” became, therefore, extremely problematic because it exclusively depicts a system of prostitution defined by the birth condition (caste) and gender (female), justifying all kinds of violence against cisgender women from the most vulnerable social groups or even from *Devadasi* families, cruelly perpetuating the reality of prostitution between generations of women within the same family.

***Pen Veshams*, the tradition of men in female roles in tamil nadu**

Throughout the East, there is a long tradition of men playing female roles. In India, this controversial tradition still exists and reinforces the stigma to women. A continuum of common sense in Indian society is perceived, according to which women are deemed as impure (menstruation), dangerous (because they are

² Nrithya Pillai’s essay: Tell Me More: Talking Caste Dynamics in Bharatanatyam With Nrithya Pillai | The Swaddle <https://theswaddle.com/tell-me-more-talking-caste-dynamics-in-bharatanatyam-with-nrithya-pillai/?fbclid=IwAR17SMYImunAjs5VU0A_qiJoDz5v4cpvLMiq9XkqNgN63RZfLeodZNYpqYq>

connected to *Shakti*) beings that, hence, must be controlled.

Therefore, they must not participate in public life, their space should be the domestic environment. A woman on stage, gesturing, talking, and singing produces a sexual tension inconceivable in rural Indian societies, which is widely manifested by artists and audiences. Even though women are frowned upon in theater, they continue to exist in the epics, in the traditional narratives that must be staged season after season, which forces artists to find other solutions.

In the state of Tamil Nadu, a theatrical form called *Theru-K-Koothu* was born. “*Theru*” means open space, “*Koothu*” means theater or actor. Therefore, *Theru-K-Koothu* is a form of ritual theater performed in open spaces, whose first records date from the 6th century CE. In its current form, *Theru-K-Koothu* has about 300 years (HOLLANDER, 2007). It is a rural, male theatrical tradition, organized in hereditary lineages (CHELLAPERUMAL, 2001), which performs episodes of the epic *Mahabharata*, with its great warriors and whose central character is *Draupadi*, the outraged wife of the five *Pandavas* (FRASCA, 1990). In Tamil Nadu, *Draupadi* is the heroine of the *Mahabharata* and also a highly revered Amman (HILTEBEITEL, 1988). She is the sister of Krishna and the very representation of female rage when, at the end of the *Festival of Draupadi Amman*, the most important ritual event in the *Theru-K-Koothu* performative calendar, she washes her long hair in the blood of Duryodhana’s thigh, in the episode known as *Padu Kalam* (CIPPICIANI, 2020).

In the *Theru-K-Koothu* tradition, the female characters, with *Draupadi* being the most important one, are called *Pen Veshams* and the minor characters, *Toli Veshams*. These characters are performed by men dressed as women. It is not a specific or refined technique that produces the feminine essence that may be in a male body, but rather the crudest observation of the way women move, the high pitch of their voices, their clothing and adornments and, especially, the reproduction of idealized and stereotyped social behaviors expected for women: modesty, submission with doses of childish sensuality (a structure of representation that, not by chance, can also be seen in many Indian films).

The *Pen/Toli Veshams* are frequently played by actors who are still young, beardless, with physical features considered more effeminate, with a softer body tone, and a more delicate movement, in addition to a rudimentary dance technique, with simple steps, called *Pen Adavus*. In other words, this choice is not determined by any specific technical capacity, but rather by desirable physical traits and the ability to sustain these qualities during the enactment. There is no attempt to make these actors mistaken for women. It is always evident that they are men dressed up as women. There is no desire to deceive or confuse the audience. The intent is to show exactly what is there to be seen: a man, representing a simulacrum of the feminine defined by the morality of his social group and, therefore, acceptable as a performance.

I choose the word “simulacrum” because, with the exception of *Draupadi*, the other female characters are plain in their psychological construction, such as caricatures: the beautiful single girl, the Queen Mother, the servant etc. Only *Draupadi* has a more complex spectrum of composition and is usually played by a more experienced actor, although his features are not so feminine. In this case,

the needs of the narrative prevail over the need of verisimilitude.

Despite the entire modernization process of India, the important increase in discussions on gender and equality in society, even today, cisgender women are not admitted to *Theru-K-Koothu* troupes, but there is an exception that it is worth mentioning (CIPPICIANI,2020). In Punjarasantankal Village, there is a theater center called *Kattaikkuttu Sangam*. In this privileged space, a risk experiment has been carried out. Its founders taught boys and girls from the poorest and most vulnerable strata of society the traditional art of *Theru-K-Koothu*, which they call *Kattaikkuttu* (DE BRUIN, 1999).

