THE VIRTUAL HINDU R@SHTRA

SAFFRON NATIONALISM AND NEW MEDIA

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To Kala Shahani, 1919–2005,
who lived an idea of Indianness
that was radically compassionate, egalitarian, and inclusive

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Introduction

Before I embark upon my analysis of Hindu nationalism and new media, a description of my background as a researcher and commentator on the topic and an explanation of my approach may be helpful here. I have been studying the online Hindu Right and Hindu nationalism for the better part of two decades. My interest in it was sparked during the late 1990s when I worked for an Indian internet start-up, rediff.com. By this time the internet had just about taken root in India, even though we could only access the online world via 56K dial-up modems at what now seems like a glacial pace. This was also the phase of the first Silicon Valley boom and bubble, which would pop in 2000, the year I moved to the USA for graduate study at Emory University in Atlanta. I was intrigued enough by what I had seen of the Hindu Right online to want to study it seriously. The deathly serious commitment of supporters to the cause of Hindu nationalism, the global character of Hindu nationalist groups which spanned across India, USA, Australia, and the UK, the virulence aimed at Indian minorities, especially Muslim and Christian Indians, and at Muslims and Christians in general, the palpable anxieties about Hindu and Indian identities coupled with the aggressive display of territoriality with regard to the internet itself – all struck me as deeply fascinating.

At Emory University, I was able to conduct research on the topic at a unique interdisciplinary centre, the Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts (ILA), under the aegis of its culture, history, and theory track. The ILA, as it was known, offered graduate students a space to design their own dissertations across disciplines from the humanities

and social sciences, and to work with scholars across several disciplines. My dissertation focused on Hindu nationalist communities online, and the thesis eventually would translate into a monograph, *Technology and Nationalism in India*[1]. While there had been some scholarly work on the Hindu Right online, largely in the form of academic essays and book chapters scattered across journals and volumes, my book was the first full-length academic study of the phenomenon.

In my academic monograph, I argued that the specific form taken by Hindu nationalism online needed to be analysed in terms of two frameworks. On the one hand, it needed to be located against the backdrop of the long history of the relationship between technology and nationalism in India, going back at least to the British colonial era, when technology was associated with Western knowledge and superiority, and later was sought to be reclaimed by Indians as culturally Hindu and Indian. This desire lies at the roots of the anxiety that we can see even today among Indians who seek validation from the West by listing ancient Indian achievements in science and technology or insist on the Hindu origins of the internet or argue that NASA (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration) is mostly peopled by Brahmins. On the other hand, as I argued in the book, Hindu nationalism in cyberspace also had to be studied with reference to the sociology of internet use, that is, by examining the particular modes or practices and habits of online communication. This involved looking at a series of questions that, as it turns out, continue to hold relevance even today – questions such as the extent to which online communication might promote disagreement and tension rather than fruitful exchange, the potential of the internet to isolate individuals and communities or to promote solidarity and bonding within and across groups, the extent to which online communication can contribute to mass-scale political movements and whether any such impact could be truly lasting or would be merely ephemeral. The larger general questions I examined in the book remain valid today, for example, what new theoretical perspectives and vocabulary does analysis of the internet demand? What meaningful generalisations about the internet can one offer without being reductive or simplistic?

Technology and Nationalism in India drew on social theory and engaged with assorted bodies of academic literature. Using a statistical technique, it also compared online Hindu nationalism with online Kashmiri and Sikh nationalism to identify what was unique to the first and what it shared with other subcontinental forms of nationalism. The book focused on websites as a prime source of Hindu Right discourse, given that the time period that it covered ended around 2006, when social media platforms had not yet become as central a part of the online space as they are now. It proposed a theorisation of archives of online conversation, exchange, and expression and then analysed these archives, which primarily consisted of Hindu nationalism on the internet as well as other types of South Asian nationalism or sub-nationalism.

In a very specific sense, this book picks up where the last one left off. It is not an academic monograph meant for a narrow scholarly audience but a general work which, I hope, will interest and engage a broad audience within and outside India. While informed by scholarship, including the latest relevant work, which is woven into arguments across the course of the book, it does not employ technical and specialised vocabularies. At the same time, for better or worse, this is a book written by an academic and is marked by that sensibility, for which I do not think any apology is necessary. I am not a journalist and should point out categorically that this is not a work of journalism. In keeping with my theoretical and methodological interests, the book focuses on the texts and contexts of archives of Hindu nationalism on the internet, offering a close reading and granular analysis of illustrative examples with reference to the wider political economy of global and national media. The book does not aim to be an exhaustive compendium of all themes in the world of Hindu nationalism on Facebook, Twitter, or the internet at large, choosing instead to highlight expressions of online Hindu nationalism that reveal and illuminate meaningful insights about the phenomenon. The particular examples of online Hindu nationalism that I parse in the book are analysed as representations of broader national and global trends in politics, culture, and communication. In terms of content, the most crucial difference between this book and my earlier work, reflecting developments in the sphere of media technology

itself, is the strong emphasis in this text on social media and, more broadly, Web 2.0, that is, the interactive, meme-powered, viral web swirling with user-generated content. Jenkins, Ford, and Green in their book, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture,* call this 'spreadable media,' which in their view does not carry the negative connotations of contagion that the metaphor of virality bears[2]. While the earlier incarnation of the web was not altogether bereft of interactive features, such as instant messengers and chat, the speed and cost of data as well as developments in mobile technology and the like since then have fundamentally altered the nature of interaction online.

I should also mention that since May 2014, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition swept to power in a stunningly comprehensive victory, I have, through an unintended experiment of sorts, been privy to a close look at Hindu nationalism on social media. A day or so after the 2014 election results, I started a parody account on Twitter named 'RushdieExplainsIndia' with the handle @RushdieExplains, which sought to explain political developments in India in a light-hearted manner through the voice and sensibility of an established and famed writer. The parody account, which I started as an inside joke meant for a few friends, went viral and got a fair bit of attention over the next year or so in the form of articles and interviews with Scroll, the *Times of India*, and BBC, among others. In 2016, I rebranded the account as @IndiaExplained, pivoting to a more directly political style of commentary. Since then, along with a friend and colleague based in London, who goes by the moniker @BuntyBolta, the project has expanded to include a podcast by the same name, in which we discuss stories from India that might be of interest to a global diaspora and to commentators interested in Indian affairs.

In both its earlier incarnation and its later one, my Twitter account was the target of attacks of Hindu right-wing trolls and Modi 'bhakts'.[3] Unpleasant as the experience was, I had a chance to experience first-hand the well-oiled and remarkably effective pro-BJP and Hindu Right online machine in all its glorious virulence. The account was routinely the target of well-known Hindu right-wing trolls who described it as anti-national, pro-Congress, and part of a

Left-wing cabal out to destabilise India. The account was also, on several occasions, the target of a concerted attack in the form of a relentless barrage of abusive tweets. Twice, at the dog-whistling of a well-known Hindu Right troll who claimed to have 'outed' me – even though I had made my identity public long ago – an army of Modi and BJP supporters flooded my employer's Twitter handle with complaints about me. My employer was very supportive. I am also aware that as a tenured academic in USA, I was protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. Over the years, the @IndiaExplained Twitter account has increasingly moved to highlighting social injustices against minority groups like Muslims and Dalits at the hands of the Indian state, the Hindu Right, and the BJP, which means that it is still often subject to abuse. I have also received a few death threats by email and on Twitter in response to some of my tweets, which I have had to report to local police authorities. Thankfully, these have not translated into acts of physical violence.

These experiences over more than four years have given me a direct sense and flavour of what it is like to be at the receiving end of the BJP's formidable online war machine and have also been instructive in helping me understand the peculiarities, unexpected rewards, and vicissitudes of online worlds. From a research point of view, they have revealed useful insights into the psychology of the online supporters of Modi. As I detail in the book, there are some issues, more than others, that tend to trigger Hindu right-wingers into abuse and expressions of rage. And my experiences have shed light on the continuities as well as discontinuities between earlier manifestations of Hindu nationalism and its new avatars in the age of social media. As India goes to the polls this year for another general election, social media and social networks will be central in the phase of campaigning as a source of both information and disinformation. Both the shorter and longer histories of Hindu nationalism and new media will be in play. It is this world that I seek to both describe and explore in the book.

1

The Landscape of New Media Today

Claims of a glorious Hindu past, harking back to a time when Hindu civilisation was at the leading edge of global technology in every area, from cancer research to telecommunication networks. Immense rage at the West for having stolen ancient Indian knowledge like yoga and Ayurveda and rebranding it as their own. The insistence that India is culturally and politically a Hindu country. Discussions about amending the Indian Constitution to erase references to secularism or to overturn the special status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Routine allegations of 'disloyalty' against Muslim Indians, from India's Vice President Mohammad Hamid Ansari to former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, to India's leading film actor Shah Rukh Khan to ordinary Muslims. Elaborate stories of plots by Islamists, Naxalites, and urban intellectuals out to kill the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, usually played on the television channel Times Now, which claims access to secret documents seized from would-be assassins by Indian intelligence agencies[1].

The list does not end here. The nefarious deeds of Pakistan, like its policy of granting shelter and protection to Indian underworld don Dawood Ibrahim, known to be responsible for the 1993 Mumbai bomb blasts. Viral WhatsApp messages about the secret rationale behind inscrutable Modi government policies like demonetisation. Repeated incantations of loyalty to the army. Wave upon wave of concerted attacks, often identical in their phrasing and even their

errors, on perceived critics of Narendra Modi, the BJP, the Hindu Right, and Hinduism. Accusatory whispers of a fifth pillar comprising Indian journalists with secret sympathies for Pakistan. Rumours about Nehru's sexual life and his secret Muslim identity. Elaborate conspiracies involving Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Vatican, Sonia Gandhi, and even the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) – all accused of undermining India in some way or another through corruption, conversion, or, simply, misguided ideology. And critics of Modi and the Hindu Right described in a whole new vocabulary, of 'libtards', 'sickularists,' and 'urban Naxals,' that has entered public conversation about politics since 2014[2].

On the other hand, less strident but still visible, are comments that seek to counter these popular points of view, often in serious, satirical, or tasteless fashion. Jokes and barbs abound about Modi's mysteriously missing master's degree in the curious subject of 'Entire Political Science'. Similarly, there is widespread scepticism about the myths surrounding the Indian prime minister; whether stories of a young Narendra swimming with crocodiles, his 56-inch chest, or the much-feted Gujarat model of development. Numerous tweets, Facebook posts, and links to articles about BJP President Amit Shah's role in the death of politicians, criminals, and a judge. The historic Tughlaqesque blunder of demonetisation. The ugly consequences of the normalisation of an ugly majoritarianism in numerous aspects of Indian social life.

The conversations often border on the farcical. For every five Modi followers who mock Rahul Gandhi by calling him 'Pappu' or 'Pidi', there are perhaps two supporters of the Congress leader who respond by addressing Modi as 'Feku,' a North Indian colloquialism for a yarn-spinner. The shenanigans of the Hindu Right, whether it is the unscientific assertions of BJP politicians or the virtues of cow urine, are all staples of conversation in the counterpart to the discourse of bhakts.

As a basic definition, Indian cyberspace may be defined as the sum of all conversation, networks, and connections of Indian, Indian-origin, and India-curious voices on the internet. And it is, of course, embedded in larger networks, circuits, and economies[3]. Whether it is

social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, social networks like WhatsApp, or discussion forums like Reddit, for any follower of Indian affairs on cyberspace, all of this is part of the daily churn of Indian political and social life.

Though Indian cyberspace, just like the global internet, is divided between the digital haves and have-nots, it has gradually encompassed more people in its fold, thanks to increased mobile phone penetration and cheaper data. The data resource, *Statista*, lists the number of worldwide internet users at a staggering 3.578 billion[4]. Facebook alone has two billion active users all over the world, with active users defined as those who log on to their accounts at least once a month[5]. Globally, the distribution and prevalence of internet access does not conform to any simple distinctions between first-world and third-world countries. The uneven distribution of access, leisure, and skills needed to meaningfully use the internet means that there is also an underclass in wealthy but unequal societies like the USA, where too there are pockets of the populace that fall on the wrong side of the digital divide. At the same time, there are large numbers of people in the so-called third world that can both access the internet and use it productively to improve their lives. The backwaters of the internet, that is, places that are areas of unconnected darkness, as described by the leading sociologist of the network society, Manuel Castells, can exist in the wealthy first world as much as in the poor third world[6].

Indian cyberspace, like the space of information technology at large, is part of a larger media ecosystem, which involves a range of media forms, genres, and platforms. This point should not be underestimated, for there is sometimes a tendency on the part of experts and laypersons alike to speak of the internet as if it were a *sui generis* form capable of generating unique kinds of media content, insight, or behaviours. The internet, much like other forms of media that have preceded it reflects both continuities and differences from digital television, cinema, radio, or print. More importantly, the internet is also in itself a cumulative media form: it is thus both a distinct medium and a platform for other media as well. It can be argued that with streaming music services like Spotify and Pandora, the internet has enabled the development of radio in a new direction,

while on the flip side it has also partially cannibalised other media industries, most significantly journalism and conventional advertising. One of the most profound consequences of the internet is the erosion of authority figures, like that of the credentialised journalist and editor. In doing so, the internet has democratised the information space by enabling citizen journalism and, at least theoretically, has become an instrument that can empower all voices. But it has also effaced distinctions of quality as applicable to content, and so represents an indifference to the possibility that online information may be put to undemocratic ends. In sum, then, if the internet is a leveler – as it overturns social hierarchies or renders them irrelevant – it also does away with valuable conventions of caution, gatekeeping, and verification, especially when it comes to facts and news.

In India, the internet is embedded within a political economy of media that is drastically different from the traditional state-monopolised media system of Doordarshan and All India Radio. Following the invention of the World Wide Web in 1989 by Tim Berners-Lee and India's economic liberalisation by the mid-1990s, the internet no longer remained an object of unfamiliarity for Indian elites. As India was gradually integrated into the global economy, the media landscape was radically reshaped. Starting with the introduction of foreign satellite broadcasting and commercial cable during the 1991 Gulf War, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) ceilings across media sectors were raised over a period of time[7]. Today, India boasts of almost 115,000 newspapers and periodicals, about 900 satellite TV channels, and 400 million internet users[8]. India produces the largest number of films and also has the largest market for newspapers by circulation. In 2016, India reached the milestone of a billion mobile subscribers[9]. By 2020, the media market is projected to reach $33.7 billion[10]. While monetising the digital realm has proven to be no easy task, the size of the Indian online market has invited attention from homegrown tycoons and entrepreneurs, as well as from multinational behemoths like Facebook, Apple, and Google. There are concerns that this for-profit media model in India echoes some of the more troubling aspects of American society without any corresponding safeguards, since in India, the media is not subject to a

network of media watchdogs like in the USA, neither does it have the consistent protection of speech afforded by the USA's First Amendment. Whether the privatisation of media has been an unqualified good and whether more media has meant more democracy is consequently an enormously complex question, one that has especially been brought to the fore by the prevalence of social media today.

Finally, while it may seem like stating the obvious, the internet, like the media at large, is not separate from the social world but an integral part of it – both mirroring and shaping society. Different theories about the relationship between media and society place the relative importance of each at different points in a spectrum. Scholarship in the Marxist tradition, from the Frankfurt School to the pioneering work of the great literary and cultural critic Raymond Williams, has generally analysed media in terms of its ideological power. For scholars like Theodor Adorno, mass media in the form of technologies like the cinema were central in establishing the legitimacy of fascist and Nazi ideologies in Europe. The Marxist thinker and playright Bertolt Brecht noted that while communism subjected art to politics, fascism in contrast, subjected politics to art. In other words, the aesthetic imperative was central to the politics of fascism, which explains the importance that Adolf Hitler and the Nazis granted to large-scale spectacles. Hugo Boss, a member of the Nazi party himself, made uniforms for the Nazi regime. Leni Riefenstahl, director of propaganda films for the Nazi regime, produced the technically brilliant and aesthetically compelling film, *The Triumph of the Will* (1935), which contributed to the myth of Hitler as a leader. In contrast to the European intellectual tradition, which stresses the role of ideology and non-conscious motivations, the American positivist tradition of theories of media effects, many of which are based on the impact of media on voting preferences, tend to centre on notions of choice and agency. These lines of research tend to converge with free-market models of how media institutions develop and operate. Across traditions, though, there is an agreement that each media form, whether print, television, or the internet, has its own limits and licence in terms of the nature of its influence.

In summary, as even an introductory college textbook on media studies will tell one, theories of technology that do not seek to understand users and the social context of internet usage are useless. Technology cannot be viewed in a historical, social, and political vacuum. The internet, likewise, cannot be viewed in isolation from history, politics, culture, policy, and human practices at the local, national, and global levels. For instance, internet usage by Indians, within India, as well as outside, is shaped by historical precedent and understandings of technology unique to Indians – a factor which influences social trends and shifts in the patterns of usage, though the precise nature of these historical influences will only become clear with the passage of time. From rumours about water shortages about to hit a city, to a meme about a politician that may go viral within India; from a song like 'Gangnam Style' performed on Indian streets, to a controversy about Twitter Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Jack Dorsey holding a placard that is perceived as anti-Brahmanical, the Indian internet bears the same dialectical relationship to global trends as it does to events at the local micro-level.

The point about the relevance of the social dimension is worth stressing emphatically, since Silicon Valley, which holds sway in the global public imagination as a cradle of technological development, is also a mecca to the creed of technological determinism. Whether it is the Occupy Wall Street movement, the Arab Spring, or the Women's March in Washington following Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 elections, there is a pervasive belief across communities of venture capitalists and professionals working in technology-related fields in the San Francisco Bay Area about the magical power of technology to transform humanity. This belief is profoundly contradictory and paradoxical, since in its libertarian techno-utopianism, Silicon Valley also fetishises the idea of individual freedom that would seem to contradict the notion of technology as an autonomous force capable of dictating human action. In any event, due to ample scholarly attention towards our increasing reliance on our mobile devices, herd-like behaviour online, addiction to social media, and the psychology of trolls, we have now begun to develop a rich, nuanced, and fine-grained analysis of the impact of new media on society.

It is a bit of a cliché, but one bearing more than a modicum of truth, that Indians are nothing if not opinionated. That trait, combined with a high degree of political awareness among arguably all sections of Indian society, manifests itself as a vast range of discussions and commentaries on the past, present, and future of India. The spectrum of discussion ranges from incisive reflections of public intellectuals like Ramchandra Guha and Pratap Bhanu Mehta in the pages of Indian newspapers to agitated and banal repetition of moralising judgements at the other end by the likes of television anchors like Arnab Goswami of Republic TV, Rahul Shivshankar of Times Now, Gaurav Sawant of India Today, and Sudhir Chaudhary of Zee News. In between these two extremes lies an ocean of online discourse that is shrill, cacophonous and moralistic at times and insightful at others, powerful in its efficacy at hounding transgressors on occasion, capable of generating genuine solidarity in certain moments, and frequently degenerating into trivial absurdity.

This pattern does not only hold for the Indian context; the same description could well be applied to American and British political conversations on the internet too, both of which are similarly prone to the extreme partisanship seen in the case of India. In India, self-identified liberals, supporters of the Congress or the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), or defenders of secularism in general, seem to inhabit an alternate political reality and have a different understanding of the fundamental nature of Indian society and the state, as compared to the adherents of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism, admirers of Narendra Modi, the hardline Hindu nationalist prime minister, or right-wingers in general. Similarly, in the United States of America, Democrats and Republicans, supporters and critics of US President Donald Trump, and liberals and conservatives seem divided as never before, with an unbreachable gulf between them. In Britain, too, the division of public opinion about Brexit manifests itself in similar extremes online. In sum, Indian political life online may seem to resemble online political life elsewhere, possibly exceptional only to the extent that Indians, as Amartya Sen has suggested, are a somewhat more argumentative bunch than others[11].

