

Ecofascism and the politics of de/territorialization

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Abstract

This article proposes that ecofascism captures popular imagination and politics by drawing from and extending *localized* conceptions and practices of enchanted ecologies. It examines how ecofascist politics draws on emplaced connections between humans, nonhumans, and gods to territorialize and naturalize beloved subjects while deterritorializing and denaturalizing hated others. I use territorialization to capture how the transcendent collective to which right-wing actors appeal and which they seek to protect is made meaningful by situating it within ecological connections that are already *in place*. Deterritorialization, by extension, is the temporal, symbolic, and, sometimes, quite literal displacement of hated others from within this web of connection. Ecofascist politics, the article argues, is animated by this constant move between territorialization and deterritorialization.

Keywords

Ecofascism, Himalaya, territorialization, ontology, India, religion

“*Devbhumi me dev to zaroori hote hi hain, lekin bhumi bhi zaroori hoti hai* (of course, gods are important in a land of gods, but land is important too),” Pan Singh Bisht said, waving his wizened hands in the air for emphasis. “Our gods live in forests and fields. If these people are allowed to grab that land and destroy the forest, where will our gods go? The *devbhumi* (land of gods) will be destroyed. That is exactly what they want.” Recently retired from his post as a low-level state government employee, Bisht had moved from Loshi, a mountain village where I first met him during my dissertation fieldwork in 2010, to the lowland city of Haldwani where two of his three sons lived. Bisht’s face was buried in a newspaper when I entered the backyard shaded by tall papaya trees. He folded the paper carefully as he told me that he had been reading about the Uttarakhand government’s demolition drive against encroachments on state-owned forest land. Many of the structures demolished, he said, were *mazaars*, shrines usually built around the tomb of a venerated Muslim saint.

These *mazaars*, Bisht went on, were part of what he described as a sinister Muslim conspiracy to evict Hindu gods from their homes and desacralize the *devbhumi* (land of gods), a term often used in popular and political discourse to mark Uttarakhand, which is home to several important Hindu temples and pilgrimage sites, as an innately Hindu sacred geography. Bisht was far from alone in holding this belief. At the time of our meeting in 2023, the BJP government of Uttarakhand claimed to have

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demolished 300 “illegal” *mazaars* and “freed” thousands of acres of state-owned land, particularly forest land, from “encroachment.” This was no innocent encroachment, the state declared; its purpose was “land jihad” or “mazaar jihad.”¹ “Mazaar jihad” and “land jihad” are right-wing conspiracy theories which hold that Indian Muslims are part of a global Islamist plot to weaken and displace Hindus by seizing control of their land through the construction of “illegal” religious structures that have no real religious significance.² The aim of this conspiracy, the Chief Minister of the state declared in a television interview, was the destruction of the essential character (*mool swaroop*) of the *devb-humi*.³ Such articulations work powerfully to place public (state-owned) land within a Hindu sacred geography that is represented as at risk from non-Hindus.

In what follows, I draw on ethnographic research in Uttarakhand to examine the growing popularity of right-wing environmental discourse in the region. Broadly, I argue that ecofascism captures popular imagination and politics by drawing from and extending *localized* conceptions and practices of enchanted or “uncanny” (Fernando, 2022) ecologies. More specifically, I am interested in understanding how ecofascist politics draws on emplaced connections between humans, nonhumans, and gods to territorialize and naturalize beloved subjects while deterritorializing and denaturalizing hated others. I use territorialization to capture how the transcendent collective to which fascists appeal and which they seek to protect is made meaningful by situating it within ecological connections that are already *in place*. Deterritorialization, by extension, is the temporal, symbolic, and, sometimes, quite literal (as in the case of *mazaar* demolitions) displacement of particular subjects from within this web of connection. Ecofascist politics is animated by this constant move between territorialization and deterritorialization. If one is to understand the global rise of ecofascism, I contend, it is crucial not to oppose a disembodied and disenchanting fascism to an enchanted and resistant ordinary, but to understand how it intertwines the everyday with the transcendent across multiple scales ranging from the local to the national and even, as I describe later in this piece, the global.

In my ethnographic context, for example, right-wing Hindus territorialize a metaphysical Hindu sacred in particular bodies such that it resonates with situated ideas and practices of connection between beings who are simultaneously natural, cultural, and divine. Many Hindus in Uttarakhand believe that the land they inhabit is itself innately Hindu, with rivers, forests, rocks, and mountains recognized as sentient and divine Hindu entities (Drew, 2017; Govindrajana, 2018; Mathur, 2016; Ranjan, 2024). This ecological articulation of Hinduism is not abstract, but thoroughly territorialized—that is, tied to specific and emplaced more-than human geographies and relationships. These “uncanny ecologies” (Fernando, 2022) have, of course, long been appropriated by the Hindu right, as Emma Mawdsley (2006) so deftly demonstrated in her analysis of the neo-traditionalist environment discourse of the Chipko movement and the anti-Tehri Dam agitation in Uttarakhand.⁴ More recent right-wing assertions about the natural Hinduness of Uttarakhand build on this history to position Muslims as an existential threat to a Hindu body politic that is framed in ecological terms as encompassing human/nonhuman/divine beings (Bhan and Govindrajana, 2024; Chakraborty et al., 2023; Joshi, 2021; Ranjan, 2024). Like global ecofascist movements, right-wing Hindu discourse in the region thus presents Hindus as attuned to and, indeed, inseparable from an enchanted, animated ecology such that any threat to the former *naturally* imperils the latter. For someone like Bisht, the presence of Muslim shrines was an existential threat not just to forests but also to the gods with whom these woods were inextricably connected and, by extension, the humans who were dependent on these gods. In narratives such as these, Muslims are deterritorialized, represented as an “out of place” threat to a territorialized, emplaced Hindu subject.