Inside this institution, girls were trained to play both the female roles (*Pen/Toli Veshams*), the male warrior roles (*Kattai Veshams*), and secondary roles (*Tires/Chinna Veshams*). Therefore, gender equality consisted in an artistic-pedagogical firstfruits. However, there is a key character whose representation by women has always been a taboo, the *Kattiyakaran*, the lascivious comic, a figure of fundamental importance in connecting the epic Mahabharata to the reality of rural workers. It is possible to convince the girls and their families of the possibility of playing *Arjuna* or *Krishna*, heroic characters, in a controlled situation of enactment, but it is practically impossible to convince them that women can perform *Kattiyakaram*, making double meaning jokes, facing the audience, conducting the narrative with malice and mockery, in performances that last all night long.

The work developed by *Kattaikkuttu Sangam* and, unfortunately, terminated due to lack of resources in 2020, fulfilled the important function of crossing limits, loosening moralities, making room for another possible imaginary for these women in their social groups through dramatic performance. Unfortunately, it is an isolated initiative that does not find support in other lineages and companies of the style and, therefore, it is difficult to sustain outside the privileged conditions that were provided by *Kattaikkuttu Sangam*. After all, where will these artists work if companies do not accept women? What is the weight of this choice on their lives, inside their communities, after leaving the institution? The intermediate solution was to bring these women together within the *Kattaikkuttu Sangam* and to found an entirely female group³ – which, although being an important step and a significant transgression of this essentially male tradition, particularly reinforces the difficulty of their inclusion in the traditional companies of the style.

As nothing is simple in cultural terms, even though they reject the presence of cisgender women, there is a significant presence of transsexual people in *Theru-K-Koothu* companies, performing female roles and making the understanding of this phenomenon even more complex and delicate. This practice broadens the scope of the gender discussion to the very controversial field of acceptance of the third gender in Hindu society as defined by the Indian constitution in 2014, formulating the first national public policies for this vulnerable and marginalized social group.

***Aravanis*, the inclusion of transsexual people in female roles**

At the *Draupadi Amman Festival*, a performative journey that can last up to 21 days, there is a remarkable episode called “The Sacrifice of Aruvan,” staged by the

³ Kattaikkuttu Women | Facebook <<https://www.facebook.com/Kattaikkuttu-Women-107981408229440>>

artists of *Theru-K-Koothu*. It is the reenactment of the death of *Aruvan*, son of *Arjuna*, in such a way that the battle of Kurukshetra can begin, as the sacrifice of *Iphigenia* before the Trojan War. Before dying, *Aruvan* requests to be married and for his head to be taken to the battlefield to watch the epic carnage. Moved by his noble gesture, *Krishna* takes the form of the enchanting *Mohini*, a celestial dancer to whom *Aruvan* can marry and have sexual relations before being sacrificed.

This is an important passage from the epic *Mahabharata*, which denotes the presence of transsexual individuals in Hindu society since its origin. In another mythological passage, *Mohini* gets married to the god *Shiva*, and from this relationship *Ayyappan* is born. The goddess *Renuka Yellamma*⁴, can also be mentioned, who gives birth to four eunuchs and the deity *Ardhanarisvara*, half male and half female. Mythology, iconography, treatises, and many historical records allow us to conclude that transsexuality was accepted and revered. Transsexual people were seen as special beings because “they were neither men nor women,” hence the term “third gender.” Their social status and ritual importance alongside the *Devadasis*, as servants of the goddess *Renuka Yellamma*, considerably declined during the period of the British Raj, which explains why a large part of this community is nowadays subject to sexual exploitation and situations of extreme violence and vulnerability.

According to the 2011 Census carried out by the Indian government, about 490 million individuals self-reported belonging to the third gender, calling themselves *Hijras*, which includes: male and female transsexual people, transvestites, bisexual people, drag queens, drag kings, and eunuchs⁵. *Hijras* are dedicated to blessing newborns, dancing in ceremonies, begging, or working as sex workers. Due to recent public policies aimed at this population, many transsexual and transvestite women started working in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or in the service sector, managing to ascend socially, albeit on a small scale and insufficient to guarantee their full social inclusion (NAIK, 2019). Nevertheless, there are important examples of transgender representation in the rigid Indian society, with the presence of writers, activists, actresses, dancers, lawyers, educators, television anchors, police officers, politicians, judges, and models⁶, as an evident result of the legal establishment of the third gender by the Indian constitution and public policies for the inclusion of this social group.