In each of the contexts identified above, differences of opinion online are prone to regress into abuse and symbolic violence in the

form of denigrating someone's identity, beliefs, or values. In many cases, the symbolic violence has become alarmingly real when the words of leaders like Trump, Modi, or a politician from a British far-right party have arguably contributed to a climate in which minorities and immigrants have become vulnerable to physical attacks. In India, however, the scale and scope of abusive and violent speech online has been particularly massive and relentless, especially since Narendra Modi became the prime minister in 2014. Indeed, the violent and abusive character of the Hindu Right online has been extreme enough to attract the attention of both the Indian and international press[12].

Indians, it is not an exaggeration to say, are inured to violence in its many expressions – in addition to the forms of symbolic violence that permeate everyday life due to hierachies of caste, class, religion, and social status, there are numerous stories everyday of brutal physical violence that is gendered, sectarian, or caste-based in nature. The daily news reflects acts that are all too horrifyingly directed at the most vulnerable segments of Indian society: the poor, the children, minorities, the disabled, and women. Much of this violence is sexual in nature. Notwithstanding arguments that seek to measure violence in terms of number of incidents for a population, it is the sheer savagery of many of these incidents – all too familiar to Indian readers to need recounting here in detail – that is numbing[13]. Yet, even with this state of affairs as the norm, Indians have been shocked at the spike in incidents of ghastly violence in recent years, linked to the programme of the Hindu Right, that the country has witnessed since 2014.

In 2015, a mob in the village of Dadri in Uttar Pradesh killed Mohammad Akhlaq, a Muslim man, on the basis of an allegation of slaughtering a calf and storing its meat. Akhlaq's son, Danish, was also grievously injured in the violence. Since then, there has been a significant rise in physical violence on Muslims, Dalits, and detractors of the ruling dispensation – from public floggings of Dalits to the lynching of Muslims suspected of carrying beef, from communal skirmishes incited by Hindu vigilante organisations to an attack on the life of Kanhaiya Kumar, an outspoken detractor of Modi and his party's policies. Though cow-related violence, like

communal violence in general, predates the tenure of the Modi government, an analysis conducted in 2017 by IndiaSpend notes that in 97 per cent of all such incidents that have occurred since 2012, about 53 per cent of the victims have been Muslims. The year 2017, when the study was conducted, was the worst for cow-related violence[14]. Another article on *IndiaSpend* points out that between January 2017 and July 2018, mob violence fed and fanned by rumours of child abductions resulted in the deaths of thirty-three people in sixty-nine attacks, while there was only one such incident in the five years before this spate of attacks[15]. Social media and networks like WhatsApp have played a central role in propagating such rumours about suspected cow smugglers and child abductors, resulting in vigilante mobs murdering innocent people – just between April and August 2018, two dozen people have been killed as a result of fake news on WhatsApp[16].

This state of affairs brings into focus one other crucial fact about the nature of Indian cyberspace, aside from its implication in an ever-deepening culture of violence, namely, the privileged and dominant position of the Hindu Right. Whether it is the well-oiled machine of the BJP IT cell that generates trends in support of the Modi government's initiatives and targets its detractors, or the veritable army of pro-BJP and pro-Modi supporters online – many followed by the prime minister himself – who issue dangerous threats to critics, the use of online media and tools to rewrite India's history, or to propagate Modi's own slick and carefully cultivated online presence, the Hindu Right appears to have the first-mover advantage in Indian cyberspace. This is not simply a matter of being the loudest voice in the room. No doubt, its head start as compared to other Indian political communities, its sustained investment in the online world, and its formidable organisational capacity and legions of devoted volunteers make the Hindu Right the most significant entity and actor in Indian cyberspace. These characteristics also mean that to a remarkable extent, the Hindu Right has defined and set the tone and rules for public conversation in this part of the world.

This book seeks to address how and why the Hindu Right is so dominant in Indian cyberspace. It aims to identify key structural and thematic aspects of the relationship of Hindu nationalism and new

media; the latter broadly defined as all online or post-internet forms of media, including websites, forums, social media platforms – in particular, Twitter and Facebook – and social media networks like WhatsApp. It locates the relationship of Hindu nationalism and new media in terms of global developments in media and politics, such as the resurgence of right-wing movements, parties, and leaders everywhere from Europe to Asia; the dramatically altered landscape of private, public, and political communication with the emergence of social media platforms; and the enormously complex and frequently tumultuous changes in Indian society and politics. While Hindu nationalism possesses its own character and unique features, it does share some salient characteristics with other online right-wing movements, be they white nationalist movements in the USA, right-wing nationalist groups in the UK, or the online face of the spate of European right-wing movements that demand the expulsion of immigrants from their countries. The book explores the phenomenon of present-day online Hindu nationalism in its multi-faceted richness with a view to understanding the relationship of the internet to democracy and civic life in India and globally, and with the objective of identifying the possible futures of Hindu nationalism itself.

I conclude this introductory chapter with a word on my politics and how it might affect my relationship with the Hindu Right online. As on the @IndiaExplained account and podcast, my scholarly work, and my journalistic writing, I make no bones about, nor offer any apologies for, my political views, my distaste for the virulent policies of the BJP and the communalism that it thrives on, and the culture of nauseating sycophancy that has infected much of the media, corporate world, and celebrity sphere in India. But, from the perspective of a researcher, as an ethical principle, I treat the Hindu Right, whether as a collective or in the form of individuals representative of the movement, with the respect and impartiality that any researcher must duly accord their research subjects.

A final word on nomenclature. I have largely, and deliberately, been using the phrase ‘Hindu Right’ to refer to Hindu nationalists online. The term is not inaccurate; to the contrary, it is useful in that it brings the Hindu Right into the same general frame as other ethnic,

religious, racial, or cultural right-wing movements that also happen to be globally resurgent at this historical moment.

However, the term Hindu Right only tells us part of the story. It is therefore necessary to offer the reader a short history of Hindu nationalism, both as a general movement and as an online one. For the reader unfamiliar with the phrase, a background on Hindu nationalism may be useful, while for the informed reader, it will serve to highlight the major themes of online Hindu nationalism that this book addresses[17]. Going forward, I will use the terms Hindu Right (or similar phrases like Hindu right-wing supporters) and Hindu nationalists (or Hindu nationalism) interchangeably.

2

Hindu Nationalism, Before and After the Internet

Hindu nationalism: A brief history

The online Hindu Right is, essentially, the manifestation of Hindu nationalism on assorted spaces and platforms of the internet. This includes both its narrower political manifestation as the BJP and its broader form as a social and cultural phenomenon that encompasses a range of Hindu right-wing organisations which enjoy widespread public support in India today. This should come as no surprise to any observer of an India that has lurched strongly to the political right, socially as well as culturally, in the last few years.

There are no more powerful symbols of this shift than the resounding victory of the BJP in the 2014 general elections and the astonishing rise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Widely castigated for his controversial role in the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat, Modi was practically banished from the Indian political mainstream for a long period afterward. He stood accused of letting Hindu mobs run riot against Gujarat's Muslim population in retaliation for the death of fifty-eight Hindu *kar sevaks* or right-wing activists. They were burnt alive when the train in which they were travelling was set ablaze at Godhra station, allegedly by Muslims[1]. As the chief minister of Gujarat during that time, Modi was criticised by the same

media that lionises him now. Refused a visa to the United States because of the serious charge of complicity in the anti-Muslim pogrom, Modi was also castigated for failing in his duty by then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vaypayee. Though he was relegated to the role of national and international pariah, he continued to rule Gujarat with a vice-like grip. Until his masterful self-engineered political rehabilitation with the help of his right-hand man, Amit Shah, Modi was considered an extremist even by the standards of the Hindu Right. Yet, even during the phase of his marginalisation from the political mainstream in 2002, Modi was able to shift the more extreme aspects of the ideology of the Hindu Right into the normative order of Indian politics in a particularly dangerous manner. The perception that Modi had allowed Hindu mobs to teach the Muslims of Gujarat a collective lesson for a crime supposedly committed by some Muslim individuals burnished his credentials among the more hardcore supporters of the Hindu Right. Modi was seen as a principled Hindu nationalist in contrast to the 'moderate' Vajpayee, one who had been scapegoated and martyred simply for remaining true to the principles of Hindu nationalism. If, till then, Hindu nationalism had been a fringe movement that had gradually moved into mainstream Indian politics, with Modi, this fringe now gravitated more toward the centre of Indian politics.

The theory and framework of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism was articulated and elaborated by VD Savarkar in 1923 in *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*[2] Hindutva proposes that India is culturally and civilisationally a Hindu nation and that minorities, such as Muslims and Christians, are aliens in the country, since their faiths, unlike those of other so-called 'Indic' minorities like Buddhists, Sikhs, and Jains, have originated in countries outside India.

The roots of the Hindu nationalist movement, according to Christophe Jaffrelot, a scholarly authority on the subject, lie in nineteenth-century Hindu reformist movements[3].

Savarkar's theorisation of Hindutva also inspired KB Hegdewar to found the RSS or Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925, which served as a missionary, cultural organisation dedicated to protecting the interests of the Hindu community. According to Jaffrelot, Hindu nationalism, as embodied by the RSS, for instance,

closely resembles and draws inspiration from European ethno-nationalist and chauvinist movements. MS Golwalkar, the second head of the RSS, was an open admirer of Hitler's views on race pride[4]. Over time, the RSS has come to serve as an overarching umbrella structure or mother organisation for the Hindu Right, including the political BJP, the overtly militant Bajrang Dal, and more recently, assorted Hindu *senas* or armies that have mushroomed across the country. The loose coalition of Hindu nationalist organisations that are gathered under the fold of the RSS are known as the Sangh Parivar or Sangh family.

Hindutva ideology is most virulently directed against Muslims, who are alleged to be sympathetic towards the invaders who founded the two great Muslim dynasties of India, the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal empire. Hindutva calls into question the loyalty and patriotism of Muslim and Christian Indians, while at the same time insisting that they are culturally Hindu, given that they have been born in a 'Hindu land' and that they are, for the most part, descendants of converts to Islam or Christianity. This logic simultaneously designates Hindus as authentic citizens of the Hindu-Indian nation-state and relegates Muslims and Christians to the status of lesser, second-class citizens. The hierarchy of citizenship proposed by Hindutva accompanies the claim that Muslim and Christian Indians can join the Hindu-Indian fold by converting back to Hinduism or accepting that Hinduism is the cultural ground of their identity[5]. However, the Hindu nationalist movement aims to include these groups, just like with the Dalits or other former untouchable communities, within an overarching fold in a faux egalitarianism where the power very much remains with upper castes, particularly, though not exclusively, with Brahmins. One may see in Hindutva a secret admiration for its professed enemy, in its desire to emulate the figure of the aggressive Muslim, the missionary zeal of evangelising faiths, the conflation of political and religious authority, and the utopian aspiration of establishing a Hindu state along the lines of the Islamic states of Pakistan, Iran, or Saudi Arabia.

The RSS was stigmatised and banned in the aftermath of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination in 1948 because of the perceived association of Gandhi's killer, Nathuram Godse, with the organisation. But at the

time of writing this, it is enormously influential and able to exercise significant control over the BJP-led government, notwithstanding its claims of being an apolitical and largely cultural entity. As a wider movement seeking to establish the primacy of Hindu identity in all aspects of Indian social life, Hindu nationalism appears to be at its zenith and has, arguably, never been stronger in post-Independence Indian public life than today.

This ascendancy is the result of tireless efforts by a range of Hindu nationalist groups dedicated to a project of majoritarian supremacy. After it was relegated to the margins of Indian political life following Independence, the Hindu nationalist movement emerged strongly in public consciousness in the 1980s with its agenda of building a temple dedicated to the Hindu deity Lord Ram, at the site of the Babri Masjid, a mosque in Uttar Pradesh's town, Ayodhya. At the heart of the dispute was the claim that the Babri Masjid – which was built in the late 1520s at the behest of Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire – was constructed on the ruins of a temple marking the birthplace of Lord Ram. The dispute preceded Independence and for the longest time, a kind of uneasy legal limbo kept the issue at bay from the centre of Indian politics, till it was rekindled and resurrected by the Hindu Right sometime in the early 1980s. Several Hindu nationalist and right-wing organisations were able to mobilise significant attention around the matter, and the controversy became a rallying point for creating a global Hindu community, including in its fold wealthy expatriates in the UK and the USA who donated generously for the cause of building the temple.

Most ominously, the BJP used the issue to successfully create an image of the Muslim as 'the Other' of Indian civilisation itself – disloyal to the Indian state and harbouring secret or overt sympathies for Pakistan. This dispute also became the pretext for the BJP to launch an attack on Indian secularism, which it described as nothing more than 'pseudo-secularism' followed by its main political opponent, the Congress, and the followers of the latter[6]. According to the BJP, this 'pseudo-secularism' was kept alive by an entire apparatus of pseudo-liberal mediapersons, academics, and activists, some of whom were a part of an elaborate system of patronage practised by the Congress. The BJP claimed that the elitist Congress

model of fake secularism disenfranchised Hindus by interfering in their affairs, while at the same time privileged Indian Muslims through a politics of appeasement and non-interference in their private laws and customs. The BJP tried to point this out in various cases, such as with regard to the 1985 Shah Bano case in which a Muslim woman secured maintenance from her husband after divorce, providing ample fodder for the Hindu Right and the BJP to change for the Hindu Right to drive home the point about Congress hypocrisy[7].

The Shah Bano judgment led to widespread protests from Muslim Indians who saw the judgment as a violation of the Shari'a or Muslim personal law and regarded it as an interference in the religious affairs of the community. Leaders of the Muslim Indian population, who claimed to represent India's Muslims at large, protested that such meddling in the religious life of the community amounted to an assault on Muslim identity itself. Like other minority communities, Indian Muslims, too, had been entitled to their personal laws by right ever since the codification of the customary and personal laws of different religious communities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under the British colonial authorities, an act that had confused and conflated the domain of the religious with that of customary practices. In 1986, in the face of protests from Muslims, the Congress government, under the prime ministership of Rajiv Gandhi, passed the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act to negate the effect of the Shah Bano judgment[8]. Ironically, the Congress' subsequent concessions to hardline and conservative Hindus on the Babri Masjid issue, such as supporting the unlocking of the gates of the structure to pacify Hindus who had called out Congress hypocrisy on the Shah Bano judgment, reinforced the image of the party as selective, inconsistent, and duplicitous in its commitment to secularism[9].

The controversy over the Babri Masjid continued to rage over the next several years, kept alive by the BJP as a rich source of political capital. On 6 December 1992, a mob of *kar sevaks* destroyed the mosque in a televised act that shook India's belief in itself as a pluralistic, tolerant, and secular society. In the days and weeks that followed, Hindu–Muslim riots broke out in several cities across the nation. Bombay (now Mumbai), especially, witnessed the kind of

brutal savagery that in cultural memory was associated with Partition-era sectarian riots. While both Hindus and Muslims were guilty of rioting in the initial phase of violence in the immediate wake of the destruction of the mosque, in the second phase of violence in January 1993, Hindu mobs, with the blessings of the Shiv Sena, a regional Hindu nationalist party based in Maharashtra, systematically targeted and attacked the city's Muslim population. The religious violence left the image of Bombay as a cosmopolitan city in tatters[10]. Shortly after the riots, in March 1993 a series of thirteen bomb blasts erupted across Bombay, killing 257 residents of the city and wounding over 700. The blasts, which were found to be the handiwork of Muslim dons and their associates from the universe of Bombay's criminal underworld, were seen as retaliation for the riots that had taken place a few months earlier. A special court found one such prominent crime lord, Dawood Ibrahim, now living in exile in Karachi, Pakistan, guilty of masterminding the conspiracy[11]. One trial, which concluded in 2007, resulted in the conviction of 100 persons for their role in the blasts while a second trial that concluded in 2017 led to the conviction of six individuals, including another underworld don, Abu Salem. In 2015, to much media attention and in the wake of hastily–summoned court sessions, Yakub Memon, a chartered accountant, was held guilty of facilitating the terror attacks and was executed by the Indian state for his role in the bomb blasts.

The Ram Janmabhoomi–Babri Masjid dispute, whose ripples have spread far and wide over time, has made visible a deep crisis in Indian secularism to which it has itself been a significant contributor. The Hindu Right continues to identify the construction of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple as one of its key goals, though it is unlikely that that the BJP will act on it any time soon. As recently as December 2018, BJP General Secretary Kailash Vijayvargiya made it clear that the BJP did not intend to expedite the process of initiating the construction of the temple since the matter was in the courts[12]. Modi, interestingly, did not base his campaign on Hindutva for the 2014 elections. Instead, he emphasised a programme of 'vikas' or development for all, promised to weed out the corruption and looting that he had accused the Congress of engaging in, and professed a

commitment to economic reforms that would slim down the Indian public sector and curtail government spending.

Since taking control under Modi in 2014, the BJP, and likely the RSS, which exerts power over the party through invisible reins or less frequently, direct control, have foregrounded several other issues that are central to their agenda, including the prevention of alleged cow slaughter, the consolidation of Hindu identity and community against minorities, a labelling of dissent as anti-national, and an increasingly aggressive public stance against terrorist activity in Kashmir and China's incursions at the border. The last two of these issues reflect a more jingoistic assertion of national identity, and arguably, for the first time in its history, the communalisation and polarisation of the Indian army along religious lines[13]. Combined with the increasingly frequent occurrence of violence against minorities, these developments indicate that India is experiencing a new normal in terms of the routine communalisation of everyday life.

The silence, for the most part, of the prime minister and leaders from the BJP party on incidents such as the spate of assaults on Dalits or members of other communities is seen as a signal of approval and a sign to extremist groups within the Hindu fold that they can get away with such acts instead of being held accountable for them. In other instances, these self-styled protectors of Hindu society have attacked Muslim men in the name of 'Love Jihad,' a term coined for the accusation that Muslim men seduce Hindu girls as a way of infiltrating and weakening the Hindu community. Other than the obvious communalism that radiates from the term, it reinforces the patriarchial notion of women as the symbols of community honour and raises the spectre of the aggressive, sexualised Muslim male. The rhetoric of 'Love Jihad' pours fresh fuel on old fears, demonising Muslims and stressing their absolute difference from Hindus. Conservative and right-wing Hindu organisations have also undertaken a project of 'Ghar Wapsi' or 'a return to home' which recalls Indian minorities into the fold of Hinduism. It is not clear how successful this initiative has been, but it is squarely in the tradition of *shuddhi* or purification practised by nineteenth-century Hindu reform movements, which sought to welcome Indian Muslims and Christians back to Hinduism by cleansing or purifying them. The implication

here, not hard to grasp, is that Islam and Christianity in India carry with them a kind of lack of moral hygiene. These older currents and newer changes within Hindu nationalism and Indian society have converged in conjunction with aspects of the deep relationship between media and nationalism – a relationship that precedes the emergence and meteoric rise of social media but one that has been radically transformed and refigured since.

Media and nationalism in India and the world: A genealogy

The general relationship of media and nationalism is one of the central forces shaping political, social, and cultural life in our times. One may, with some caution, venture to suggest that this relationship has also been central to twentieth-century modernity. There is no dearth of examples that drive home this point in this immediate, present moment in history. The many repercussions of US President Donald Trump's tweets since his election in 2016 are a case in point. Trump's tweets, which appear to be spontaneous and impulsive reactions to world events and developments in the news that concern him, have caused jitters to stock markets across the globe, led to aggressive displays of jingoism and racism by his core base of supporters, and evoked puzzled or irked reactions at large, even from other world leaders. In Britain, too, media technology has played a similar role in the political and social domains. The decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union based on the results of a referendum conducted in 2016 was shaped in part by media technology giant Facebook moulding people's opinions, thanks to the data it shared with Cambridge Analytica, a data mining and political consulting firm[14]. Facebook similarly stands accused of being hijacked by Russian trolls who, allegedly at the behest of the Russian state, ran interference in the 2016 US elections with the intention of securing the election for Donald Trump as opposed to his rival, Hillary Clinton.

