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Notes From the Field

Rage as a Method: Beyond Hope in the Field

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ABSTRACT

To speak of methods is to speak of the tools through which knowledge is gathered and produced. Yet, method can also be understood as a mode of engagement that shapes what becomes perceptible and how we reproduce political worlds. Fieldwork, then, is at once the application of techniques to make sense of a research problem, but also, ultimately, an encounter that rearranges our intellectual expectations and affective dispositions alike. This note develops a discussion around one such rearrangement: from hope to rage, both as a lament that developed in the field and as a proposition that could help us think about how knowledge is produced under conditions of closure, repetition, and the exhaustion of hope.

In anthropological engagements with political affect, Miyazaki's (2004) theorization of 'hope as a method' has been particularly influential. It encourages scholars to suspend teleological assumptions about political outcomes and remain attentive to the unfolding of uncertain futures. This orientation has been ethically necessary to guard against a rather patronizing "prediction of knowledge" (Miyazaki 2004, p. 2), but also analytically productive in cases where political trajectories remain indeterminate and fragile. It has also generated a recognizable conceptual style that privileges futurity, through which field observations acquire interpretive coherence. Yet, the temporal conditions that shape many field sites are not defined by indeterminacy alone. They are, at times, marked by frightful predictability and a reluctant awareness of structural closures, where hope can risk becoming a normative demand that must be perceived and narrated even in sites that render such narration increasingly strained.

My fieldwork unfolded within precisely such conditions. I study proscription—the practice through which governments ban or declare organizations unlawful, and criminalize their existence and forms of association. The project traces a specific category of proscription under Indian law called the 'unlawful association', through three broad routes: One concerns historical contextualization how ideas about organizational character, propensity, or political volition are situated within longer classificatory traditions of South Asian identities. Another concerns legal inscription, including the ways statutory frameworks encode assumptions about the redeemability of associations. A third concerns the contemporaneous tangible sites that can be observed—executive notifications and judicial proceedings through which the state proscribes associations and determines their futures.

To contextualize my understanding of rage as a method, I draw on the affective traces across the aforementioned sites: through findings from the archive, observations of two [anonymized] tribunals in 2024 set up under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act of 1967 (UAPA) to adjudicate the government's ban, interviews with lawyers who have contested such bans, and conversations with friends and civil society members during the fieldwork.

Findings show that in discourses saturated with "rising" Hindu nationalism in India, Hindu organizations have historically faced bans only rarely, and when they have, the bans have never lasted. Since the enactment of UAPA in 1967, bans have been reviewed by tribunals, which are civil judicial bodies tasked with examining whether the government's decision is justified. In practice, however, tribunals almost always confirm the government's order. Across all cases examined, the only instances where tribunals

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have cancelled the government's bans involved Hindu nationalist organizations: the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) and the *Bajrang Dal* in 1993, and the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP) in 1995. Another cancellation concerned the *Students' Islamic Movement of India* (SIMI) in 2008, but the tribunal's order was immediately stayed by the Supreme Court, and the ban was reinstated under a new order. In general, organizations in border regions and minority collectives, irrespective of their cultural or political identities or stated goals, are held to impossible legal and ideological standards before these tribunals.

Interviews with lawyers contesting bans were a mix of hope, frustration, and fatigue. On the one hand, there was a belief that "this may look too technical and mundane, but this is how we catch them [the state] on little things." On the other hand, a recognition persisted that "there is no scope for intelligent argumentation", and, eventually, a withdrawal from contestation altogether: "we are not contesting anymore, as there is no point in doing it anymore" (personal communication, 2024).

Observations of tribunals were also marked by an expectation that groups vehemently contesting their bans—which, according to the latter, were based on accusations that were neither specific, nor transparent, nor coherent, nor up-to-date—might break the cycle of unquestioned confirmation—only for that expectation to collapse.

Over time, the tension between two temporal registers—one oriented toward futurity, the other marked by cumulative closure—generated an affective landscape that was difficult to stabilize within hope-centered frameworks. To clarify, hope remains indispensable for sustenance, as a tactical repertoire, and as all that people have under siege. However, for the specific site I was studying: proscription and the tribunals, I no longer understood what hope was. Hope, after all, claims to offer a direction, but it also absorbs everything: persistence, despair, endurance, silence, and even tentative surrender, as proponents of 'skillful hope' (Han-Pile and Stern 2024) have recently suggested. At times, its all-encompassing nature can feel less an open embrace and more an occupation that lays claim to every affect and possibility that could be generated in politics. Moreover, hope is not just a feeling or a virtue with unlimited ends; it is also a politics that emerges in response to what the state tolerates and is willing to respond to. One cannot hope in a grammar that unsettles the institutions that ask for hope. One may critique the state, but never hope for its undoing, for that constitutes 'losing' hope.