Within this context, we eventually, find transvestites working in *Theru-K-Koothu* companies, according to information collected during field research in India, in 2019, together with Prof. PhD. A. Chellaperumal, head of the Department of Anthropology at Pondicherry University⁷. In Tamil Nadu, they are named *Aravanis*, or *Aruvan's* wives, referring to the episode of the “Sacrifice of *Aruvan*” and associating their figure with the celestial dancer *Mohini*. Their presence is welcome because it satisfactorily resolves the issue of representation of female roles, within the impossibility of absorbing cisgender women and the unavailability of finding boys who have the “right attributes.”

⁴ The Jogappas, trans women from Karnataka State, singing to the goddess Yellamma: The Jogappas- Queer Stories Through Music – YouTube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLja-o1w-Dc>>

⁵ TransGender/Others - Census 2011 India <<https://www.census2011.co.in/transgender.php>>

⁶ 10 Famous & Inspiring Transgender people in India | Telugu Times Now <<https://www.telugutimesnow.com/special-articles/10-famous-inspiring-transgender-people-in-india/>>

⁷ Prof. PhD. Chellaperumal's interview to the author: THERU K KOOTHU - RAÍZES E ROTAS I – YouTube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-CM682YjiA&list=UUaKAqvZzp1Rm7Narde9YOUq>>

Furthermore, they are the very incarnation of the god *Krishna* in the *Mohini* form and represent all the power and mystery of this third mythical gender. In its liminal and powerful condition, there is no conflict regarding their existence and presence in the troupes. On the contrary, their presence is considered auspicious and beneficial, bringing wealth, abundance, and releasing individuals from the evil eye and envy. This does not mean that they are immune from the abuses and violence that accompany cisgender and transsexual women in the rural environment in southern India, but rather that they precariously stand on this cold blade of ambivalence that accompanies this multiple feminine across India.

Cisgender women and theater communities

As aforementioned, Indian society expresses a paradoxical feeling towards women: they are feared and revered, and this ambiguity has direct consequences for their existence in the private and public spheres. In the field of performance, the presence of cisgender women in the scene is almost due to inertia. Usually, an actress belongs to a family of actors and, therefore, she pursues the same career due to complete lack of opportunity or need, not always for their own choice or vocation. Interestingly, folk theater is an economically advantageous professional field when compared with the income of a rural worker. Therefore, even if they have to carry the stigma of women without morale or even prostitutes, such a choice allows them to offer themselves and their families better living conditions. Above all, the dilemma presented for these women is of an economic order, overcoming the established morale and the need for social acceptance.

There is an interesting example of a folk theater genre from the state of Tamil Nadu in which women can act, namely the *Spechal Natakam* (SEIZER, 2005), an improvised theatrical modality that combines drama, dance, and buffoonery, influenced by different theatrical traditions and which serves to entertain rural workers. Its name, of Anglo-Tamil origin, is the phonetic translation of the English word "special" (SEIZER, 2005, p. 29), reflecting its degree of hybridity and "specialty," as a theater of amenities, totally improvised and, therefore, always special and unique.

In *Spechal Natakam*, women take on an ambivalent role in the scene: they play female characters well suited to the taste of local audiences: on the edge between chastity and seduction, though it is common for them to use this sex appeal to invert the scenic game and the narrative. By using humor and making the stigma they carry a critical tool, they mock that construction of the caricatured feminine, performing even more falsely the caricature of the caricature, in such a way that, somewhat disconcerted but seduced by their sensual histrionic skills, the audience laughs at the indignity they help to perpetuate (and, who knows, maybe they slightly reflect on the injustice committed by them, but we cannot know it!). Moreover, it is also frequent that, assuming a more activist tone, these women decide to openly speak about their stigmatized social condition. In a totally improvised form of theater without any kind of rehearsal and preparation, everything can be used in the scene, including what they want to hide or omit.

It is a dense discussion that goes far beyond any Western conception of activism or feminist struggle. The performance of these artists resembles an action of indirect and disjointed resistance, of a sense of belonging to an oppressed class and

gender, but which chooses not to confront the agent of oppression directly. Rather, they act in such a way as to confuse the oppressors in their own game and, in this clash of forces, usually unequal, they make room for and reconfigure the local imaginary in a slower process than what would be desirable.