Ignoring for a moment the priceless irony of the USA's outrage over Russian interference in its sovereign affairs (with the exception

of Donald's Trump's mystifying defence of Vladimir Putin and Russia), given its own history of interfering in the political affairs of countless countries across the globe, Facebook here became an instrument of the globalisation of Russian nationalism, aimed at its historic Cold War adversary that had supposedly vanquished it once and for all with the end of the era of détente in world history[15]. Facebook and other platforms of social media – like forms of media before them, from pamphlets to radio, from signs posted on walls to speech in the guise of rumour – have also been used by majoritarian nationalisms to target designated enemies and 'Others' within the boundaries of the nation-state. History is replete with such instances, such as in the case of Rwanda where Tutsis were killed by the Hutu majority in the lead-up to the Rwandan genocide in 1994, the 1984 pogrom against Sikhs in India by Hindu mobs, or Jewish citizens murdered in Poland and Germany during the reign of Nazism[16].

In countries like Russia, Turkey, China, and North Korea, each of which exercises censorship in varying degrees on its people, the media is central to the creation and preservation of nationalist myths. This claim can also be reasonably made with regard to democracies like Great Britain, the USA, France and India. In India, for all its claims of a free and independent press, journalists who are critical of state policies are often targeted by the government in the name of the nation. Indeed, in an ironic historical development, given that the first English-language newspaper in India, *Hicky's Bengal Gazette*, was highly critical of the government at the time, the colonial British administration mainstream media itself has now become an instrument of an ugly majoritarian nationalism.

Television channels such as Times Now, Zee TV, and the especially virulent Republic TV and publications such as *India Today* and the *Times of India* for the most part emphatically endorse the positions of the coalition NDA government, which is helmed by the Hindu nationalist BJP. Whether it is attacks on secularism or on progressive Left-leaning institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), aggressive and militaristic nationalism, the soft-pedalling of the violence committed by Hindu groups against religious and caste minorities, the views presented by a host of television anchors across the board during prime-time converge

almost perfectly with the politics and political objectives of the BJP. It is not an exaggeration to state that despite the claim that these media outlets are neutral or even objective, commentators on the state of affairs in the nation have, with a single-mindedness that is alarming, joined in the RSS project to normalise Hindu nationalism as the *de facto* ethos of the Indian nation-state and as a viable foundational alternative to the Constitution of the Indian republic.

In keeping with the hardline turn taken by the BJP in practice, mainstream media channels and publications also target and vilify minorities and demonise dissenters, notably academics, activists, artistes, and journalists as an anti-national fifth column. Teesta Setalvad, an activist who, for years, has sought to hold the Gujarat state government accountable for its role in the anti-Muslim riots of 2002, has been raided by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) on grounds of corruption. Rana Ayyub, a journalist whose news story on fake encounter killings in Gujarat played an important part in getting prominent BJP leader and current BJP President Amit Shah jailed, has been hounded and threatened on numerous occasions. Prominent publishing houses refused to publish Ayyub's book on the role of Shah and others in encounter killings, so she had to publish the work, titled *Gujarat Files*, herself[17]. Many critics of the Modi government, like the well-known writer Arundhati Roy or the activist Prashant Bhushan, are routinely described in the mainstream media as 'anti-national' and 'anti-Hindu,' consistent with both the general ideological thrust of Hindu nationalism and the hypernationalistic public mood of the present. And in a reversal that reeks of chutzpah, the mainstream media, as well as the BJP's army of formal and informal online employees, volunteers, and supporters have simultaneously created a narrative of themselves as victims of fake news generated by an invisible but powerful nexus of Congress leaders, their sympathisers in the media, and liberals in Indian society. This narrative and rhetoric has uncanny parallels with Trump's accusations against reputed media channels of targeting him with 'fake news', a strategy that, in turn, has a dangerous precedent and similarity with the Nazi notion of 'lügenpresse' or the 'lying press'[18].

The one critical difference between the Indian and American context, though, is that the mainstream media in the latter case, for all the justified criticism it may receive on assorted counts, has stood firm in doing its job of holding the American president and the White House accountable and responsible for their actions. Whether it is the somewhat bizarre summit between North Korea and the USA, the Trump administration's policy of separating migrant parents from children, the probe against the Trump campaign for alleged collusion with Russia, the allegations of sexual assault and intimidation against Trump's team, as well as Trump's relentless attacks on the press, media outlets such as CNN, ABC, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have refused to serve as mouthpieces for the Trump administration or to uncritically endorse its policies.

In India, as seen above, television channels like Zee News, Times Now, India Today, and the relatively newly founded BJP-funded Republic TV seem eager to outdo even the government in presenting what they perceive to be pro-government views. So is the case with newspapers like the *Times of India* and *Hindustan Times*. It is alleged by journalists with access to official sources that many of these channels and newspapers are given orders to comply with the agenda of the BJP government, though it is hard, for obvious reasons, to find official proof of the same[19]. It is worth noting that NDTV, the one channel seen as critical of the BJP, was implicated in a tax evasion case by a government agency. The case against NDTV was widely perceived as a punitive measure for straying from the agenda of the government in power and as a signal to other media organisations about what might lie in store for them if they did not comply with the government's diktat. While there are independent voices – legacy publications like the *Hindu* and the *Telegraph*, and new online initiatives like the Wire, that are doing yeoman service in the cause of society by practising rigorous, uncompromised, and ethical journalism there is nonetheless a culture of self-censorship that has taken root among many of their compatriot organisations. There is more than a grain of truth in the satirical references made on social media to these compliant media publications and channels as 'North Korean' channels.

What gives the relationship of media and nationalism its broad salience is the fact that it is not just limited to the political realm – the domain of formal structured government, bureaucracy, elections, and the like – but also has a powerful impact beyond the domain of the narrowly political. This is what paradoxically makes this relationship so critical to modern political existence. Organisations and groups that are able to politicise seemingly apolitical areas of life, or areas traditionally kept out of politics, are extremely effective in establishing hegemony or gaining legitimacy for their ideological positions. From Nazi and fascist propaganda to the Modi government's blitzkrieg of advertising, media is an essential part of this process. The Indian context since 2014 has shown that politicising the everyday, for instance, the role of religion in the army, scientific policy, or criteria for appointments for national institutions, is an extremely effective strategy for changing the rules of the political game. This is what the BJP, in its latest run under Modi since 2014, has done very well in the Indian political and social context, utilising legacy media and social media as key instruments toward this end. It is not surprising that in four years, the Modi government has spent over ₹4,800 crores or ₹480 million on advertising[20].

Media and nationalism have been deeply intertwined from the nascent stages, if not the birth, of nationalism itself. Nationalism is a thoroughly modern concept, though the paradox of the phenomenon is that it claims to be ancient and primordial. National and nationalist myths claim that the basis of the modern nation-state lies in antiquity, in the existence of a people or community whose identity has existed seamlessly and has persisted unchanged through time. Whether it is Hindu nationalists claiming that Hindu nationalism has been around since 8000 BCE, or White far-Right movements in Europe which argue that their authentic (Caucasian) French, Austrian, or Polish identities hark back to a superior and glorious past, or the Pakistani state insisting that Pakistani national identity is coterminus with the history of Islam itself, this feature is something that marks all forms of nationalism, despite their rhetoric of uniqueness and distinctiveness[21].

Emphasising the essential modernity of nationalism, Hans Kohn locates significant moments of the origin of the phenomenon in the French and American revolutions, which he describes as 'two powerful manifestations of the movement'[22]. Benedict Anderson's seminal work, *Imagined Communities*, offered the thesis that 'print capitalism', as he termed it, in the form of the newspaper and the novel, allowed readers to imagine themselves as part of the same, finite, bounded community of the nation, a type of community distinct from the paradigms of the religious and imperial pre-modern communities that preceded modern, national collectives[23]. The national community, so imagined, was predicated on a unique kind of affective sentiment, a different kind of belonging, identification, and attachment than that felt by members or subjects of a religious community like the *ummah* of Islam or the world of Christianity, which saw themselves as universal. The power exercised by the imagined community of the nation among its inhabitants was also different from the kind of belonging experienced by the subjects of vast empires, with their fuzzy boundaries and patterns of decentralised and local life in which the centre was often a distant, even unimaginable, idea. National sovereignty, in other words, was and is experienced differently at the emotional and visceral level, as well as at the intellectual and cerebral level, from imperial and religious sovereignty.

Scholars like Partha Chatterjee have challenged such accounts as Eurocentric, arguing that they deny the distinctiveness of anti-colonial and non-Western nationalism, reducing them simply to variants of a Western historical occurrence that claims a universal historical significance[24]. The details of that debate do not necessarily need to concern us here, but Chatterjee's crucial insight that anti-colonial nationalism must be seen as much as a cultural movement as a political one is key to understanding online Hindu nationalism. In fact, one may extend Chatterjee's point to Western nationalism as well; the resurgence of European nationalism and American nationalism significantly centre on the issue of European, American, Western, and Christian culture, which are deemed to be under threat from the Muslim and non-Western cultures of immigrant and refugee populations from the Middle East and Africa.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has described the experience of national belonging as the state being 'incorporated' within subjects: by this he means that we are disposed to respond to a national *habitus*, that is, a set of social structures that mark the parameters of our social experiences through rituals such as national holidays and the like. We are habituated and oriented through social practices, relentless reminders, and everyday routines to behave as members of a nation. The state is an invisible force, one might say, that has become part of us, that guides these actions of ours. The state, 'and everything that follows from it', Bourdieu says, 'is a historic invention, a historical artefact and […] we ourselves are inventions of the state, our minds are inventions of the state'[25]. In an argument that shares some resonance with that of Bourdieu, Michael Billig has argued that nationalism is reinforced and a sense of national belonging created through the most quotidian of everyday practices, in language, through symbols of nationhood like the flag, and the commodification of national symbols in objects[26].

The perspectives of Bourdieu and Billig allow us to understand how the Indian state, in its different forms, has gradually endorsed and reinforced the precepts of Hindutva as a kind of common sense that is viscerally felt by Indian citizens as a type of objective truth or reality. In his work on the television series, *Ramayana*, which was created by the Indian film director Ramanand Sagar, Arvind Rajagopal has described how the screening of the Hindu epic on the state-owned television broadcaster, Doordarshan, contributed to the creation of a new kind of audience – one coded as Hindu. Rajagopal's book argues that the very decision to screen the series, starting in January 1987, marked a departure from Doordarshan's policy to follow the principle of secularism by abdicating from screening explicitly religious content. More ominously, in Rajagopal's view, the series politically empowered the BJP and contributed to the climate that led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid[27]. Coinciding with and contributing to the resurgence of Hindu nationalism, the screening of Sagar's interpretation of the epic – uncritical, patriarchial, pious, and technically unimpressive across its seventy-eight episodes – unalterably and radically transformed Indian television. It also signalled a massive thirst among the Indian

populace for religious content and highlighted the political power of televised religious material in India.

Unsurprisingly, the televisual dramatisation of the *Ramayana* was followed by a similar version of the *Mahabharata*, which made its debut in 1988. Produced by a well-known Bollywood director and producer, BR Chopra, the *Mahabharata*, which ran for ninety-two episodes, shared the aesthetic and uncritically hagiographic idiom of Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana*. Both these shows drove home the idea that there was one authoritative and truthful version of the epics, namely the version that television was bringing each week into drawing rooms, stores, or screening locations in the metros, small towns, and villages of India. The elevation of particularly unimaginative interpretations of the epics militated against the reality of the richly pluralistic and creative range of versions of these tales that exist in Indian society. It is that fact of the plurality of these epics, and the ways in which they have been claimed by different groups at different points of time in India's civilisational history, that is captured by AK Ramanujan's marvelous essay, 'Three Hundred Ramayanas'[28]. It is no coincidence that in 2008, the Hindu Right, with its insistence upon a singular version of Indian history and of Hinduism – its own, identical with Hindutva – objected to Ramanujan's essay being taught at Delhi University.

There was another humbler form of media that played an equally, if not far more dangerous, role in the events leading up to the destruction of the Babri Masjid: the Indian version of the audio cassette or audio tape. Till much of the 1980s, other than popular cinema, whether in Hindi or other languages, cultural entertainment was limited to the modest fare available on the radio and state-run television. Much of what was played on radio was Indian classical music, a reflection of the bent of India's radio broadcasting authority towards high culture and an implicit pedagogical imperative of educating the masses. Radio, however, also brought beloved shows such as *Binaca Geet Mala*, dramatic skits, and other kinds of educational content. On television, the staple of a movie or two on weekends and *Chitrahaar*, a thirty-minute show centred on Bollywood songs, was supplemented by popular television series, such as *Hum Log*, *Nukkad*, and the televised Hindu epics, *Ramayana*

and *Mahabharata*. By the 1970s, cheaply produced audio cassettes joined the list of inexpensive entertainment options in India.

The key difference, of course, between the audio cassette and the other forms of entertainment was that the cassette was a mobile media form, generated through private enterprise yet priced at low cost, and one that travelled through an alternative route of media circulation. The content of audio cassettes included domestically produced legitimate fare, such as soundtracks of Indian films, popular artistes like Jagjit and Chitra Singh, and devotional music like *bhajans*, as well as pirated versions of the works of popular American musicians such as Michael Jackson and Madonna.

But the cassettes were also put to more sinister use in the 1980s. Peter Manuel, in his seminal work on cassette culture in north India, describes how groups of Hindu right-wing activists would travel around neighbourhoods in communally sensitive towns blaring audiotapes on loudspeakers, which played doctored and staged scenes of Hindu women screaming as if they were being abducted by Muslim men[29]. The narratives on the cassettes echoed the stereotype of Muslims as rapacious invaders from whom Hindu women had to be protected. The trope of the lustful Muslim out to rape Hindu women, central to the communalisation of the sectarian Hindu imagination since the nineteenth century, has been a staple of Hindu nationalist rhetoric ever since. This theme exists as a palimpsest in the nationalist imagination, its many layers conflating Hindu – synonymous with Indian – identity and honour, with the figure of the vulnerable yet brave Hindu woman. The idealization of *jauhar* or the act of suicide by self-immolation by Rajput women to save their honour when faced with the imminent prospect of abduction or forced marriage following the military defeat of their husbands at the hands of enemy forces, usually Muslim, is one such page in the imagined book of history. It explains the importance accorded to the fictionalised story of Rani Padmavati, ironically written by a Muslim poet, Malik Muhamad Jayasi, in the sixteenth century. In the story, the Rajput queen commits *jauhar* rather than get captured by the Muslim ruler Alauddin Khilji, who was said to be enraptured by her beauty, even though Padmavati may well never have actually existed.

A recent cinematic dramatisation of the film by the filmmaker Sanjay Leela Bhansali, originally titled *Padmavati*, met with outraged protests by Hindu Rajput groups in Rajasthan who threatened violence if the film were to be screened. While the groups involved in the protest were no doubt opportunistic, seeking to create a controversy and milk it for political capital, the fact remained that neither the BJP government nor the Congress opposition party in Rajasthan were willing to unequivocally take on the thuggish Karni Sena, a Rajput group that assaulted the director of the film and vandalised his sets[30]. The latest layer in this script, as also mentioned earlier, is the bogey of 'Love Jihad', or the seduction of Hindu women by Muslim men to lure them into the fold of Islam. The anxieties about Muslims out to commit 'Love Jihad' and the remedial measures taken by Hindu nationalist groups, however, now circulate through new media technologies instead of the mechanisms of legacy media.

Hindu nationalism in the era of new media

Donald Trump's frenzied tweets, the Arab Spring and its aftermath, the calamitous role of WhatsApp in fomenting violence in India, the spread of fake news on the internet, Russian troll factories infiltrating the online American political sphere, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) canvassing for recruits online, Facebook's meteoric rise and its powerful impact on global affairs, Modi's ubiquitous online presence combined with the BJP-led NDA government's relentless image-management exercises on Twitter. All these can be safely summed up in one claim: the worlds of media and politics have been dramatically altered by developments in new media over the last quarter-century or so. The universe of Indian politics, and the world of Hindu nationalism within it, are no exception to this trend. The political, social, and cultural impact of new media has been extensively studied over the last twenty-five years, and that of social media specifically over the last decade. Rather than engage in a long and detailed survey of the different phases and perspectives found in

this large body of literature, I will bring relevant theories, concepts, and insights from this material to bear upon germane developments in Hindu nationalism.

The history of the internet in India has been intertwined with that of Hindu nationalism well before Modi's well-documented love affair with cyberspace and his coronation as the Indian prime minister. A professed yoga fanatic, Modi avers that there is but one thing that exercises a stronger hold over him than his daily regimen of early morning yogic exercises. As an article in *Time* magazine noted, Modi is addicted to his iPad.

> Narendra Modi is an early riser. He is awake before dawn and soon ready for the yoga and meditation routines that help prepare him mentally, physically, and spiritually for the day ahead. Before he settles into position to follow an exercise regime that has its roots in centuries of Indian tradition, however, he has a more contemporary reflex that will not wait. He connects to the Internet[31].

The intertwined history of Indian politics, Hindu nationalism, and the internet can be roughly traced to the early to mid-1990s, in the early years of an emergent Indian public sphere, after the invention of the World Wide Web really made the internet part of global consciousness. The internet in its earliest form took shape as ARPANET or the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network, an initiative of the United States Department of Defence , in the late 1960s[32]. But it was the invention of the World Wide Web, the first 'killer app' for the internet, by Tim Berners-Lee in 1990 at CERN that really inaugurated the remarkable story of the internet as a fundamental aspect of contemporary social, political, economic, and cultural life across the globe[33]. The most radical feature of the web was reflected in the solution it offered to the problem that Berners-Lee had been trying to solve, that is, developing a universal protocol for disseminating, circulating, and accessing information. Lee developed three components in the solution: a universal language for the web, a system of unique addresses for assigning locations for information on the web, and a system of links that enabled users to

navigate the web[34]. No less crucial was the fact that Berners-Lee 'and others advocated to ensure that CERN would agree to make the underlying code available on a royalty-free basis, forever. This decision was announced in April 1993 , and sparked a global wave of creativity, collaboration and innovation never seen before'[35]. With the World Wide Web thus born as a globally available and freely accessible technology, it was only a matter of time before India, too, turned to embrace it.

By the late 1990s, a nascent Indian internet industry had emerged, replicating the kinds of firms seen in Silicon Valley. Portals like Rediff On The NeT, Yahoo! India, Sify; Indian email service providers, inspired by Yahoo mail and Hotmail; auction sites like Baazi.com, based on Ebay; a host of cricket, jokes, and contest websites; online brokerages; and fledging e-commerce sites could all be seen as part of an 'Indian' web. Even though many of these would go bust around the year 2000, just like their Bay Area counterparts in the US, they set in place the template of an Indian online audience whose wide influence persists till date. One of those characteristics is the dominance of right-wing Hindu ideology in Indian cyberspace, and now on Indian social media as well. I had the opportunity to witness this first-hand, when, after a stint in academic publishing in New Delhi, I moved to Bombay to work at Rediff On The NeT, India's first web portal.

Rediff On The NeT, which would later be renamed rediff.com, was a spin-off of Rediffusion, an ad agency that had managed to make a reputation and name for itself in Bombay's crowded and cut-throat world of media and advertising agencies. Founded in 1973 by Ajit Balakrishnan, Mohammed Khan, and Arun Nanda, the last of whom had been a schoolmate of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at the elite boarding school, Doon[36], the company got one of its big breaks by locking in the accounts for the Congress' campaigns in 1985[37]. The name Rediff On The NeT was a way of leveraging Rediffusion's name recall and brand recognition to assure Indian clients unfamiliar with the internet that the technology and medium was here to stay and, as such, was worth investing in in terms of advertising. Rediff On The NeT started out as the digital equivalent of an advertising agency, focusing on corporate web solutions for a range of clients

across different market sectors, including major banks, government organisations, and other big corporations. It was this division that I was hired to work for in mid-1998, at a time when the company had about thirty-five or forty employees and operated out of two small offices, one on the ground floor of a residential building in the Gowalia Tank area of Bombay and the other in three large rooms of a ramshackle building in Fort, somewhat incongrously next to a jeweller's family. Modelled very much along the lines of an American start-up, Rediff On The NeT was the entity that introduced many Indians to this strange and wonderful new technology and form of media.