I want to take a pause and not write from a place of hope, but from something more persistent and palpable, if not mutually exclusive—rage. Because what do we do when we operate within structures that are so foreclosed that historical accumulation and institutional patterns of predictability cannot be ignored? How does one make sense of Miyazaki, that "hope can only be represented by further acts of hope" (2004, p. 29) in a structure that has only worked for RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal?

Philosophical debates have sought to make sense of rage, primarily by differentiating between its legitimate or principled forms and those considered destructive, pathological, or narcissistic. While much of this literature uses the language of anger rather than rage, I use the terms interchangeably here to draw attention to a broader tendency to classify and regulate what is otherwise experienced as excess. Nussbaum (2017), for instance, distances herself from the vindictive nature of rage and frames it in relation to questions of moral repair and forward-looking transformation, while recent discussions also variously emphasize the need to render rage "politically productive" (Cherry 2022). Further, Jagmohan (2020) highlights the risks and constraints that shape the public expression of rage among oppressed populations, for whom overt confrontations may temporarily restore dignity but do little to alter their political status. These interventions share an underlying concern with what rage does—the outcomes it generates, the transformations it enables, and the harms it risks reproducing. However, it is essential to complicate them too.

This brings me to the fourth element in my field: my conversations with friends, colleagues, and civil liberties actors in the field, which at times were about ethical reflections on organizations concerning my research, and at times about mobilizations and events happening elsewhere in the world. Those conversations often returned to familiar injunctions: what is justified as resistance, and what is proportionate as a political response to the State. And such formulations were articulated by individuals deeply attentive to structural asymmetries in global politics. Yet, they also implicated a presumption that the political horizons within which rage is evaluated remain broadly comparable across contexts. The moment rage among marginalized actors is foregrounded, it tends to be immediately equated with the most extreme manifestations of domination and abuse, and rendered suspect in advance. Needless to say, not everyone has the privilege to express rage. However, it would be disingenuous to ignore that some people already are—either through exhaustion or rejection of mainstream political systems. I want to ask, what are we doing when we see that rage and that annihilation of hope?

It is here that rage must be foregrounded as an urgent and necessary method: a way of registering and refusing the terms through which the field is made intelligible. To treat rage as a method would mean: (1) spilling into moral excess, (2) redistributing obligations, and (3) writing with rage.

First, rage introduces moral excess into the research process. In instances where the scale of injustice exceeds the frameworks through which it can be institutionally processed; allyship, solidarities and knowledge production must confront their moral discomforts and refuse the proportional reasoning through which politics is often domesticated into palatable categories. Rage insists on recognizing that certain forms of dispossession cannot be adequately addressed through incremental reform or everyday negotiations alone, particularly when endless mechanisms of impossibilities continue to structure the terrain of political engagement.

Second, rage redistributes the burden of obligations. Going beyond, "we must note what the oppressed have to say or do," and merely reproducing it, rage unsettles the tacit expectation with the oppressed to continue generating strategies, articulating alternative futures, and sustaining institutional engagement even when confronted with long histories of defeat. Rage flips and redirects analytic attention and demands outwards—toward the broader assemblages of observers, institutions, solidaristic actors, and knowledge producers who continue to inhabit spaces where

acts of confrontation still retain credibility. Treating rage as a method allows this evaluative structure itself to become an object of analysis, and disrupts the demand that sticks responsibility upon those whose political horizons have already been narrowed.

Third, rage alters what counts as scholarly production and the researcher's entanglement within the field. In my case, rage became significantly palpable during the writing process. Academia carries an implicit expectation that the identification of systemic constraint must lead somewhere—toward recommendations, reinterpretations of agency, or at least a re-opening of political possibility. Writing thus became a site of methodological decision: whether to fuel this demand, which I had no reason to believe in, or to sustain the discomfort that certain infrastructures and processes do not currently yield actionable pathways. Such realizations, however, also turn back upon the researcher. They require confronting what we are unwilling to do from our places of privilege, and, more pointedly, what we hesitate to write when faced with the scale of dispossession we claim to analyze. Where, and why, does rage remain regulated, and at times absent, in our writing, even when it lives unmistakably in our hearts?

We need to write and do more with rage. And when people ask, Is rage not counterproductive?—The answer is: anything can be counterproductive when power decides what is productive. That is not a flaw in rage, but a fact about power.

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