The perspective of change comes, therefore, from the very theater practice, from the scenic daring, from the persistent act of performing on stage, in a bare and sometimes painful way, their own existential drama, configuring "limit-acts" (FREIRE, 1978, p.106), transgressive situations that carry within them the possibility of the "unprecedented-viable" (FREIRE, 1978, p.110), which has not been experienced yet; but, thanks to their resilient action, it can be imagined and, perhaps, in this symbolic and intangible space, some deep change in the social psyche can take place in their favor, in favor of all women in a slow process and, unfortunately, also marked by many abuses and gender violence.

Inhabiting this interstitial condition, these artists sometimes work as mediators between the public and their mythical narratives, their sacredness; sometimes entertaining those who despise them, reinforcing, on stage, the stigma that oppresses and demeans them, from which they gain their livelihood and revenge against a patriarchal and sexist system. Folk theater communities are, therefore, spaces of resistance, inclusion and mutual cooperation between cisgender women who find an extremely subtle way of resisting, attenuating, such as "water dropping day by day wears the hardest rock away," the stigma, prejudice, and oppression between successive generations of women and artists.

Final considerations

It is noteworthy that such ambivalence from the *Devadasis*, *Pen Veshams*, *Aravanis*, *Jogappas*, and cisgender women of *Spechal Natakam*, clearly follows the logic of the patriarchal system and is articulated at its convenience with the intent to control this powerful and dangerous cisgender and transsexual female, while feeding on this imaginary to sustain their traditional rituals, narratives and performances, especially in the rural environment, but also affecting the art forms considered classical.

It is a process of exploration and control of these multiple females, marked by a deep physical and psychological violence of caste and gender, which end up configuring a heterogeneous, broad, vulnerable, and marginalized social group – but not incapable of revolting, creating their own strategies of action, such as the aforementioned example of the artists of *Spechal Natakam* and also of the *Gulabi Gang*⁸ or women who, wearing pink sarees and armed with bamboo sticks, fight for women's rights, especially those from the lower castes in an absolutely admirable movement of empowerment and cooperation among women.

Despite the examples of exclusion previously mentioned, the folk theater community, which is very large and diverse, is quite inclusive in terms of caste, gender, religion, social class, marital status, and age. Perhaps, it is one of the most inclusive social groups of India precisely because of its "permissiveness and lust." A community that greatly suffers from the stigma of a social group without *Murai*, that is, "contrary to normality, rules and order" (SEIZER, 2005, p. 33), true

⁸ GULABI GANG :: Women Empowerment India <<https://gulabigang.in/>>

outcasts. Such receptivity is not that broad among the highest castes in India, posing great difficulties for the acceptance of hereditary dancers, descendants of the *Devadasis*, in this “select” social group of classical artists, in which the disputes to control this tradition, which gave rise to *Bharatanatyam*, are marked by many conflicts and divergent narratives.

In this troubled environment, always precarious, several stigmatized individuals meet and bond. Aware of their peculiar condition, they create organizational and performative strategies to guarantee their material and symbolic existences, considering that rural societies deem theater as an almost exclusive form of entertainment, being an interesting field of work, although socially uncomfortable.

Many present-day Indian activist-artists, such as T. M. Krishna⁹, an internationally recognized singer of Carnatic music (southern Indian music system), express the desire to firmly combat such distortion, through political actions that include reestablishing hereditary dancers and transsexual devotees of the goddess *Yellamma* the historical importance and protagonism that were denied to them in a cultural phenomenon that, originally, existed to worship the ambivalent forces of the sacred feminine, originating elevated forms of worship through dance and singing, and which within a patriarchal and sexist society, turned into a brutal system of violence, exclusion, and social stigma against cisgender and transsexual women.

The narratives oppose and clash each other in an important processes of historical revisionism, of reclaiming usurped spaces and struggles for human rights for cisgender and transsexual women, in a social, political, and religious context that is still hostile to these transformations, but not disregarding the need to advance in this territory, as advocated by the Indian constitution itself and that overflows into the social body in the form of activism, unfolding a phase of ebullition and strong social transformation, precisely when conservative forces and the nationalist discourse of *Hindutva*¹⁰ rule India.

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⁹ About T. M. Krishna: <<https://www.facebook.com/tmkrishna/posts/339743247523333>>

¹⁰ Hindu Nationalist Movement, created at the beginning of the 20th century by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, whose purpose was to defend a Hindu India formed by those who were born in that place, who had it as their ancestral territory, and shared common cultural aspects. In the extreme, it induces sectarian and excluding postures, present in ultranationalist and conservative discourses, such as the discourses of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which led Narendra Modi to power (SAVARKAR, 2016).

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