Rediff On The NeT was meant to stay as a digital advertising agency but expanded into a journalistic publication – and later a full-services portal – as a result of the serendipitous discovery, early in the existence of the online initiative, that there was an overseas Indian audience hungry for news from India. Apparently, a page featuring news was hosted on the site, and the next morning it was discovered that a large number of visitors from the USA had viewed the page. Seeing this, the corporation responded to the as-yet-untapped market swiftly and efficiently. It hired a team of journalistic rock stars, who pioneered live cricket coverage, news, web-based chats with celebrities, film and book reviews, and a travel section, along with the mandatory reportage on politics and Bollywood. As the company would expand, rebranding as rediff.com and eventually listing on the NASDAQ, following a barrage of advertising, it would also develop an email service, a messenger, a search engine, and in-house content channels on education, health, and the like, as well as co-branded content on finance and other areas.

For the journalistic side of the business, rediff hired a number of columnists across the political spectrum to write regularly for it. It was, arguably, the first Indian publication, online or otherwise, to unapologetically feature three very strong Hindu right-wing voices of the time: Varsha Bhonsle, by her own account, a Leftist in college who had swung sharply to the right; Rajeev Srinivasan, a one-time Indian expatriate in the USA, who on returning to India had dedicated himself to the cause of an aggressive and assertive Hindu India; and François Gautier, a French journalist settled in India, and an ardent

advocate of the ideology and philosophy of Hindutva[38]. Judging by the reader comments, the views expressed in these columns appeared to resonate with a large audience. It is perhaps safe to say that a range of views that would have been considered beyond the pale for any number of publications had now found a hospitable home in the online space provided by rediff.

Between them, the columns often combined moral outrage with conspiracy theories about a sophisticated anti-Hindu and anti-Hindutva machinery at work in the deep Indian state. A typical example of such a piece is Varsha Bhonsle's column on the gruesome murder of the Australian missionary Graham Staines and his sons, all of whom were burned alive in a village in Odisha in 1999 by a group of Hindu fundamentalists belonging to the Bajrang Dal[39]. In the column, Bhonsle argued that Staines was not an innocent man working for the betterment of the villagers but was an evangelist trying to convert Hindus to Christianity. The implication was that Staines had brought upon himself the rage that resulted in him and his children being burnt alive. According to a report in the *Times of India*, quoted by Bhonsle in her article, Graham Staines' widow, Gladys Staines, had clarified that her husband 'never converted anybody; he only devoted his life to the service of the poor and downtrodden'. Dismissing this as 'bollocks,' Bhonsle insisted that he had been converting members of the tribal Santhal community to Christianity, including on the day he had been killed[40].

Equally, if not more troublingly, Bhonsle went on to suggest that there was something fishy about the Staines murder and that it had been arranged to frame Hindu nationalists. Presenting her theory that the murder was the result of a tussle between the Vatican and evangelicals, both competing for the souls of Hindus, Bhonsle concluded by making a prejudiced jab at Sonia Gandhi, whose Catholic origins have been a constant target for the Hindu Right for decades, and at other prominent Christian political figures.

> Staines wasn't a Roman Catholic. Non-RC evangelists, like those from the Bible Belt, are particularly ruthless about reaching their century-end conversion goals. It's known that in India, evangelists are swiftly converting RCs to Protestant

> denominations – and the Church fears that. The Vatican has proved itself to be a scheming, political institution – right up to Vietnam, and the murder of Pope John Paul I. Political institutions do what they must to keep their dominions intact. The ghastly murder of Staines kills four birds: It sets back competing proselytisation; it gains sympathy for Christianity; it damages the present government; and it discredits the Hindutva movement ...
>
> Perhaps, the president of the party which rules Orissa can shed Her Divine Light on the case. Or maybe Vincent George can. Or Oscar Fernandes. Or Margaret Alva. Or P J Kurien …[41].

Bhonsle's article is a small representation and reflection of a mode and style of argument as well as of the themes that have continued to persist in expressions of Hindu nationalist ideology on the internet. While seemingly extreme in its sentiments, the article is fairly typical in terms of the tropes, conspiracy theories, and sense of victimhood that pervade Hindu nationalist conversations and online discourse, even some twenty years after Bhonsle penned these thoughts.

I believe Rediff On The NeT's role in creating a template for the Hindu Right online has not received the attention it deserves.

Unlike the Congress, the Hindu Right had anticipated the importance of the diaspora fairly early on. Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) based in the USA, for instance, had contributed generously in the 1980s to the cause of building the Ram temple in Ayodhya. The BJP, too, had steadily cultivated the diaspora through a series of measures implemented during the first NDA government, such as a festival for NRIs and Persons of Indian Origin titled 'Pravasi Bharatiya Divas', in which achievers of Indian origin (except those who had migrated to Bangladesh and Pakistan) were felicitated. A significant chunk of the diasporic constituency of support for the Hindu Right consisted of professionals working in the technology sector, who had migrated to the US in large numbers because of the demand among American and multinational technology behemoths for engineers, developers, and coders. The demand for these workers created pools of India-based technological labour and customer-

service labour. At the same time, the demand also generated massive opportunities for Indian technology firms like Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services, and Wipro, as well as for a number of smaller software and technology firms founded by and largely employing Indians. These firms provided subcontracted technological labour for American corporations at various locations. Through the 1990s and 2000s, a steady influx of Indian technology workers made their way to the USA on various short-term and longer-term visas. The extent of migration is reflected in a recent illuminating statistic: as of 2017, there were over a quarter million Indians working on H-1B visas in the United States[42].

This pool of immigrant technological labour consisted of two tiers of workers. The first tier was composed of an elite, highly skilled layer from premier Indian technological institutions, such as the various Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT), BITS Pilani, the National Institutes of Technology, and the like. These were graduates of four-year accredited engineering colleges, fetishized by the Indian middle-classes and bearers of Jawaharlal Nehru's hope that they, with their fellow doctors and scientists, would help India achieve material and economic progress as well as inculcate a scientific, rationalist, and socialist disposition among the uneducated and backward Indian masses. Starting in the 1970s, many of these engineering graduates began to move to the States for higher studies, typically for a master's or PhD degree, and often stayed on in the USA after finding employment[43]. The second tier comprised those individuals who had obtained short-term qualifications from one of the many institutes that had sprung up in India to meet the global demand for workers with specialised lower-level skills, such as familiarity with a particular computer language. Scholars have suggested that engineers are especially prone to joining terrorist movements and organisations like ISIS[44]. One must be cautious in making similar claims about Hindu fundamentalists online, though a detailed study on the subject, similar to those focused on Muslim terrorists, would be of much value. In the Indian case, generally, what I termed 'technocultural Hindu nationalism' in my monograph reflects the influence and authority of communities with technological capital, in terms of both access and skills, in shaping not just the priorities of

Hindu nationalist ideology online but in being able to claim authority on *any* number of issues[45]. In other words, because of the privilege accorded to engineers in postcolonial Indian society, an engineer working in Silicon Valley can claim that he or she is an authority on history, society, religion, and politics, while a researcher who has worked in these areas for years can summarily be dismissed as a Westernised colonised stooge. The internet was the perfect communicative glue between the diaspora and its imaginary, imagined homeland. As with earlier technologies like the telegraph, it erased the limitations of space and time and enabled far more sophisticated forms of asynchronous as well as synchronous interactive communication. In this way, the internet allowed Hindu nativists and nationalists to claim son-of-the-soil status while working as programmers, doctors, lawyers, and academics for Western firms in distant Western, often Christian-majority, countries. According to the tenets of Hindutva, Muslims and Christians of Indian nationality and ancestry (who may well have never left the shores of India) are under permanent suspicion for disloyalty to Bharatvarsha. Yet, the long-distance nationalism grounded in the internet, topped with platitudes about the universality of Hinduism, such as 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakum,' which translates into 'The world is one family,' allowed right-wing Hindu-Indian expatriates to claim an organic connection with a soil, territory, and civilisation that was, for all practical purposes, unfamiliar to them. As far back as fifteen years, commentators had noted the irony of the fact that the majority of Hindu nationalist websites were hosted on servers in the USA[46].

Expatriates and immigrants often live with an imagined idea of the countries they have left behind, and if all conceptions and comprehensions of the nation are imagined, as Benedict Anderson tells us, then the diasporic imagination can often settle into a particular narrow rut; one that is fossilized in time, soaking in nostalgia, and fixated on a romanticised idea of the motherland left behind. This very sentiment was echoed in the Bollywood films of the 1990s. Such films began to develop stories around the trials and tribulations of affluent diasporic families in the UK, USA, and Australia, presenting a romanticised notion of India that began to displace the gritty portrayals and angry realism of earlier films.

India, as represented in two early blockbusters, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), is the unsullied land of traditional values and family, which despite being buffeted by the winds of change, ultimately recoup to preserve their eternal, essential Indianness. It is perhaps a stretch to say that these films, for all their conservatism regarding parental and societal authority, ideas of arranged marriage, and valorisation of family, were out to promote a predetermined Hindutva agenda[47]. But the films were not exempt from a running streak of romantic nationalism – one that was more overt in some films than others – and an implicit understanding of the ideal Indian family as a privileged-caste Hindu family. In a bizarre scene that masquerades as an act of postcolonial revenge in Karan Johar's *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001), a patriotic Indian expatriate gets a number of British children to sing the Indian national anthem. This general sentiment of chauvinistic nationalism in the film took on more ominous online manifestations of Hindutva on websites, discussion forums, and the like.

Did Rediff On The NeT simply reflect a sentiment that already existed among sections of disaporic and resident Hindus? Or did it exacerbate these sentiments? If so, did it do so to the extent that a difference in degree implied a difference in kind altogether? Or did it plant new kinds of dangerous and troubling ideas in a receptive audience? In either case, was there a new variant of Hindu nationalism created, one that could mobilise the power of the new media technology of the internet to devastating effect? These questions go to the heart of debates in media studies about the ideological, political, social, and cultural impact of media.

In raising these questions, it should be clear that I am not advocating either censorship of Hindu right-wing perspectives or insisting that individuals or media organisations should follow any fixed political line, whether out of adherence to Hindu nationalism, secularism, or any other ideology. The internet has raised some enormously complex issues about the relationship of free speech and violence, which I analyse later in the book. But notwithstanding the fact that Hindu nationalists and BJP supporters have frequently engaged in threatening speech, perhaps more so than adherents of other political parties or individuals with different political leanings,

it is a fair criticism that the post-Independence consensus in mainstream Indian media reflected a Left-leaning hegemonic framework of Nehruvian welfarism and secularism. It is also a fair point that the Congress, for all its claims of representing a progressive and emancipatory politics, has had a poor track record of defending freedom of expression, having on its conscience a list of banned books, from Stanley Wolpert's *Nine Hours to Rama* (1962), about Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, to Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988), which, somewhat oddly, was banned under the Indian Customs Act.

Regardless of whatever point in the spectrum of societal influence one places it, it is key to note that Rediff On The NeT created both a new kind of commentator and interlocutor – Srinivasan, for instance, is not a trained journalist but a cultural crusader – as well as a new audience, and mediated a new kind of relationship between them. These were not the first Hindu right-wing voices in the Indian media; editors like Girilal Jain and journalists like Swapan Dasgupta and Kanchan Gupta come to mind. But, in form and tone, Rediff On The NeT had now given a distinct species of Hindu right-wing polemicists a new legitimacy. In doing so, it also introduced into a very distinct tradition of Indian media an element of the culture wars of 1980s America. In the latter case, the debates, typically combative and acrimonious, had focused on topics such as feminism, abortion rights, gun control, rap music, and social welfare programmes. In the 2000s, as the Indian television industry grew shrill, it began to resemble the landscape of US media more closely. The contentious issues in the Indian context included the well-worn themes of Hindu–Muslim relations, Indian secularism, corruption, and terrorism.

The difference was that the dog-whistling and attacks on minorities usually had far more devastating consequences in the Indian setting.

The rhetoric on Hinduism in India and abroad, in popular culture, and in Indian state discourse, had always relied on certain clichés about spirituality, yoga, godmen, and lazy generalisations about Hinduism being 'more a way of life' than a religion. This self-congratulatory discourse mirrored Orientalist tropes that defined Hinduism in opposition to so-called Western qualities, with one

exception: an obsession with the scientific nature of Hinduism. That obsession, as the work of Gyan Prakash, Meera Nanda, and others has shown, was rooted in colonial and post-colonial anxieties about Hindu inadequacy and soul-searching about the reasons for Hindu defeat at the hands of first, Muslim invaders, and then, the British[48].

In the present moment, as earlier, Hindu identity has, to a significant extent, become a matter of expressing one's universalism, but now, in the aftermath of India's economic liberalisation, it is fraught with anxiety about succeeding in a global and globalising world. And so, the 'India Shining' campaign launched in the early 2000s by the BJP-led NDA government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee dutifully drew on stereotypes about India as a land of colour and elephants, of Ayurveda and yoga, of palaces and temples. For at least twenty years now, the narrative of India as a nuclear power and 'emerging superpower' has been echoed endlessly by Indian commentators and global Indian communities, begging the question of when the country might actually emerge as a bona fide player with the likes of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

In parallel to the enunciation of these themes and the creation of the Hindu right-wing online commentator, a distinct perspective on Hinduism consistent with its traditional representation and self-representation began to reveal itself online. Even seemingly benign sites such as Hindunet, a comprehensive portal about Hinduism, created the Muslim or Christian as 'the Other' vis-à-vis Hinduism. While the 'Othering' of Muslims was obvious in the overtly communal sites like the now-defunct 'Hindu Holocaust Museum', it was more subtle on sites such as Hindunet. The notion of an Indic civilisation was based in Orientalist scholarship on India that saw the Indian historical and cultural experience as founded on a Hindu base and then impacted by successive layers of Muslim, Christian, and British Western influence. The Indic theory and model of Indian identity also effectively located the essence and soul of India in Hinduism and more narrowly in Vedic Hinduism. This perspective, which has endured in Western scholarship about India following Indian independence, has also come under critique in the wake of Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), as well as in

scholarship that has examined the relationship of knowledge and power in non-Western, colonial contexts. But it gained a new lease of life online where the 'Indic,' Indian, and Hindu were practically treated as identical, authentic, and indigenous and the so-called 'Abrahamic' faiths of Islam and Christianity were treated as alien. Hindu right-wing ideologues, like the academic Makarand Paranjpe, are involved with the *American Journal of Indic Studies*. The Dharma Civilisation Foundation, a Hindu right-wing organisation that seeks to fund chairs in US universities that would propagate its ideological vision, similarly emphasises the idea of the Indic civilisation as the foundation of Indian identity. The Indic is constructed as an ideological counterpoint to what may be termed the Nehruvian idea of the Indian, that is, a secular, multi-religious, pluralistic notion of India in which Muslims and Christians have parity with Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains. In the Indic schematic, in contrast, religious traditions deemed to have originated in India, like Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism are designated, implicitly or explicitly, as authentically Indian, while other faiths are given secondary status. It is not too hard to recognise that this is a singularly unimaginative model of Indian identity; the distinction it draws between faiths rooted in the soil of India and those that have originated outside is squarely in keeping with the core tenet of Hindutva, as expressed by Savarkar. These ideas, too, as with the other obsessions of Hindu right-wing commentators, have continued to persist in the latest phase of new media, that is, the era of social media.

Social media has been central to the Hindu nationalist project in the last few years. It is, however, part of a larger strategy of the Hindu Right and the BJP to use the internet as effectively as possible to not just seize political power but to establish both dominance and hegemony and, arguably, to change the very meaning of politics in India. Starting with the run-up to the 2014 elections, the BJP has been enormously successful in altering the terms of political debate, for instance, by reframing what would normally have been considered rank communalism as patriotic sentiment. It has also relentlessly emphasised Congress corruption and the promise of economic reform, as a means of diverting attention from Modi's tainted past.

The BJP has been equally successful in using the internet as part of a relentless propaganda machine, involving both legacy media and new media, to promote a cult of Modi and paint a picture of the BJP's success in a number of areas of governance. The internet has also been used by the Hindu Right as a vehicle of unstated if obvious messaging by Modi to his voter base about permissible aggression against minorities and critics. This has allowed Modi to claim plausible deniability and absolve himself of culpability in violence committed by Hindu right-wing groups against minorities and critics, while also conferring the political benefits of such violence against him.

New media and social media have also been central to the political management of memory by Hindu nationalist organisations; part of a larger and long-standing Hindu Right project of rewriting the history of colonial and postcolonial India to establish and reinforce the Hindutva narrative about an indigenous Hinduism marauded by Islam. The manipulation of online discourse is undertaken to salvage the reputation of the RSS and Hindu Right by attributing heroic deeds to them. It also seeks to wipe away the lingering, unanswered questions about Modi's role in the 2002 riots and Amit Shah's culpability in several murders, including that of then Gujarat Home Minister Haren Pandya in 2003[49]. Shah is also accused of allegedly facilitating the kidnapping, extortion, and extra-judicial killing by the Gujarat police of Sohrabuddin Sheikh, a petty criminal, Sheikh's wife Kausar Bi, and their associate Tulsiram Prajapati. Despite serving time in jail briefly for his role in the Sohrabuddin case, Shah was acquitted by a court in 2014 of the triple murder charge[50].

I will now wade into these muddied virtual waters, seeking to understand how and why Modi, the BJP, and the Hindu Right have been so successful in using new media and what the impact of their initiatives portends for the future of India. There are three broad and interrelated areas of special interest and relevance here: first, the figure of Modi and his peculiar suitability to the dynamics of social media; second, the particular functions that different platforms, specifically Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp serve for the Hindu Right; and third, the use of the internet in the form of different

websites for the purposes of signalling messages to the Hindu Right base by creating an archive of alternative truths about the Hindu Right that also doubles as a source of deliberate disinformation. Much of what we see in the case of the Hindu Right's use of social media is also seen in other contexts, like the US. In keeping with the general approach followed here, I will aim to highlight both what is unique to it and what it may share with the use of social media in other political settings, especially in Trump's America.

Hindu Nationalism and Social Media

Few figures in recent Indian history have been as polarising as Narendra Modi. An initially unknown but hard-working and ambitious party worker, Modi rose through the ranks of the RSS and BJP to achieve some degree of prominence as the chief minister of Gujarat, a position he held for thirteen years between 2001 and 2014. To what extent he transformed Gujarat into the paragon of successful development that it is touted to be is somewhat controversial. Detractors point out that the reputation of Modi's 'Gujarat model' rests not so much on actual achievements as on image management, control of the media, and an authoritarian grip on the state in which Modi's diktat was the final word and critics were dealt with harshly. Modi's critics note that since taking the reins as prime minister he has essentially sought to deploy the same model at the national level. Yet, setting aside the mandatory sycophancy of Indian celebrities, such as cricketers, actors, and wealthy industrialists, toward those in political power, Modi found endorsement for his policies from distinguished economists like Jagdish Bhagwati and Arvind Panagriya, and even from the equally well-respected industrialist, Ratan Tata. Despite being widely criticised in the Indian press, mainly for his allegedly deliberate inaction in the 2002 riots, Modi not only politically survived but thrived.

