

# India: Backstory 2024: They were bigoted gaurakshaks, but they were good to me

Monday 13 January 2025, by [BHALLA Vineet](#) (Date first published: 27 December 2024).

**The cognitive dissonance of being able to see the humanity in hateful people.**

“I’m sure you don’t actually mean that,” I told Sonu Jat, slightly bewildered. “You are a good, decent person.”

Jat had just told me, in a rare, unguarded moment, that he would be ready to kill anyone who slaughters a cow.

“You are right. We won’t actually kill anyone,” Sonu Jat told me apologetically, with a weak smile. “I just got carried away.”

Jat, 29, is the Gurgaon district head of the Akhil Bharatiya Bajrang Vahini, one of several cow vigilante groups or gau rakshaks – literally cow protectors – active in Haryana.

I was sitting with him and some of his associates in a small, dilapidated shop in Badshahpur in the Gurugram district of Haryana on a sweltering September afternoon.

Jat and I had been talking for nearly two hours. I was working on a [story](#) about the declining electoral support for the Bharatiya Janata Party among gau rakshaks ahead of the Haryana Assembly elections. He was one of the handful of gau rakshaks who had agreed to speak to me on record.

Jat has a menacing smile and a slightly unhinged look in his eyes. I felt a hint of apprehension entering a small room with him and his associates when I first met him.

However, he was soft-spoken and charming. He was generous in his courtesy towards me during our interview, offering me tea, biscuits and soft drinks. I warmed up to him.

At an extremely fraught time for journalism in India, when most people are hesitant to speak to the media, as a journalist, it is hard not to but feel instant gratitude to anyone willing to speak on record at length.

Throughout the interview, Jat had tried to impress upon me that gau rakshaks are peaceful and law-abiding citizens, who make it a point never to harm those who they chase down on suspicion of being cow smugglers. It is the cow-slaughtering Muslims from the adjoining district of Nuh who break the law, he claimed. “We just hand them over to the police,” he said.

In reality, though, ever since the Bharatiya Janata Party came to power for the first time in Haryana in 2014, gau rakshaks in the state have been associated with incidents of [harassment](#), [assault](#) and even [murder](#).

Why had I immediately brought up Jat’s innate humanity and tried to convince him that he didn’t and

couldn't mean to kill another person? Perhaps because I wanted to believe that he is not a bad person.

Two things had stood out during my conversations with Jat and other gau rakshaks for the story.

As someone who feels strongly about animal rights, I could not help but be impressed by their dedication towards and reverence for the cow.

They would wince if you called it an animal and insisted that you address it as "gau mata" or Mother Cow. They also seemed genuinely pained by the poor conditions in which stray cattle in Haryana find themselves. Our conversations were peppered with the men taking calls to direct ambulances to spots where an injured cow had been found. They also showed me photos on their phones of ill and injured cows that they had rehabilitated in gaushalas and nursed back to good health.

But I was also startled by the deep hatred and prejudice they held towards Muslims.

They painted all Muslims as Hindu-hating beef-eaters. They expressed contempt for Hindus who do not revere cows and activists who question their vigilantism. They also espoused bizarre conspiracy theories about institutionalised marginalisation of Hindus both within and outside India. They did not respect the rule of law. Their political outlook and worldview were built on falsehoods.

It is easy to want to dislike such bigoted persons. But I could not bring myself to.

Like Jat, the other gau rakshaks had shown me impeccable courtesy during our meetings. Despite being visibly of limited means, all of them had offered me refreshments and snacks. One of them gave me a tour of the gaushala he volunteered at, during which his affection for the cows was obvious. Another had offered me his hookah – a sign of respect among Haryanvi men.

I suppose it is natural to like someone who is nice to you.

I am fully aware that I may not have been extended such courtesy if I were not a cisgendered man with a Hindu name.

Yet, during the interviews, I found a part of myself feeling bad that my report will end up shedding light on their vigilantism and bigotry, hoping they would offer me something to rationalise or mitigate their ideology.

In retrospect, I think that in order to evade cognitive dissonance, I was trying to separate these people from their ideas. These were not bad people, I was thinking. They are just people with bad ideas.

As we navigate a time of great political polarisation in India, it is perhaps worth reflecting: Can you look at someone in isolation of their ideas? And what separates a bad person from a good one with repugnant ideas?

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