I heard another such narrative about the out-of-placeness of Muslims in the course of a conversation with Vikas, a locally recruited forest guard whom I had known for over a decade. What struck me about this particular narrative was how it seamlessly connected local concerns to global fears. I was talking to Vikas about his work when he suddenly declared that forests in the region were under



Figure 1. This is a screenshot (taken on 6 August 2025) of an X post (created on 16 June 2023) by a media organization that describes itself as a “top pro-Hindutva organization.” It shares an image, designed by the artist Manoj Kureel, which depicts a man who is visually coded as Muslim (sporting a beard and wearing a green kurta pajama and prayer cap) scrambling up a hill labeled Himachal. He holds a burning torch in his hand and is running towards a man seated atop the hill. The man atop the hill, visually coded as a Hindu ascetic (wearing rudraksh beads in his hair and around his neck, and meditating in front of a trishul while seated on a tiger skin), opens one eye and says “Oh no, here too?.” Behind them, a green hill labeled Uttarakhand is on fire in several places. Source: <https://x.com/KreatelyMedia/status/1669761191080591377>.

threat from “jihadis.” He said he had heard from a trusted source that the recent forest fires raging across the state were the work of Muslims. “They know this is our *devbhumi*,” he said. “They want to uproot us, our gods, from it. That’s why they burn our forests, pollute our rivers, cut our mountains. It’s all part of a bigger plan by international terrorist organizations: *aag jihad* (fire jihad).” The image below (Figure 1), which was created by an artist called Manoj Kureel and circulated widely online, speaks to the broader context and viral appeal of this kind of conspiratorial thinking. Indeed, after our conversation, a Google search revealed that the “forest fire jihad” conspiracy theory had captured not only Vikas’ imagination, but also that of right-wing actors globally. The United States-based RAIR (Rise Align Ignite Reclaim) Foundation, formerly Resistance Against Islamic Radicals, reported that the fires in Uttarakhand were set by “migrant Muslim arsonists”, and asked if Indian authorities were “taking into account the numerous commands of Islamic terrorist groups urging Muslims to ignite wildfires to terrorize non-Muslim populations?”⁵ Similar theories about groups like Al-Qaeda setting fire to forests in Russia⁶ or the Australian bush⁷ as part of an organized terrorist campaign remind us of the ways in which right-wing politics across the globe territorializes certain bodies and deterritorializes others in ways that beg for an interscalar analysis of the resonance between local and global contexts (Agard-Jones, 2013).

Indeed, I was reminded of how important it is for ecofascists to *displace* their hated others during a conversation with Madan, a member of a right-wing Hindu organization, in 2023. Madan was railing against what he described as an explosion in Muslim shrines across the buffer zone of Jim Corbett National Park, India’s oldest wildlife sanctuary, one edge of which lay close to his home in Kaladhungi. “Our gods belong here,” he said. “Tigers and leopards are *vahanas* (vehicles or carriers) for our goddesses. Our gods used to frolic in the jungles. If our temples are in the forest, they belong there. But Muslim gods are from Arabia. What are their *mazaars* doing in the forest? They have no meaning there.” I was struck by how Madan’s narrative denied the possibility that one of the “primary experiences of the sacred” for Indian Muslims was “ecological,” whereby the “sanctity and blessings of Muslim saints was integrally linked to local ecology and topography (Hamja and Menon, 2024; Jalais, 2010; Taneja, 2017: 182). By displacing Muslims from local ecologies, people like Madan were able to compellingly represent Muslim presence as an existential threat to Hindus who were imagined as an integral part of an ecological web of connections. Madan’s final words on the topic—“when their gods don’t have roots in this earth, how can they?”—were a powerful reminder of how ecofascism is fertilized by a politics of territorialization and deterritorialization that moves meaningfully across multiple scales.

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1. <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/uttarakhand-chief-minister-pushkar-singh-dhami-land-love-thook-jihad-local-body-elections>.
2. While the state government, which has been in the hands of the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) since 2017, claimed that the demolition drive did not target members of any particular religious community, the fact that it identified encroachment as a strategy of “jihad” left ordinary observers convinced as to the religious identity of the people it treated as offenders. In Uttarakhand and elsewhere, “land jihad” was often spoken of as working in tandem with “love jihad,” another right-wing conspiracy theory which claims that Muslim men are seducing Hindu women under false pretenses in order to convert them to Islam. Hindu land and Hindu women were thus portrayed as under constant assault in this conspiratorial discourse.
3. https://x.com/ians_india/status/1783111598569353611.
4. This is not to say that there is perfect synergy between these different imaginings and practices of an ecological Hindu sacred. For more on everyday dissonance and tension between different kinds of Hindu actors in Uttarakhand, see Govindrajan, 2021, 2022.
5. <https://rairfoundation.com/fire-jihad-unleashed-acres-forests-engulfed-india-multiple/>.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/03/russia-al-qaida-forest-jihad>.
7. <https://www.afp.gov.au/news-centre/media-release/victorian-man-jailed-terrorism-offences>.

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