Considered an outsider and a long shot as the prime ministerial candidate in 2014 by many, the BJP's comprehensive victory in the elections under the leadership of Modi as the prime ministerial candidate and star campaigner stunned many who had thought that

while India might well swing rightwards and away from the Congress, it would not, however, go to the extreme of electing a man like Modi[51]. Many attributed the victory to the anti-incumbency factor and the widespread perception of the Congress as corrupt. Yet, at that time, the general belief among the political pundits and chattering classes was that Hindutva held only limited appeal for the Indian electorate, and that by itself it could not sustain a compact between a party and people.

Perhaps there is a grain of truth in this; Modi, after all, did not campaign on Hindutva for 2014, but on the theme of '*sabka saath*, *sabka vikas*' or of 'inclusive development for all'. In this, he was following a time-bound tradition of prospective Indian prime ministers canvassing on a narrative of development, progress, and a promising future. With '*vikas*' or progress, Modi ironically echoed Jawaharlal Nehru's obsession with 'planning', Indira Gandhi's centralised welfarist populism, and Rajiv Gandhi's thrust on modernising India through telecommunications and computing.

Yet, Modi's own past did not seem to be a liability in 2014. Now, in the run-up to the 2019 elections, the BJP is running a communally polarising, evermore sectarian campaign, pitting the interests of nationalistic Hindus against an imaginary, anti-national coalition of minorities, Congress supporters, pseudo-secularists, and the like. This year, 2019, will be the acid test of whether Modi, his right-hand man Amit Shah, and their loyalists in the party and beyond have managed to change the terms and discourse of Indian politics beyond even a nominal, if hypocritical, appeal to communal harmony, development, and inclusive progress. The Vajpayee government's emphasis on 'India Shining', after all, was rejected by voters after one term, and the Congress, which oversaw strong economic growth for a decade, and introduced safety-net programmes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), seemed to have squandered political goodwill in the face of apparent failures to include large numbers of Indians in the India growth story.

It is in the backstory to 2014 that the internet plays an important part, including but not limited to social media. Here, we meet the enigma of Rajesh Jain, India's first internet millionaire, and currently the founder and managing director of Netcore, an internet marketing

firm. In 1999, at the time of the first wave of internet start-ups in India, Jain played a crucial role in two seminal web-based projects that have drastically changed the Indian media landscape, especially with regard to its politics. The first was in founding a centre-right portal called NITI Aayog, and the second in helping develop the backend to the 'missed call' initiative, which itself was part of a middle-class anti-corruption movement, India Against Corruption[52]. Both these projects were instrumental in the rise of the Hindu Right and played more than a small part in enabling the political success of the BJP in the 2014 elections.

In addition to benefiting from these projects, the BJP has also worked to mobilise an army of social-media volunteers and former employees. Judging by the relentless attacks on the Congress and Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime, well before the 2014 elections, the basic structure of the BJP apparatus of online warriors was well in place. The next chapter examines the role of these internet ventures and of social media in contributing to a groundswell of support for the BJP and Modi across social boundaries and barriers.

3

The Birth of the Rightwing Indian Media Ecosystem

The Hindu Right began to materialise as a distinct presence on the internet in the 1990s, following the invention of the World Wide Web, the first so-called ‘killer app’ that transformed the internet into something as ubiquitous as electricity. The small fraction of Indians online at that time was peopled significantly, if not exclusively, by adherents of Hindutva ideology. In comparison to the vast majority of Indians, the individuals who made up this group, including and beyond those who espoused Hindu nationalism, were highly privileged in terms of their educational qualifications, access to technology, and social influence. The world of Indians online in the early 1990s also crossed national borders, drawing support from diasporic Indians. Interestingly, and perhaps curiously, in contrast to the transnational community of Hindu nationalists online, who wore their political hearts on their sleeves, there were no India-based or global communities that correspondingly self-identified as secular in keeping with the normative self-image of the independent Indian state. Though there were several civil society and human rights initiatives, whether websites or listservs, that defined themselves as Indian or South Asian in an inclusive and pluralistic manner, they did not match the presence of the Hindu Right online in their spread, reach and comprehensiveness. Similarly, there was no easily identifiable meaningful presence of a Congress support base online

as a counterpoint to the visible presence of those who professed support for the BJP.

One reason for this has to do with the idea of community in the contemporary global landscape, which reflects the rise of social movements and rights initiatives grounded in the idea of *difference*. While particular conceptions of identity – gendered, cultural, national, class, racial – were essential to the political movements of the earlier part of the twentieth century, whether these were anti-colonial struggles for sovereignty and independence, movements for women's rights, or civil rights struggles, these initiatives also strongly emphasised the principle of universality. The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights may itself be seen as an exemplar and apotheosis of such a statement of universality[1].

In contrast, the political struggles of more recent times, such as, for instance, progressive movements for LGBTQ rights and Dalit rights or assertions of majoritarian identity in Britain or Poland, have strongly emphasised the notion of *difference* and *uniqueness*. While the critique of universality in both the practice and theory of identity-based movements, especially as formulated by the more progressive and reflexive of such political initiatives, has been immensely valuable, it has also been a double-edged sword in that it has authorised, and even valorized, essentialist and often simplistic notions of cultural identity as the basis for community. In a globalised world, additionally, there is relentless pressure for each group or community to identify what is unique or special about it lest it appear indistinguishable from other groups or communities. As a result, every group runs a constant risk of slipping into an ideological position that inevitably demands the exclusion of those perceived as not qualifying for inclusion.

The point here is that the incentives to describe oneself as Hindu, Muslim, or Indian in a way that emphasises what is *different* about them from other groups are much more powerful than the need to articulate these identities in terms of what is common and shared with other identities. Along with its other attractions, the Hindutva model of identity offers Hindus a template that is predicated on absolute difference from other Indians. The Nehruvian model of composite Indian identity may well be guilty of overemphasising the syncretic

character of Indian identity to the point of romanticising it. But the Hindutva model more than overcompensates for any such excesses. By conflating Hindu identity with Indian identity itself, it designates the Muslim and Christian as the 'Other' vis-à-vis the Hindu and thus inassimilable within the umbrella of Indian identity. In its spurious version of universalism, Hindutva offers Christians and Muslims a chance to either convert back to Hinduism or to accept that they are culturally Hindu. But, of course, this prescriptive and profoundly unequal idea of cultural identity militates against the inclusive imperative that should ideally inform any model of universal belonging. In Hindutva's bogus promise of universalism, Hindus – and caste Hindus at that – occupy the highest position in a cultural-national hierarchy while other communities, including Muslims and Christians reclaimed back into the Hindu fold, are placed lower down.

The logic of separateness – whose value one can clearly see in arguments that refuse, for instance, to reduce women to a variant of bourgeoisie men or to measure LGBTQ identity against a heterosexual norm – is not entirely a positive virtue when it comes to cultural, national, or ethnic identity. In the realm of the latter, it can easily take the form of a homogeneous and monolithic majoritarian identity that in emphasising its own uniqueness cannot or will not recognise other forms of difference. The vocabularies of identity politics that continue to productively energise several academic disciplines and radical activist groups today are also used by white nationalists, far-right movements, and ethno-cultural chauvinists over the world to make exceptionalist claims and demand special rights for themselves. The march of White nationalists, including members of the Ku Klux Klan, in the state of Virginia in the USA, is an almost perfect example of this phenomenon[2]. In Britain, the muddled defence of honor killings among South Asian communities by self-identified liberals or the suspension of principles of free speech when it comes to criticism, satire, or mockery of the Prophet Muhammad, in the name of a multiculturalism that defends such exceptions on grounds on cultural relativism, are another instance of a warped consequence of the critique of universalism based on identity politics.

Although the BJP defines the creed of 'integral humanism' as its core philosophy, its commitment to the core ideology of Hindutva and its place in the pantheon of Sangh organisations is not in doubt. Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, the architect of 'integral humanism' was himself steeped deeply in the ideology of Hindutva. On the website of the BJP, the section 'About the Party' proudly affirms the pride of place the party holds in the Sangh family:

> The Bharatiya Janata Party is today the most prominent member of the family of organisations known as the "Sangh Parivar" and nurtured by the Rashtria Swyamsevak Sangh (RSS). Like the RSS, the BJP is wedded to India's unity and integrity, its intrinsic identity and the social strength, individual character and cultural uniqueness that have been the hallmark of this great country and its people for millennia[3].

The statement then notes, equally categorically, that the RSS, the parent organisation of the BJP, 'has no doubt about Hindu identity and culture being the mainstay of the Indian nation and of Indian society'[4].

During the early phase of an 'Indian' internet, if one may call it that, any website that promoted any tenet of Hindu nationalist ideology in any form, whether officially affiliated with the RSS or BJP or not, wound up benefiting the BJP, whether inadvertently or by design. However, there was no similar network of websites dedicated to the alternate conception of Indian identity, whether it was one that took Nehruvian secularism as its core ideological principle or one that emphasised a civilisational model of South Asia as a paradigm for understanding Indian identity. Other than scattered initiatives that proposed otherwise, in an interesting echo of the core claim of Hindutva itself, the presence of India online overlapped largely with the presence of a conservative vision of Hinduism in cyberspace as the material, historical, intellectual, and spiritual foundation of Indian identity and, consequently, as the basis of Indian civilisational identity. If the model of Nehruvian secularism, whether fully practised in reality or not, was hegemonic in print media, it did not enjoy that position of privilege in cyberspace. In fact, there was

no existing archive or body of materials in cyberspace to which the Congress could hitch its bandwagon or through which it could affirm its professed ideological principles or its vision of India. This fact, sensed and exploited fruitfully both by leaders and rank-and-file footsoldiers of the Hindu Right, would be central to the establishment of a right-wing Indian media ecosystem, starting with the internet and social media.

A final natural advantage enjoyed by the BJP in cyberspace has to do with the historical ironies of the Indian anti-colonial movement and the nature of post-Independence nationalism during different phases of Congress rule and then under the BJP. Prior to Independence, the Indian anti-colonial nationalist movement drew on the support of Indians and non-Indian well-wishers from across the world. For instance, the Gadar Party in the San Francisco Bay Area hatched a plot to overthrow British rule in India with German support and Subhas Chandra Bose mobilised Japanese support for the project of Indian independence[5]. The leaders of the Indian anti-colonial nationalist movement, from Dadabhai Naoroji to Gandhi and Nehru to Ambedkar, had themselves lived abroad for long stretches of time.

The global zeitgeist in the decades of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s was no less cosmopolitan than it is in our times. In fact, one might argue that in key respects it was more true to the spirit of cosmopolitanism, with internationalist historical events like the Bandung Conference of 1955, at which twenty-nine states from Asia and Africa met to articulate a critique of, and voice opposition to, Western hegemonic policies that were ethnocentric, discriminatory and racist.

Yet, the hard-fought struggle for national sovereignty after the brutal experience of colonial occupation meant that the energies and attention of post-colonial leaders in India, and arguably in other newly decolonised nations as well, were focused on nation-building. With regard to India in particular, the Cold War, the relative difficulty of mass communication across borders, and the considerable challenges facing the nascent Indian state after the trauma of Partition, meant that Nehru's secular cosmopolitanism, genuine as it was, did not necessarily conceive of Indian expatriates as central to the project of building the independent Indian state. With his emphasis on

development and his obsessive faith in science, Nehru exhorted resident Indians to work for the well-being and benefit of the nation. That was the idea behind the establishment of institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology and the project of building dams, steel plants and shipyards across the country: a hope of trickle-down development that would transform India into a modern nation with a scientific temper.

The Congress Party would inherit and warp Nehru's understandable focus on the nation as opposed to the Indian diaspora, turning it into a navel-gazing parochialism, whose correlate in the economic realm was the closed or mixed economy. The mantra of self-sufficiency, combined with Indira Gandhi's welfarist populism and desire to consolidate power, meant that in terms of cultural experiences as well, the decades that followed Nehru's death were marked by an inwardness and insularity.

The Hindu Right valorises another kind of cultural insularity, one that inevitably stems from the kind of cultural chauvinist vision of history and identity to which it is dedicated. In contrast to the Indian *National Congress, the* RSS had steadfastly opposed the Indian nationalist movement anyway, with regard to its incarnation at home and its more modest presence overseas. But later, its offshoot, the BJP, was quick to recognise the importance of the diaspora, which, among other things, proved to be a valuable source of funds for the project of building the Ram temple at the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. For entities that stridently proclaim their son-of-the-soil credentials, lament about the corrosion of Indian values by debased and degraded Western values, and deify a particular, fictionalised, model of indigenous Aryan identity, the RSS and Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) have no problem using the resources of the West and even in setting up branches of their organisations overseas.

Although members of the RSS and VHP often deny it, the HSS or Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh is, for all practical purposes, the RSS' overseas wing while the VHP America serves the same purpose for the VHP. The nebulous and fuzzy character of the relationship between various Hindu rightwing organisations whether within India or across international borders allows the Hindu Right to claim or deny connections and accountability based on what is more

expedient. The RSS also engages in the same doublespeak with regard to the BJP, claiming, on the one hand, that it is a cultural organisation without a political agenda while at other times making it clear that the BJP, as the political wing of the Sangh Parivar, is subject to its bidding. Interestingly, the VHP was founded in India in 1964 and the first American chapter was opened not too long after in New York in 1970, again indicating that the Hindu Right recognised and capitalised on the importance of the diaspora fairly early[6].

A point to be stressed is that not everyone who may be a member of the VHP America may necessarily agree with the ideology, policies and actions of the organisations. The Hindu Right was quick to recognise that as a religious, cultural, and ethnic minority, Hindu Indians would naturally have anxieties about rights, preserving their cultural identity, educating their children about matters of history, heritage, language, and culture, and passing on cultural and social practices to subsequent generations. There was no corresponding secular organisational network – at least not on the same scale – dedicated to a pan-Indian vision that could assuage the same anxieties among expatriate Indians across the USA or UK while offering a model of Indian heritage and values beyond religion. It is likely then that Muslim Indian expatriates formed their own communities in these overseas locations or perhaps sought to find community within global pan-Islamic communities. Perhaps, this led to the Indian diaspora cleaving along lines of community, language, and caste. In publications produced by and aimed at the diaspora, like *Khabar* and *India Abroad*, it is not uncommon to find announcements of events being hosted by Bengali, Tamil, or Gujarati, Vaishnav or Brahmin organisations, or some combinations of region and caste organisations.

The first BJP-led NDA government, helmed by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajyapee from 1998 to 2004, may have been voted out by the Indian electorate after one term, with its slogan of 'India Shining' ringing hollow to them. But the campaign found massive support among overseas or Non-Resident Indians. In turn, the Vajpayee government doffed its hat to the community, acknowledging its importance through events such as Pravasi Bharatiya Divas or a festival for overseas Indians at which NRI achievers were feted,

implementing a mechanisms for NRIs to avail of a model of *de facto* dual citizenship through offering Person of Indian Origin (PIO) and later Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) status, and by appointing an ambassador-at-large to address the affairs of the expatriate, immigrant and diasporic community[7].

The BJP's policy initiatives for NRIs were aimed at one segment of the diasporic Indian and Indian-American population in the US, specifically the affluent professional classes. They were skewed in favour of elites working in Silicon Valley and, to a lesser extent, conservative Hindu populations of Gujarati expatriates in locations like New Jersey. Both these populations tended to be supporters of the BJP and were generally attracted to the politics of the Hindu Right. This selective view of the Indian-origin population of the US ignored a much longer and far more complex history of Indian migration to America, whether it was migrant labour to the Pacific Northwest and California in the nineteenth century or more recent undocumented migrants of Indian origin[8].

With an already active potential user base overseas, a young and restless population within the country carrying aspirations and frustrations in equal measure, a Congress Party that appeared jaded and enervated in the face of seemingly intractable problems, and a disciplined cadre-based party in the BJP that seemed to understand the internet and social media well, by the early 2010s the ground was set for the relationship between Hindu nationalism and new media to mutate or evolve into its latest incarnation.

Milking the politics of anti-corruption outrage online

Enter Rajesh Jain and the India Against Corruption movement. Two entities, an individual and an institution, who played a seminal role in transforming the landscape of the internet and politics in the India of the last decade.

Presently the founder of NetCore, a marketing solutions technology firm, Rajesh Jain is well-known as India's first internet

millionaire. In 1999, during the peak of India's first internet boom, he sold his company IndiaWorld Communications to Satyam Infoway for over $100 million dollars. In 2012, Jain founded NitiDigital, an online umbrella structure for assorted right-of-centre initiatives[9]. The same year also saw Jain launch NitiCentral, a portal dedicated to presenting centre-right views in an effort to integrate them into the mainstream of Indian political discourse which tended to tilt left in many of its assumptions and assertions about the nature of Indian identity, the complexities of Indian history, the essence of the Indian character, the social obligations of the Indian state, and the like. Rohan Venkataramakrishnan notes that 'NitiCentral was supposed to be part of an effort to turn the immense popularity of Modi, and his brand of Bharatiya Janata Party politics, into a sustainable intellectual ecosystem online'[10]. Jain also launched two other important ventures: IndiaVotes, inaugurated in 2012, which gathered and organised publicly-available data on Indian voters that could then be used effectively for strategic electoral purposes by political parties; and India 272+, which was set up in 2013, an initiative that sought to persuade voters to cast their lot for Narendra Modi's BJP and reach the magical figure required for the BJP to be able to form the government.

In January 2018, I had the chance to meet with Jain at his NetCore office, in Lower Parel in central Mumbai[11]. The office is located in prime real estate, Peninsula Corporate Park, which earlier housed Mumbai's now-defunct mills but now boasts upscale malls and spacious and glitzy corporate building, both, perhaps like Jain's career trajectory itself, signs of the new India. It is this new India that Modi promised, that Indian elites and subaltern groups alike dream of.

Jain, who is affable and radiates a cheery optimism, patiently answered all my questions and was more than forthcoming in sharing his vision for India and explaining the reasons behind his desire for creating a right-wing media ecosystem in India. No right-wing majoritarian, Jain speaks a language that is part libertarian utopianism, part capitalism, and part Indian aspirational developmentalism. A critic of the social welfarist policies that have been woven into the DNA of the post-colonial Indian state, Jain made

the point that the Indian media tended to uncritically endorse this socio-economic vision, which, in his view, was inefficient and worked against the interests of all Indians. His motivation in funding and founding a centre-right site like NitiCentral, and in assisting Narendra Modi and the BJP, was, first, to offer a space for an alternate perspective to the dominant Left-liberal economic view and, second, to bring about a political change that he felt the Congress, with its legacy, history, and dynastic politics, could not and would not deliver.

Taking a broad historical view from 1947 to the present, Jain's observation about the hegemony of a Left-liberal viewpoint in media is a fair one, holding true not just for matters of economics but of culture and politics as well. Yet, in a post-liberalisation context, there have been enough voices that have been pro-reform, whether in papers like the *Indian Express* or in Indian financial papers and magazines, to suggest that the range of views in media on questions of market reform, welfare spending, regulations, and the like was more complex than what Jain was suggesting. At different points of time over the last several years, prominent journalists and commentators have, in fact, critiqued what they see as the hypocritical liberalism of elites that would deny poorer Indians the benefits that they could take for granted; whether it is the benefit of market forces, secure proof of identity, or free access to the internet promised by Facebook through its Free Basics program[12].

Shekhar Gupta, a well-known journalist and then editor of the *Indian Express*, had termed this ideology 'povertarianism' in a scathing editorial written in 2013. Gupta took the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) to task for what he saw as its cussed opposition to economic reform and its woolly-headed insistence on considering the human costs of reform in any plan for development, for instance, by drawing on the work of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen. Laying claim to ownership of the term, 'povertarianism,' fumed Gupta, 'is a unique philosophy invented by the Congress and three generations of its intellectual fellow-travellers. The central postulate of povertarianism is, poverty is my birthright, and I shall do anything possible to make sure you have it. With apologies to Tilak: *garibi hamara janmasiddha adhikar hai,*

aur hum ise aapko dila kar hee dum lenge'[13]. In another phrase, used in connection to the controversial Aadhar project, which has the ambitious goal of bringing all Indians within a grid of biometric identification, Gupta had described critics of the project as 'wine-and-cheese-liberals.' Ashok Malik, another senior journalist, had similarly spoken of a 'Khan Market consensus'; the reference to an affluent neighbourhood in New Delhi, was meant to suggest that liberal voices, in journalism and beyond, were utterly out of touch with the needs of the Indian masses.

While these caustic phrases were articulated after Jain founded NitiCentral in 2012, it is not difficult to find similar sentiments in the Indian media and public spaces from the 90s onward. Economists Jagdish Bhagwati and Arvind Panagriya, both of whom came out as ardent supporters of Narendra Modi and defenders of his 'Gujarat Model' of development, Surjit Bhalla, Swaminathan Aiyar, and many other high-placed figures in the industry and the corporate world were strong advocates of right-of-centre economic reforms. During my visits to India over the last few years, more than one informed commentator and analyst told me that Congress' initiatives like MGNREGA, a minimum employment guarantee scheme, had alienated the influential political classes who had then decided to throw their weight behind the BJP in the 2014 general elections.

Yet, be that as it may, Jain was successful in demonstrating the power of the internet to the constituency of Hindu right-wingers at large. Internet ventures are easy and inexpensive to set up: hitch a site to a cause and make it clear that profit is not a motive, and volunteers will clamour to write for a publication. Following the Ariana Huffington model – that has contributed to the current crisis of journalism by thoroughly devaluing the labor of credentialised and trained journalists and competent writers – people can be easily persuaded to write for free in return for visibility. Jain initially appointed Kanchan Gupta, a well-known journalist with Hindu right-wing leanings, as editor of NitiCentral. Gupta was later replaced by Shashi Shekhar, a technology professional, emblematic of a new demographic of Indians attracted to the politics of the Hindu Right. In 2016, claiming it had now fulfilled its objective, NitiCentral shut down. Whether it had stayed true to Jain's vision of advocating for a

Centre-Right economic perspective is a question for debate. In any event, NitiCentral set in place a template for a rash of other right-wing sites that would come about later, like *Swarajya* and OpIndia, that were more narrowly-focused on defending the BJP and Modi, attacking their critics, and were more strongly centred on voicing a Hindu Right perspective on cultural and political matters.

When I met Jain, he indicated that he had been disappointed by the Modi government's refusal or inability to carry out economic reforms. Although Jain did not say so himself during our conversation, several people who knew him, and who I had the opportunity to speak with during my visits to India, said that he was also dismayed at the virulent behaviour of Hindu rightwing trolls and that it had never been his intention to provide a platform or space for them or to enable them in any way. Indeed, in my meeting with him, Jain gave the impression of having moved on from his earlier passion of creating a platform for centre-right perspectives in India. He spoke animatedly of his new venture, Nayi Disha or 'new direction', which aimed to empower Indian citizens by proposing to give each citizen a sum of money and to elect a candidate of their choice, thereby rendering redundant the political party as a traditional source of authority. Under the aegis of Nayi Disha, Jain has recently initiated a more specific programme to enrich Indians called Dhan Vapsi[14].

Jain also played an important role in another development that has reshaped Indian politics in crucial ways, the India Against Corruption movement. The mass movement, spearheaded by activist Anna Hazare, began in 2011. The movement drew on Indian middle-class anger at the stench of political corruption that seemed to cloak the Congress, the party in power at the time. Corruption in the government and private sector is both a serious problem in India and an emblem of the failures of the state, making it a traditional target of the ire of Indian salaried and professional classes. Hazare too honed in on corruption as the root of all evil in India and promptly embarked on a hunger strike till his demand that the Indian Parliament pass an anti-corruption bill and establish a body for investigating corruption cases was met. Whether the movement was a spontaneous uprising of middle-class anger or whether it was, in part, orchestrated by the Hindu Right to ensure the BJP wrested power

from the Congress remains shrouded in some mystery. The core team of the India Against Corruption movement, consisting of Anna Hazare, former bureaucrats Kiran Bedi and Arvind Kejriwal, and godman-cum-business Baba Ramdev, were brought together by a right-wing think-tank, the Vivekananda Foundation. The founder director of the foundation, Ajit Doval, is now the Modi government's National Security Advisor. Its connections to the RSS, notes an article in *The Caravan*, are 'an open secret' while ministers in Modi's cabinet and the BJP general secretary Ram Madhav are curent directors of the foundation[15].

Hazare, for all his claims of being a Gandhian, had achieved fame mostly for village-level vigilantism against alcohol consumption and for his repertoire of activist techniques, which included tying offenders to trees and thrashing them[16]. His idea of an unelected body of experts to adjudicate on matters of corruption, as indeed the absolutist nature of middle-class rage that he both fed and fed off, were, similarly, profoundly undemocratic, not to mention patently absurd. Hazare's idea was to populate the Jan Lokpal, the name given to his proposed anti-graft collective, with eminent Indians, such as Nobel Laureates and the like, who would serve, in the manner of wise elders, as the judges of the actions of their fallible, less-qualified Indian compatriots. Kiran Bedi would eventually go on to join the BJP and stand as its candidate for chief minister from Delhi. Kejriwal proved to be more stubborn. Refusing to be a useful idiot for the BJP, Kejriwal was instrumental in creating a new political party out of the India Against Corruption phenomenon, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which may be loosely translated as the party of the common man. While the AAP has failed to make headway on the national stage, it has twice swept elections in Delhi, decimating both the Congress and the BJP. Since taking office as Delhi's Chief Minister, Kejriwal has been the victim of a relentless campaign of harassment from the BJP, arguably for the sin of going off-script and morphing into a rogue politician who they have not been able to coopt or manage.

Jain's role in all of this was to provide the technological infrastructure for the 'missed call' strategy for getting people to join the India Against Corruption movement. The logic behind the strategy

was simple. It drew on existing convention where making a call that a recipient would not pick up was itself the message. A missed call from a courier delivery person might signal that he or she was at the entrance of your building or close by. Similarly, a missed call to your chauffeur indicated that he should come by to pick you up from a previously agreed-upon location. In exactly this manner, all you had to do to join the IAC movement was call a number that was not intended to be answered anyway. Your 'missed call' was proof of your voluntary act of joining the initiative and by sharing your number you were now part of the information and communication network of the movement[17]. NetCore, Jain's digital marketing firm, was thus instrumental in giving heft to the movement. Since Jain would also provide technological support to the BJP, he would later be accused by AAP leaders of sharing the mobile database of 15 million IAC users with the BJP, a charge that he emphatically denied[18]. At our meeting, I asked Jain about the accusation and he reiterated that there had been no misuse. As a matter of principle, I see no reason not to believe Jain. The sharing of the database, had it occurred, would no doubt have benefited the BJP. However, Jain's main contribution was to show the BJP and the Indian middle-class public the benefits of marrying technology with outrage and political energy. This is Jain's somewhat ambivalent legacy to the political present in India.

The Hindu Right, no doubt, had more than an inkling of this, with its history of using the internet to whip up anger against perceived critics of Hinduism, especially Western scholars such as Paul Courtright of Emory University and Wendy Doniger of the University of Chicago. In the eyes of the Hindu Right, these scholars, among a larger group of similar offenders, had a deliberate agenda to malign and insult Hinduism. I happened to witness the Paul Courtright controversy from beginning to end with a courtside view as a graduate student at Emory University. I saw how the scholar of religious studies at Emory drew the wrath of right-wing Hindus for a book on the Hindu deity, Lord Ganesha, that he had written in the 1980s. The original publication had drawn no such ire. Nearly twenty years later, the reissue planned by Motilal Banarsidass Publishers of New Delhi had sent the Hindu Right into a dizzying rage[19].

Originally peeved at the cover of the book, which featured an image of an Indian sculpture of Ganesha that Hindu right-wingers said was obscene, the book's detractors also took offense at Courtright's Freudian analysis which, among other things, analysed the relationship between Ganesha and Parvati through the theoretical lens of the Oedipal complex. The web was effectively mobilised to intimidate and threaten Courtright, as indeed was the case in attacks on other scholars as well.

Many of these causes, as indeed the larger project of reshaping the study of Hinduism in the US and global academy, were spearheaded by Rajiv Malhotra, an Indian technology entrepreneur turned self-styled academic. While Malhotra's own writings are puerile and draw on concepts from postcolonial and social theory in a confused manner, he has widespread support among Hindu Americans as well as Hindu Indians of right-wing and Hindu nationalist persuasion[20]. Hindu Americans and academics, who either genuinely believe in Malhotra's conservative vision of Hindu identity and history or are opportunistically seeking to benefit professionally, have aligned their lot with Malhotra.

What the India Against Corruption movement and the Hindu right-wing media ecosystem that mobilised against Paul Courtright showed was the speed at which outrage could spread in a Web 2.0 communication economy. The two cases illustrated the value of the web in reaping large gains in political capital at low cost and the ability of interlocutors to shift the terms of political debate itself by bypassing media pundits and the structure of legacy media altogether. It helped, of course, that the Indian media – perhaps doing what any nation's media should do – was relentless in its critique of the UPA-2 government, Sonia Gandhi as the President of the Congress Party, and Dr Manmohan Singh, as the Prime Minister. It bears noting here, though, that since Modi became Prime Minister in 2014, his treatment by the mainstream media, for all the claims of victimhood by Hindu right-wingers, has largely been one of supplication to the point of spectacular absurdity[21].

The Kejriwal boomerang notwithstanding, the Hindu Right's investment in fomenting middle-class discontent and outrage through its utilisation of new media and mobile technologies paid off

spectacularly in one respect. The India Against Corruption movement shifted the heart of the discussion around the 2014 election to corruption, pre-empting the Congress' plan to raise the issue of Modi's tainted communal past given his alleged role in the anti-Muslim pogrom of Gujarat in 2002. The general discourse of corruption fanned the flames of the 2G scam raised by a bureaucrat, Vinod Rai, who accused Congress leaders of making money off it.

The BJP benefited handsomely from the scandal. Corruption is seen by Indians as not just a financial problem but also a moral one. Gandhian puritanism, as well as indigenous strands of socio-religious puritanism such as the Arya Samaj or Muslim puritanical traditions, play an important role in this perception that cuts across social groups. In addition, corruption is seen as a problem that impacts productivity and efficiency, both of which are fetishised by Indian professional elites.

Beyond these factors, the BJP has also worked to build and organise an army of social media volunteers and employees. Judging by the relentless attacks on the Congress during the UPA regime, well before the elections, the basic structure of the BJP's IT cell seems to have been well in place and functioning smoothly before the 2014 elections. The resources at the disposal of the BJP's IT cell are formidable, as someone who happened to have seen them first-hand shared with me[22]. If politics is war by other means, information technology is a critical weapon in the armoury of the BJP. The IT cell has an arsenal of volunteers at hand, monitoring the news and talk shows on live television, ready with a rapid response to the events or views espoused by individuals. A lawyer in Delhi, who is famous for his work in the realm of digital rights and privacy, shared a telling anecdote with me. A frequent invitee to popular news shows on mainstream media, both during the UPA-2 and NDA-2 regimes, he would often be asked to comment on government policies or responses to issues related to the internet, such as the draconian Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, Facebook's plan to introduce Free Basics in India and its relationship to net neutrality, or the suspension of internet services in politically sensitive places like Kashmir. During the UPA-2 regime, if this lawyer took a position that was critical of the government, his view would be retweeted almost

instantly by dozens of accounts. Since the Modi government has taken power, the same thing happens only if his views happen to coincide with the position taken by the government. Conversely, he is also at the receiving end of negative tweets – identical in their phrasing and even errors – if his views deviate from or are critical of the Modi government. Cadre-based and internally well-disciplined, the RSS and the BJP have effective managerial mechanisms and organisational structures already in place to mobilise and use their massive base of both employees and volunteers. Amit Shah, known as much for his formidable organisational acumen as for his alleged involvement in murders and political threats, as well as other leaders validate the efforts of social media volunteers through a number of mechanisms. The BJP organises social media training sessions for volunteers and regular meetings for its online *karyakartas* or workers. These meetings often see the presence of senior leaders like Shah, signaling the importance BJP footsoldiers hold for the BJP and reflecting the value that the BJP places on new media as a political tool.

The grand prize for social media volunteers is recognition from the higher-ups in the party, especially from Narendra Modi himself. In 2015, the Prime Minister met with a select lot of members of the BJP's army of supporters on Twitter at the #Super150 event held at his residence, some of who were known right-wing trolls[23]. The event has not been repeated, likely because of some discontent among those who were not invited. The ultimate badge of honour among Hindu right-wingers is getting followed by Narendra Modi on Twitter. Modi's penchant for following the most virulent of trolls, including those known for issuing death and rape threats, has received widespread attention in the national and international media[24]. Yet, the fact that, other than some tepid clarifications from party spokespersons, Modi continues to follow them indicates the priority Modi attaches to loyalty and an awareness of the fact that the individuals who espouse these extreme views are an important part of his support base. This too is a signal to the world at large; that Modi is indifferent to media criticism and that he and his followers on social media share a bond that is not necessarily subject to externally-imposed ethical criteria.

As a detailed analysis of the BJP's social media strategy for the 2014 elections, presented on the website Social Samosa reveals, the BJP has been very effective in rolling out an integrated media campaign in which legacy media and new media as well as different social media platforms complement each other very effectively[25]. Additionally, the internet is now also used for the deliberate dissemination of fake news, in a manner that is somewhat different from the earlier Hindu Right project of using the web to create a counter-narrative about Hinduism, Indian identity, and Indian history. While sites of Hindu nationalist persuasion no doubt presented dubious claims like the argument that the Taj Mahal was a Hindu structure, such theories and accounts were part of a larger ideological project of conflating a vision of Hindu history with Indian history itself. The goal of spreading fake news, whether by BJP IT cell head Amit Malviya or a website like Postcard News, whose founder was arrested for spreading falsehoods, is aimed at sowing confusion, maligning an opponent, or creating a tactical diversion[26]. Interestingly, in the Web 2.0 space, each online platform is used for a specific purpose by the Hindu Right and the BJP. Twitter is a tactical weapon. It is a platform and weapon for the BJP to engage in the digital equivalent of what the war theorist Clausewitz called 'total war'. From short-lived trends to campaigns of harassment that go on endlessly, the Hindu Right uses Twitter to silence, wear down and intimidate opponents.

Facebook is part of the programme of developing a counter-archive that consolidates, legitimises, and reinforces Hindutva claims and tenets in various ways. Facebook pages associated broadly with the Hindu Right show continuities with earlier Hindutva themes as well new post-Modi concerns and emphases. Older themes include cow protection (though the degree of attention that the issue has received since 2014 has increased exponentially), the myth of Muslims engaged in cow slaughter, again an historically old trope given new life, and the building of the Ram Mandir at the site of the destroyed Babri Masjid. New themes involve the radical politicisation of the army, often with the support of former army personnel, the idea of the army as (implicitly) aligned with Hindu nationalism, and critics of the army as anti-nationals. These pages

also endorse the performance of national loyalty through invocations of Vande Mataram, 'Jai Shri Ram', and allegiance to Modi. In addition to creating mythologies about the Hindu Right, the longstanding goals of Hindu nationalists to rewrite history in school textbooks and to capture institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University remain in place. Facebook becomes an effective tool and ally for the BJP and the Hindu Right as they set about to achieve these objectives.

WhatsApp is essentially a network of networks, many of which are closed loops. This allows the Hindu Right to claim deniability while introducing the seeds of various politically charged messages in WhatsApp groups through which they spread across wider social circuits, often with dangerous and violent consequences. WhatsApp, then, offers a structure that links the larger political frame of the nation through the party to caste, interest-based, or neighbourhood groups and then down to the level of the family. It offers a perfect model for the BJP to test how its messages will play at different levels of granularity. As closed loops, these WhatsApp groups also become 'safe spaces' for people to express religious bigotry, for men to be chauvinistic, and the like.

Finally – and here we come to the big social media question – what is it about the BJP that has motivated people to join in such large numbers as online volunteers? The answer here is Narendra Modi and what he represents in the new aspirational India.

Since economic liberalisation in 1991, social mobility and churn have created aspirations among a wide array of Indians across caste and class, but also anxieties among some who may be privileged in terms of caste but not in terms of class, given the greater assertion of subaltern caste groups. Modi represents the antithesis of old, dynastic privilege embodied by the figure of the Gandhi dynasty – a trope and theme Modi personally has returned to time and again in campaign speeches, often in not very charitable terms. This elite world is also what is invoked by the caricatures of the 'Lutyens media', the 'Khan Market consensus' or wine-and-cheese liberals, though the BJP itself is also a party of dynastic succession, elite privilege, and crony capitalism.

Social media offers a new form of what Weber called ‘charismatic authority’, along with the pretense of paradoxically being unmediated and direct. Social media carries the illusion of reciprocity and equality. This is what Modi effectively appeals to by following various trolls, including vile ones. And it is this performance of egalitarianism combined with ideas of nationalistic duty, as well as metaphors of the family as nation, that are at play in the BJP’s social media meetings.

Many of Modi’s supporters routinely express extreme sentiments that qualify them as trolls. The psychology and history of trolling, analysed by Angela Nagle, is instructive in this regard[27]. At least one source of trolling behavior is a current crisis of masculinity among both privileged and subaltern males. In the Indian case, it is fair to say that trolling culture feeds off a general culture of patriarchy plus the patriarchal culture of the Hindu Right. Instances of abuse, such as the singer Abhijeet’s rants about socialite and writer Shobhaa De, actor Alok Nath’s attacks on activist Kavita Krishnan, and the routine anger and hate directed at women journalists like Rohini Singh, Swati Chaturvedi, Barkha Dutt, and Nidhi Razdan, reflect a conflation of the ugliness of patriarchy with the tawdriness of a jingoistic nationalism. Social media is not the cause of such behaviour, but the nature of the space, which is freed from accountability, prone to group polarisation and the reinforcement of extreme views, indicates alarmingly that the internet may be perceived by the more radical of Modi’s supporters as perhaps the only space where they can express such sentiments. In the next chapter, I unpack the effects of Modi’s charismatic authority online, while examining in more detail how the Hindu Right has made use of each specific new and social media platform and network, that is, Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp.

4

Hindu Nationalism and New Media in Pax Modica

The establishment of Pax Modica

In May 2014, following the BJP's spectacularly resounding election victory, most of India was temporarily afflicted with hope. It was a particular kind of hope that I remember having experienced myself on several occasions while growing up in India: in 1984, with the appointment of Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister, then in 1989, when VP Singh, reputed to be an honest government official, became PM, and then yet again in 1991, when, in response to a balance of payments crisis precipitated by the First Gulf War, India initiated long overdue reforms aimed at integrating the Indian economy into a global world order. Older generations of Indians will add 1977 as a date with a similar resonance for them, for that was when the Janata Party had swept the Congress aside, following the suspension of civil rights or the 'Emergency' that had been imposed by Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi in 1975. And for those who can still recall the day, the most magical moment of hope of them all was 15 August 1947, when, in Nehru's memorable words, India awoke 'to life and freedom,' a historic turning point when British colonial subjects turned into free Indian citizens at the stroke of midnight[1].

This hope – naïve, realistic, or necessary – centres on the expectation of radical change, which perhaps will always be a somewhat utopian dream in a country like India that is vast, complex and beset with intractable problems[2]. Echoing predictable mantras of the power of capitalism to create wealth, lift millions out of poverty, and usher in a meritocratic society, India's industrial, corporate, and professional elites dream of economic reforms that will unshackle the volcanic energy of India's burgeoning middle class and its giant reservoir of untapped and under-utilised human capital. The middle classes and aspiring middle classes hope for an end to corruption, access to better services, and fewer hassles in the grind of daily life. More more socially minded Indians hope that in the days that follow, the lot of the most vulnerable marginalised, and wretched of Indians will improve.

How realistic were these hopes in the case of Narendra Modi's BJP?

The BJP had utterly decimated the Congress in the elections, achieving an absolute majority of 282 seats in a parliament of 543, which meant it could, if it wanted, form the government by itself instead of spearheading the National Democratic Alliance coalition (NDA). These results met or exceeded the BJP's 'Mission 272+' project. The project, as pointed out earlier, was an initiative that NetCore's Rajesh Jain had proposed and put in place. Following a meeting with Narendra Modi, he had set up a team to implement the NitiDigital initiative that would help the BJP reach the desired target. Like many other Indians, Jain, too, had hoped to kickstart India and set into motion a radical transformation of the nation's economic, social and political life. Modi, in Jain's imagination, was to be the instrument of this change, suffering neither from the liberal welfarist tendencies of the Congress nor from its dynastic sclerosis.

The result of the election was truly astonishing to many, for till a few months before the election, seasoned political observers and journalists had wondered aloud about the wisdom of the BJP putting forth Narendra Modi as its prime ministerial candidate. Some of these commentators, like the Indian-American journalist, Sadanand Dhume, had shifted their views on Modi in the run-up to the election, but the consensus among pundits seemed to be that Modi, given his

record and image, was too extreme a candidate even for a Hindu right-wing party, and that the Indian public would not accept such a divisive and polarising figure as the *de facto* leader of the country. Once Modi was settled on as the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, the same skeptics seemed to think that his candidacy would undermine rather than strengthen the BJP's chances in the elections.

This assumption, of course, was based on the perception of an abiding, even if battered, secularism as a fact of Indian social life. Secularism is an article of faith that the commentariat, activist sector, and the Congress have all too often rested their hopes on, while the Hindu Right has exploited the term to the hilt, by reframing it as the minority-appeasing 'pseudo-secularism' of the Congress, its supporters, and Indians of liberal persuasion. It is no secret that the Congress' hands are not clean when it comes to communal violence. 'Many a Congressman was a communalist under his nationalist cloak,' Nehru is known to have said, though he emphasised that the Congress would never throw in its lot with a communal party[3]. In post-colonial India, the most glaring example of the communalism of the Congress remains the anti-Sikh violence that followed the assassination of Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984. Several Congress leaders were alleged to have led mobs against Sikhs in Delhi in the retaliatory violence that followed, which resulted in Sikhs being lynched and burned alive. Like Modi in 2002, then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had supposedly been in the know about the violence and was believed to have given it his tacit approval, a charge Congress leaders have always vehemently denied.

The taint of 1984 does not seem to have hurt the Congress as much as the accusations of corruption, incompetence, and dynastic sloth did in 2014. Following the recent surprise victory of the Congress Party in three states that formed part the BJP's Indian stronghold – Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh – in December 2018, the Congress Party President and leadership appointed Kamal Nath as Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh. Nath, a seasoned politician with longstanding ties to the Gandhi family, is alleged to have overseen the killing of two Sikhs in the 1984 violence, according to eyewitness accounts. In December 2018, after a legal process that

lasted more than two decades, the Delhi High Court also upheld the prior conviction of Sajjan Kumar, another Congress politician accused of participating in the riots[4]. In general, with a few exceptions, the Congress victory in these state elections has been welcomed by liberals and Modi critics as hopefully signaling the beginning of the end of the Modi era or, at least, shattering the myth of Modi's invincibility.

These facts regarding the Congress have lent some weight to the chagrin of BJP supporters about the hypocrisy of the Congress, mainstream media, and Left-liberal intelligentsia, variously, on the issue of the Congress' communalism and a perceived double standard in judging Modi versus leaders and politicians from other parties. Nonetheless, while politicians across party lines benefit from the communalisation and inevitable polarisation of the electorate, recent scholarship suggests that the BJP gains more from sectarian conflict than does the Congress, and that the presence of a Congress legislator in a constituency is likely to reduce the possibility of inter-religious strife[5]. In an incisive reflection, the historian Mukul Kesavan has addressed the thorny question of whether the communal sins of the Congress might be considered less evil than those of its main rival in the Indian political field.

> Let us return to our question, namely, "What makes Modi and the BJP worse than the Congress and its dynasts, given the horror of 1984?" The answer is simple and unedifying. The Congress, by a kind of historical default, is a pluralist party that is opportunistically communal while the BJP is an ideologically communal (or majoritarian) party that is opportunistically 'secular'. The difference between the Congress and the BJP doesn't lie mainly in the willingness of the former to express contrition about pogroms it helped organise; it is, perhaps, best illustrated by the fact that twenty years after the 1984 pogrom, the Congress assumed office with a Sikh at the helm who served as prime minister for two terms[6].

For Kesavan, the Congress is not exhausted by its communalism, but the BJP, by virtue of its DNA, is invariably constrained by it. Even before the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom, Gujarat had been known as a laboratory of Hindutva, where the banal communalisation of everyday life had been gradually normalised such that it had become a kind of experential common sense.

The question on everyone's mind about Modi on 16 May 2014 was whether he could re-engineer the communal DNA of the BJP through the force of his will and the sweeping mandate given to him or, at the very least, not let it impair him.

Would Modi seek to do to India what he had done to Gujarat? In an important essay, written two decades ago and one that seems especially prescient with the resurgence of majoritarian violence in India over the last few years, Ashis Nandy, one of India's leading public intellectuals, had described Modi's personality as that of a sociopath who was pathologically obsessed with Muslims as the source of all evil[7].

> Modi, it gives me no pleasure to tell the readers, met virtually all the criteria that psychiatrists, psycho-analysts and psychologists had set up after years of empirical work on the authoritarian personality. He had the same mix of puritanical rigidity, narrowing of emotional life, massive use of the ego defence of projection, denial and fear of his own passions combined with fantasies of violence – all set within the matrix of clear paranoid and obsessive personality traits. I still remember the cool, measured tone in which he elaborated a theory of cosmic conspiracy against India that painted every Muslim as a suspected traitor and a potential terrorist. I came out of the interview shaken and told Yagnik that, for the first time, I had met a textbook case of a fascist and a prospective killer, perhaps even a future mass murderer.
>
> The very fact that he has wormed his way to the post of the chief minister of Gujarat tells you something about our political process and the trajectory our democracy has

> traversed in the last fifty years. I am afraid I cannot look at the future of the country with anything but great foreboding[8].

As Modi's fortunes have fluctuated a bit, following the inevitable bad press generated by the routine violence unleashed on minorities and the failures of the government to make good on their its many promises, Nandy's words appear prophetic. Yet, watching the widespread embrace of Modi by people across the political spectrum in India immediately after his victory, it seemed like Nandy might have been talking about another person altogether. Was the Modi of 2014 the same Modi who had been denied a visa to the United States for his role in the anti-Muslim violence? Or was he the politician who, aside from some tasteless remarks about Sonia Gandhi and occasional invocations of the bogey of cow slaughter, had really meant what he said when he focused his campaign on the theme of inclusive development, ensuring the progress of all in the nation? Modi had also promised that he would retrieve the unaccounted income or black money illegally stashed away in Swiss banks, a sum massive enough to give each Indian ₹15 lakhs or 1.5 million. 'Achche din' or 'good days' lay ahead, claimed a triumphant Modi as his followers celebrated his win with a religious fervour[9]. Modi echoed his commitment to work for the well-being of all Indians in another catchy slogan '*sabka saath, sabka vikaas*,' or 'development with all, development for all'. While the traditional activist and academic Left in India did not hold any expectations that Modi would work to improve social relations between different religious and caste groups, their hope was that being appointed prime minister would, at the very least, temper his communal instincts. Liberal commentators, framing the moment of Modi's victory as one of contingency and choice rather than one of an inevitable imposition of Hindu nationalist ideology, had to take the high road and convince themselves that Modi would shape India for the better with his vision. Journalists who had in earlier years had slotted Modi as an arch-communalist now seemed to have discovered new virtues in him, from his oratorical skills to his organisational abilities, as indeed they did in the BJP. This in itself was a sign of things to come. The same mainstream media that had been ruthlessly unsparing of the

Congress and Dr Manmohan Singh, who served as Prime Minister between 2004 –2014, as, indeed, a free and independent media should have been, suddenly seemed to have lost its critical, inquiring temper.

In one hagiographic strand of analysis, Modi was heralded as the true representative of the masses and of the energies of small-town and rural India, uncouth and brash but authentic and the real deal. He spoke for, and was of, the class of Indians who did not swill gin and tonics at the India International Centre; in other words, he was not of the world of Lutyens' Delhi's haw-haw Nehruvian elites with their Anglophila, their St. Stephen and Oxbridge degrees and their closed cliquish circles. This narrative may have contained a grain of truth in it, but it was also a caricature. It was a reductive simplification of the immensely complex Indian political landscape. There were plenty of sons-and-daughters-of-the soil and regional politicians who had also become major players on the national political scene, whether Devi Lal, Deve Gowda, or Sharad Pawar. The President of the Congress, Sonia Gandhi, had been careful to present herself as an Indian wife and daughter-in-law, and had been accepted as such. In 2004, following the election victory of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, her refusal to assume the post of Prime Minister and her nomination of Dr Manmohan Singh was seen as an act of *tyaag*, a consummately Indian and supremely noble act of sacrifice.

Yet, even if this story of Modi as a social outsider who carried the real India in his past and present, and who spoke for other such outsiders, did not hold much literal weight, it nevertheless contained a powerful affective truth. For hordes of Modi supporters, whether from subaltern groups or from privileged Hindu backgrounds, who nonetheless, saw themselves as the victims of the Indian state's affirmative action policies in favour of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and the state's supposed appeasement of religious minorites, Modi's struggle mirrored their own trials and tribulations. In a country where not just fluency in English but the accent in which one speaks the language clearly places one in a social and class hierarchy, Modi's thickly-accented English and his fluency in Hindi rang true for many as symbols of both defiance and egalitarianism, further adding to his credibility.

The classic moment of the clash of these worlds can be seen in an awkward interview between Modi, then serving as the Chief Minister of Gujarat, and veteran Indian journalist, Karan Thapar, an Oxford-educated wealthy Indian with longstanding connections to the Gandhi-Nehru dynasty and a penchant for a grating over-enunciation in the Queen's English. During the interview, Thapar relentlessly dogged Modi about the controversy over the 2002 riots, till a visibly flustered Modi got up and left the interview[10]. This was by no means the first instance of an Indian journalist discomfiting an Indian politician with persistent questioning. Yet, what was also on display was a tension between people who had inhabited two very different Indias: Thapar, born into privilege, entitled to the point of being pompous; and Modi, born in humble circumstances, displaying the insecurity and egotism of the self-made man who had overcome obstacle after obstacle to succeed. And perhaps the dice was loaded against Modi given that the interview was conducted in English, granting a natural advantage to Thapar. In contrast to his lack of fluency in English, Modi comes across as a gifted orator in Gujarati as well as Hindi. While Modi may still have gotten rattled by Thapar and walked out had the interview been conducted in Hindi, he may also have been able to defend himself in more articulate fashion. In any event, since then, every encounter between Modi and the media has been carefully stage-managed. Modi has either been interviewed by pliant and sympathetic journalists or the questions that he is asked in the interview are provided to him beforehand.

Paradoxically, Modi's record and penchant for doing away with the niceties of democracy and constitutional procedure in the service of the higher cause of nationalism also gained him wider legitimacy. He stood in marked contrast to the scholarly Dr Manmohan Singh, who was endlessly criticised by media for not speaking up on urgent and burning issues[11]. As a leader, Modi, interestingly, has not been alone in exploiting the appeal of the no-nonsense strongman who derives his authority directly from the people, outside the constraints of political structures and processes. Russia's Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan also fit this mould. And Trump's tactics during the 2016 US presidential elections and his actions

since taking the reins of the American presidency also place him in the same category.

By 15 May 2014, it was clear that the BJP had swept the elections convincingly. Modi's online supporters were every bit as triumphant about his election success as were his supporters out on the streets, revelling in their schadenfreude at the discomfort of 'libtards' and 'sickulars', two staple terms in the argot of the Hindu Right for the secular liberals who they see as the enemy. Following Modi's victory, a new specialised online vocabulary of two-way nicknames and insults came into being, 'bhakts' and 'sickulars', Pappu, i.e., Rahul Gandhi, versus Feku, i.e., Modi, Sanghis versus Congis and Commies, Modi supporters also exhorted his critics to soothe themselves with Burnol, an Indian medical product used to treat burns. They seemed particularly keen to lord it over a host of prominent journalists, like Barkha Dutt, Nidhi Razdan, Rajdeep Sardesai, Sagarika Ghose, and Rana Ayyub, who they considered hypocritical liberals and blatantly partisan detractors of Modi. If the discourse of Modi's supporters or 'bhakts' and Hindu right-wingers wasn't so virulent, it might have been funny. It very rarely rose to the level of good satire. One exception was the figure of the 'adarsh liberal,' or ideal liberal, that drew on preachy, vintage posters of the 'adarsh balak' or good boy, which were meant to exhort and motivate schoolboys to behave well[12].

The media landscape at the birth of Pax Modica

The media support for Modi in the immediate aftermath of the election, in both its online and offline variants, may partially be attributed to the radical changes in the political economy of the Indian media system since 1991. The media system has been fundamentally transformed by the economic reforms initiated in 1991, with domestic and global private players now able to hold ownership of media properties. A detailed scholarly history of these changes and their impact on the political, cultural and social lives of Indians remains to be written. Here, I provide in broad brushstrokes a general sketch, to

highlight some trends in particular that have shaped the Hindu Right's deployment of new media since the BJP's 2014 election victory. Describing these important aspects of Indian media will provide additional context and a basis for interpretive nuance in understanding how the Hindu Right has used new media and social media since 2014.

In print, the old guard, represented by the Hindustan Times group, the Times Group, the India Today group and the like, continue to dominate. In the English-language space, while some new newspapers like *LiveMint* have flourished, these initiatives have often been the result of partnerships between prominent media houses and, similarly, well-established foreign players. *LiveMint*, for instance, was set up as a partnership in 2007 between the the *Wall Street Journal* and the HT Media group that also owns *Hindustan Times*. The partnership dissolved in 2014, but the paper has struck roots and has taken its place among the *Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, *Telegraph*, *Mid-Day*, and the *Hindu* and business newspapers like the *Financial Times* and the *Economic Times* as a viable and credible player in Indian print media. Meticulously produced and designed, *LiveMint* was the first paper to introduce an ethical set of guidelines for its journalistic content, under the leadership of Raju Narisetti, a veteran of the American media industry, who has since returned to the USA[13]. In the English-language news magazine arena, a few new players have emerged or been resuscitated, like *Open* and the *Caravan*. The *Caravan*, in particular, has done yeoman service in the realm of investigative journalism, such as on the topic of the death of Judge Loya[14], who was investigating the role of BJP President, Amit Shah, in the murder of witnesses who could have incriminated him for wrongdoing, along with producing outstanding profiles of a number of political players and influential mediapersons, such as Manmohan Singh, Arun Jaitley, and Shekhar Gupta.

In the post-liberalisation era, it is the sphere of television, however, that has arguably witnessed the most dramatic changes. From two black-and-white state-run channels, with limited programming on a narrow band of themes, such as national integration, agriculture, yoga, national sport and wholesome family-friendly fare, Indian television has experienced an explosion of

channels in every major language and programming in every conceivable area, from cricket to kabbadi in the realm of sports, food, lifestyle, travel channels and entertainment. Whether it is lachrymose soap operas that peddle the most conservative social values, reruns of Hollywood classics, a surfeit of Bollywood fare, a profusion of religious channels with sermons and sermonisers aimed at followers of all major religions and assorted denominations, the television industry has expanded manifold since then.

Founded in 1988 by Prannoy Roy and Radhika Roy, the media network NDTV was a pioneer in the television space, and among its roster of journalists and anchors, it was the journalist Barkha Dutt, more than anyone else, who created the figure of the contemporary English-language television anchor, and perhaps, the non-English language television anchor as well[15]. Dutt's ambition and drive in covering stories in conflict-ridden Kashmir or the Mumbai terrorist attacks in November 2008, talent for scoring important interviews, and the popularity of her discussion show, *The Buck Stops Here*, were the key factors in influencing an entire generation of young Indians to seek a career in the media. No less significant was Dutt's mode of delivering the news which, in its middle-class Indian English inflections and intonation, stood in pointed contrast to the faux-BBC accent of the English-language newscasters of Doordarshan and All India Radio. Even today, Dutt's influence can be seen in the manner in which the typical news anchor or journalist on an English-language media channel speaks and reports. NDTV was also home to several other prominent television journalists and anchors working in Indian television today, though many have since moved to other television channels.

The NDTV 24x7 and NDTV India channels and the network at large have been a lightning rod for criticism from the Hindu Right. The channel and networks have for several years been targeted as guilty of liberal bias. In part, this may possibly have been because a senior journalist and network executive Rajdeep Sardesai had publicly held Modi liable for the anti-Muslim carnage of 2002 in Gujarat. Other media channels and publications had also held Modi responsible – in the aftermath of the 2002 violence, Modi was on the cover of every Indian magazine and featured in stories that had raised

questions about his culpability in the anti-Muslim pogrom. However, in the lead up to 2014, perhaps hedging their bets, many publications had begun veering somewhat rightward. NDTV's relative doggedness in its critique of Hindu nationalism may have been responsible for it being especially singled out for attack by the Hindu Right.

Dutt, in particular, has been on the receiving end of relentless criticism and vicious attacks from the Hindu Right since well before the 2014 elections, with the abuse only amplifying after. She has been accused of compromising troop positions during the Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan, and, similarly of divulging important tactical information during the 26/11 terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008, a charge also levelled against other channels. Dutt has denied both charges strongly and has threatened legal action against bloggers who have accused her of the same[16]. This, in turn, further provoked the ire of the Hindu Right who claimed that Dutt was hypocritical as a journalist in clamping down on free speech and was unable to handle criticism. Her stories on the plight of the Kashmiris, which do not always fit a standard nationalist or jingoistic line, have also provided additional ammunition and fodder for her critics. Rumours even abound online that Dutt is secretly married to a Kashmiri man, which, according to Hindu right-wingers, explains her soft spot for anti-Indian Kashmiri terrorists.

Aside from the question of political affiliation, the abuse directed at Dutt is also a reflection of the fact, seen across the internet, whether in North America, Africa, Asia, or Europe, of the fact that women disproportionately bear the brunt of abuse online. If the anonymity and lack of accountability enabled by the internet are factors in promoting abuse in general, by ridding speech acts from ethical constraints, they also sanction the expression and, indeed, amplification of misogyny. Angela Nagle's work, which examines the online forum 4Chan, has shown that trolling and misogyny have a deep connection. Trolling is a dominantly male and profoundly gendered practice, and the history of trolling in general, especially on social media, has been interwoven with the history of online attacks on women[17].

Online violence against women is a global problem, and social media is a space in which women are especially vulnerable. Amnesty

International's report on the abuse faced by women on Twitter titled 'Toxic Twitter – A Toxic Place for Women' makes for harrowing reading[18]. The threats and abuse that women discuss in the report will be familiar to anyone who follows Indian Twitter accounts. It is not an unfair generalisation to note that while these threats on India's social media are not issued exclusively by Hindu right-wingers or supporters of Modi, the majority of abusive tweets against women do emanate from this consituency. The tweets include threats of rape, mutilation, and death. They often address women as prostitutes, and doxx or publicly share women's addresses and other personal details of their life. And, in extreme cases, they morph women's images on to naked images taken from pornographic sites and circulate them online.

At an event held in Delhi in 2018, journalist Rana Ayyub, whose work was instrumental in getting Indian investigative agencies to examine the role of Amit Shah in a staged encounter killing, drew attention to the constant abuse and threats she had faced and Twitter's lackadaisical attitude in responding to them[19]. The question of the responsibility of digital platforms like Twitter is key to the future of social media, not just in India but globally. I address this issue in detail in the next chapter of the book. For now, it is worth noting that platforms like Twitter or Facebook, which otherwise are not particularly responsive to such threats in the Indian context, are quick to comply with many demands and requests of the Indian state. This responsiveness is motivated by a desire to maintain good relations with the Indian government, and to not lose out on access to one of the fastest growing internet markets in the world. Mariya Salim notes that India is among the top twenty markets by internet usage in the world and also boasts of the highest annual growth of users. While this means that more women can express their voices in online discourse, the abuse they face remains a serious deterrent to their participation in public conversations on the internet. Gendered violence online often overlaps and intersects with casteist and communal violence. And prominent women in particular, whether journalists, actors, activists, or academics, whatever their caste or religious background, are often at the receiving end of an extreme barrage of violent abuse[20].

By 2014, the year of Modi's triumph, the internet sector in India had come of age, a far cry from the early boom and bust of the late 1990s and early 2000s, which had roughly paralleled the first bubble and boom of Silicon Valley. Speaking with the benefit of hindsight and from the vantage point of someone who saw and lived the better part of two years of that era closely, the early players in the internet space, such as rediff.com, Satyam, and the Times, were either unable to scale up or could not eventually compete in terms of services with the big US-based firms like Google, Yahoo, and Hotmail. Some other initiatives, like the auction site Baazi or online brokerage firms offering trades for as little as five paise per transaction, did not take off because they may have been ahead of the times. Low numbers of users, the reliance on dial-up modem technology for a large number of users, and slower than expected user growth meant that in terms of both access and usage the internet in India did not quite catch up with the West's advanced industrial nations in the manner that the fledgling Indian industry had hoped for.

Almost two decades later, the situation is similar to that early moment in the history of the internet in India in some vital respects and radically different in others.

Some of the internet startups in today's new media ecosystem in India are inspired by or seek to outright emulate startups in the USA, whether rating services, crowdsourcing initiatives for charity or education, or food delivery firms. The e-commerce sector too has matured with Indian companies like Flipkart and Snapdeal giving Amazon more than a run for its money. Indian startups are now able to raise money from global investors and have access to global capital markets. The Indian legacy media too has entered the digital space, although most websites associated with print newspapers and televisions channels are poorly designed, infested with ads and ridden with malware. In addition, there have been a number of online-only ventures that have taken root, such as Pinkvilla, which monitors the Bollywood industry, and Scroll, Firstpost, and the Wire, all of which are focused on hard news. It remains to be seen, though, whether these ventures will turn out to be economically sustainable in the long run.

Yet, as far as the quality of journalism in concerned, barring a few exceptions like the Wire, the growth of online media in the Indian context has not necessarily been an entirely salubrious development. The trajectory of rediff.com, which I had the privilege of witnessing as an early employee, tells this story. The web portal was a pioneer in numerous respects: it introduced an Indian email web-based system and messenger system; created in-house content to meet the massive demand for information on education, health, and sexuality; set up live cricket commentary and chats with actors, authors, politicians; and also established an online book shop and an e-commerce site. Along with these offerings, rediff also had a star-studded roster of editors and journalists, who guaranteed a steady production of first-rate reportage, commentary and analysis.

In keeping with the realities of the global media marketplace, however, rediff was unable to meet demand, set in place content pipelines to ensure a steady stream of information and offerings for its education or health channels, or set up the kind of support and infrastructure needed to manage its various offerings. Though the website is still around, it has increasingly come to resemble other players in the online Indian media marketplace with the inevitable reliance on the lives of Bollywood celebrities, cricketers, clickbait stories, and discounted offerings on consumer products. While the quality of prose on the average article on rediff is not as shot through with typographical errors as content on, say, the Times of India or Network 18 websites, it is, nonetheless, simplified and even dumbed down, a reflection of the fact that there is no real incentive for well-written articles in the advertising-riddled world of web content. For advertising revenue, it is the numbers game, or ‘eyeballs’ in the jargon of the early web, that count. And for getting these eyeballs, it is topics such as the wedding of a Bollywood actor or some other celebrity, Modi’s dance in a stadium in New Jersey, or any moderately sensationalist-sounding story that really matter.

And, as with other forms of media, at least in their English-language variants, subaltern voices, whether those of Dalits, Muslims, and Christians, women, sexual minorities, and the disabled, continue to be marginalised in cyberspace. These groups are not as invisible as they were twenty years ago, and the internet has provided

them with a stage that was previously unavailable given the political economy of structures of print and televisual media in India. But, even with these positive steps, such groups remain a minority online, vulnerable to online mobs and virulent expressions of majoritarian sentiment.

By 2014, Modi's supporters were well-entrenched in this online universe, warts and all. Rajesh Jain's ambition of establishing a right-wing media ecosystem online had been realised, though not quite in the way that he had hoped. Far from being a libertarian or classically conservative space – or a classically liberal one, for that matter – which would be dedicated to individual freedom and rights, the sanctity of private property, limited government, and to the efficient functioning of markets, right-wing online space in the Indian context had become an avenue for the propagation of culturally right-wing ideas and for constructing a particular image of Modi. If Hindutva conflated the categories of Indian and Hindu, and the Indian nation-state with a narrow interpretation of Hindu civilisation, Hindu right-wingers online conflated Hindu civilisation with the RSS and BJP, and in turn the RSS and BJP with Modi. For instance, *Swarajya*, a classically liberal magazine that had gone quiet and has now been revived as a Hindu right-wing publication, carried a characteristic article in this vein in 2013 titled, 'Modi: An Idea Whose Time Has Come'[21]. The cultish fervour extended to hounding anyone seen as a Modi critic. In January 2014, for instance, Modi's supporters and Hindu right-wingers launched a scathing attack on journalist and activist Raheel Khursheed, who was the head of the News, Politics and Government division of Twitter India, on grounds that he had criticised Modi for the latter's ineffectual governance in 2002[22]. In general, the Hindu Right, like the Conservative Right in the US, has a curious argument that employees of platforms like Twitter need must be 'neutral' in their politics, whatever that means.

Shortly after Modi's victory in 2014, an article by journalist Malini Goyal, in the *Economic Times*, pointed to Modi's vast reach on social media and highlighted the power it gave the new Indian prime minister in being able to implement his agenda for governance[23]. Goyal notes that with about half of India's total population of 1.25 billion being under 25 years in age, social media

has become a critically important avenue for wielding political influence. India has around 243 million internet users, with 185 million accessing it through mobile technology, giving it third spot among countries in terms of size of internet user-base. No doubt, having recognised this potential, the BJP and Modi ensured that these platforms 'played a key role' in the 2014 election[24]. Goyal's article presents some other valuable figures as well that provide us with a sense of Modi's well-established social media presence at the start of his tenure as the prime minister of India. As of May 2014, the Prime Minister's Office Facebook page boasted 2.4 million fans. Modi was among the top 5 global leaders in terms of Twitter followers, in the august company of Barack Obama and the Pope. In terms of likes on Facebook, Modi ranked second to Obama. And after taking the helm of affairs as PM, Modi transitioned into a more interactive mode of engagement with social media users, engaging in more two-way communication and often responding to his constituents, as opposed to the more information and dissemination-based one-way model that he had employed earlier[25].

As any standard undergraduate textbook on global media will tell you, media industries, like global businesses at large, continue to experience trends of concentration of ownership, conglomeration, and horizontal and vertical integration[26]. This holds true for India too, whether in terms of acquisitions or investment in media properties by domestic and foreign players. In late May 2014, India's wealthiest man, Mukesh Ambani bought out Network Media and Investments Ltd., a major Indian media network[27]. The acquisition of the network by Ambani, who is known to be close to Modi, was followed by the departure of two high-profile journalists, the husband-wife team of Rajdeep Sardesai and Sagarika Ghose, both of whom were critics of Modi. Even without the departures of Sardesai and Ghose, the acquisition raised the critical issue of media independence in the face of corporate power. As Megha Bahree notes, 'This takeover, once combined with RIL's telecom business, makes the combined group likely bigger than media baron Rupert Murdoch's empire in India and bigger than any other media group in India. And that should raise some serious questions about it'[28]. An

associate of Ambani, Mahendra Nahata, also bailed out NDTV by providing it with a large loan when it was in financial trouble and apparently held control over the channel given the nature of the agreement[29]. Combined with the formidable clout already wielded by the Ambani family, even if Ambani assets are now split up into two sets of businesses between brothers Mukesh and Anil, the ownership of a media network gives Mukesh Ambani remarkable power to shape political conversations in India.

This is not a uniquely Indian problem. Similar concerns have been raised about Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp empire, former New York Mayor Bloomberg, the Koch brothers in the USA, and Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. But the reasons why the situation in India may be treated as more worrisome is that, first, India lacks a well-developed watchdog and activist sector, an aspect of a national media ecosystem that may be considered its reflexive, self-critical institutional dimension. Secondly, the protections for journalists from libel and defamation laws are much weaker in India than in advanced Western industrial or post-industrial societies. India routinely ranks among the most unsafe place for journalists in the world, though' in 2018 the USA joined it in the top ten[30]. In the realm of legal protections for journalists, however, the USA does much better. In India, letters of intent to sue or frivolous defamation cases filed in courts in cities all over India are an instrument to harass journalists, activists, and academics. The Ambanis have a long record of using these and other means to shut down criticism by the media. In the last few years, Mukesh Ambani has pushed back on several unflattering and critical stories about his enterprises, such as, for instance, the sweet deal given to Reliance Industries Limited for natural gas by various governments[31]. Stories of a car crash allegedly involving Akash Ambani, the elder son of Mukesh Ambani, mysteriously vanished from most online publications as did coverage of an event where Anant Ambani, the younger son, addressed the audience in a manner that provoked mockery and satire[32].

Ownership structures in India are also more opaque than in the USA and tools like the Right to Information Act (RTI) have had their powers diluted since Modi began his tenure as the Prime Minister, and have not necessarily led to more transparency about who exactly

controls ownership of various media organisations. The publication NewsLaundry, however, has done some excellent work in this regard, as has the *Caravan*[33]. Prasanto Roy, an expert on media and technology in India, shared with me the fact that at the end of the complex chain of media ownership, there is usually a politician or an industrial house with political interests to be found. Most, media properties, he observed, are not especially profitable in the Indian context, a fact as true for a print magazine as for a new digital venture. The fact of industrial or political ownership of a media house may not in itself be any case for alarm – no doubt media is a critical tool for influencing opinion and regulation and for critiquing political opponents, but the desire to own media properties may also be motivated by a commitment to the importance of a free, robust and vibrant press for civic life. Funding provided transparently by industrialists like Narayana Murthy and Nandan Nilekani of Infosys or Azim Premji of Wipro, or by foundations set up by them to media organisations like the Wire, a non-profit, or The Print has not resulted in interference of any sort. It is when ownership is not traceable, and not meant to be traceable, that the motivations become unclear. The larger point to be emphasised here though is that there is an imbalance in terms of the relative power of corporate media and civil society in India, with the advantage firmly in favor of the former. Combined with weak protections for journalists and the possibilities for serious abuse, this does not bode well for the health of Indian democracy, even with India's long tradition of a generally free and vibrant press.

The general characteristics of global media manifest themselves according to the peculiarities and particularities of each national media system. While the blurring of the line between advertising and editorial functions in television and print is a feature of several media systems, in India this erasure has taken on a strange ubiquity with the phenomenon of 'paid news' extending not just to corporates but to politicians as well.

By way of clarification, paid news should be treated as distinct from fake news, though there may be cases where a news article qualifies as both fake news and paid news. A news item may not be factually untrue but someone – a politician, corporate, or interest

group – may pay a newspaper, television channel, or media organisation money to place it in a prominent section of the newspaper or run it as a prime-time story. There may be an arrangement in place where an organisation pays a media network a sum of money to cover a particular issue from an angle, and the coverage, while biased or slanted in this respect, may not literally be untruthful or fake. Fake news, conversely, may not be paid for. The goal of fake news is to misinform and to create a general climate of confusion in which what is true cannot be distinguished from what is not. Volunteers or ideologues may create or spread fake news to drive viewership of a particular idea, such as stories about Obama's Muslim identity, Rahul Gandhi's cocaine addiction, or the dangers of vaccines in spreading autism. Some creators of fake news, of course, may create and circulate such stories to make money by driving advertising to their sites through clickbait headlines and the like.

Periodic scandals about paid news have erupted in India over the last decade or so, some involving the ethically controversial practice of the 'sting' in which reporters go undercover seeking to honeytrap alleged perpetrators into confessing their transgressions on tape. While these have created some outrage, any public anger or recrimination by media organisations has neither lasted nor resulted in any meaningful changes implemented by media firms themselves, watchdog bodies, or regulatory entities[34]. The sting as a practice was allegedly started in India in the 1990s by the Times group, and the perception stands that it is now common practice among all media houses, with the rare media organisation that does not engage with it. I do not know of the extent and degree of the malaise, but there is at present a widespread cynicism among large numbers of people about the ethical principles and practices of mainstream media organisations. During three visits to India over the last five years, I spoke extensively with numerous members in the journalistic fraternity about the phenomenon of paid news. A senior editor at a leading Indian publication shared with me the open secret that in the lead-up to the 2014 elections, Narendra Modi's personal campaign war chest, as opposed to the BJP's campaign collection from business houses and the political class, had paid a major news group a significant sum of money to carry an exclusive interview with a

newspaper and a television channel from the same organisation, with questions agreed upon and vetted beforehand by Modi's people.

In Indian television, a new paradigm of a voluble, perennially outraged, and hyper-nationalist anchor spitting out moral judgements has replaced the earlier model of the anchor pioneered by NDTV as moderator, mediator, and arbiter. Even if the latter was not always free of the malaise of middle-class moralising and the smug certitudes of the patrician class that its founders Radhika and Prannoy Roy embodied, the NDTV anchor possessed a certain measure of competence and composure. The new style of outraged anchoring that took the place of the earlier NDTV model has almost entirely been created by the much-mocked Arnab Goswami, who is known for prefacing his one-way inquisitorial sessions with his target for the day with the incantation, 'The nation wants to know'. At the Times Now channel of the Times Group, where he moved from NDTV, Arnab promptly appointed himself as the nationalist watchdog of the nation. In his shows, he used his self-appointed authority to dispense with any journalistic conventions and proceeded promptly to monopolise conversations, deciding which of his guests got to speak or not, and holding forth in enraged, rambling soliloquies. Though easy to satirise, Arnab's style reaped rewards for both the Times Now channel and for him personally. His shows rocketed to the top of the ratings, beating those of his erstwhile colleagues and now rivals at NDTV and CNN-IBN. With his vast reach and popularity, Arnab had also morphed into a politically influential figure, which perhaps explains why Congress spokespersons, activists, and others who he saw as the enemies of the nation repeatedly turned up on his show to take the punishment he would mete out to them.

In 2017, Goswami left the Times Now channel, to found Republic TV, where he is a co-investor along with Rajeev Chandrasekhar, a well-heeled independent MP who since has defected to the BJP. Well before the launch of Republic TV, Arnab had ceased to display any pretence of non-partisanship, conflating the Congress with an imagined elite sector of Indian society out to destroy India, from which, despite his ample remuneration, Oxbridge education and privileged background, he was miraculously exempt. At his new channel, Arnab has continued to sit in inflexible judgement against all

those who he sees as treasonous towards the nation. Whether his performances are pure theater or reflect what he really feels, in both his Times and Republic avatars, Goswami has been enormously detrimental to Indian journalism. His replacements at Times Now, Rahul Shivshankar and Navika Kumar, have now mutated into versions of him, even more partisan toward the BJP and prone to cranking out more conspiracy theories, an example being their frequent 'scoops' about assorted plots to assassinate Narendra Modi. Vineet Jain, one of the members of the family who owns the Times Group, also owns another channel, Mirror Now. The channel is helmed by anchor and editor, Faye D'Souza who takes a diametrically opposed stand to that of Times Now on any issue. Despite the seemingly progressive sentiments espoused by D'Souza, which resemble Jain's own occasional platitudes on Twitter about the importance of secularism and the like, she is as guilty as Goswami, Kumar, or Shivshankar, of the same moralising absolutism.

A final factor that influences media practices in the present is the attempt by the Indian state, in the form of both the previous UPA-2 government and the current NDA-2 government to criminalise certain kinds of activity on the internet. Internet usage in India is anyhow subject to Sections 153A and 295A of the Indian Penal Code, both of which limit free expression. Section 153A criminalises those guilty of 'promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, etc., and doing acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony', and Section 295A penalises '[d]eliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs'[35]. The UPA-2 coalition government passed Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, which had the potential to be used to prosecute anything on Twitter or Facebook that could be construed as offensive, defamatory, or even irksome. Saurav Datta points out that the Act could be combined with 'the provisions dealing with the offences of blasphemy or spreading communal hatred', that is, Sections 153A and 295A of the Indian Penal Code, making it an especially draconian piece of legislation[36]. Like other countries in the post-9/11 world, the Indian state has invoked the spectre of terrorism to clamp down on online speech. For example, in late

2014, India's Department of Telecommunication blocked thirty two websites in response to a possible threat by the Islamic State fundamentalist group (ISIL)[37]. The Indian Supreme Court struck down Section 66A of the Act in March 2015 on grounds of it being unconstitutional but the Indian authorities have continued to use it since; as recently as December 2018 and often on flimsy grounds such as mild criticism of political figures[38].

The latest of the periodic attempts by the Modi government to monitor online activity occurred just a few months ago. Ten government agencies were given wide authority by the Indian Home Ministry to monitor computer activity[39]. This latest move has added to worries among privacy advocates and free speech activists in India about the government developing extensive surveillance capabilities through an array of initiatives. One of these, which has been the object of significant controversy, is the Aadhar project, a biometric system based on the allocation of a unique numeric identifier for each Indian citizen. The programme is the brainchild of Nandan Nilekani, one of India's most well-known technology entrepreneurs, and is well-intentioned – the idea underlying it is to set up a system, somewhat akin to the Social Security Number system in the United States, that will protect a citizen's identity, help tackle corruption by making the use of the number mandatory for a host of financial transactions, and will bring more citizens under the formal structures of governmentality. Widely challenged since its inception, which predates the date of the Modi government taking power, the programme continues to be marked by controversy, as much for its troubled and shoddy implementation as for its inexactitude of scope[40].

To the mix of concerns expressed by Indian advocates of free speech and robust internet security, we can add worries about the extensive data collection capabilities and less-than-open policies of Facebook. Facebook's deep and broad reach into the lives of its users, already a concern for governments, activists, and ordinary citizens across the world, was revealed in the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which a rogue researcher with permission from Facebook to use some data collected on the platform for research, vastly exceeded his brief by acessing the information of

an extended network of users. In the context of the USA, this has led to the creation of what Julia Angwin calls a 'dragnet nation', a hybrid of government authorities and the private sector, which share, combine, chop up, and recombine data mined and gathered about citizens for the purposes of both surveillance and monetisation through targeted advertising and selling profiles of users[41]. India is Facebook's largest market in terms of numbers, having overtaken America in July 2017 when it reached 241 million users[42], and is projected to have a staggering 730 million internet users by 2020[43]. Given the potential for abuse, the data gathering and protection practices of Facebook, accordingly, have a direct bearing on the character of Indian democracy itself.

Following Modi's incredible win in 2014, the online machinery of the Hindu Right swung into action soon, just like the Hindu Right at large. Modi's victory was interpreted by the Hindu Right, including extreme Hindu groups like the Bajrang Dal and assorted senas or self-styled armies, as a mandate to impose their will on the population at large, whether to undertake vigilante action against supposed cow slaughter, extort people in the name of protecting cows, target minorities, or generally assert an ugly form of majoritarian Hinduism. Modi was their man, but it was made clear even at that time that if he stood in their way then they would shift loyalties to someone still more extreme, like Yogi Adityanath, who would go on to become the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. Just as Modi had once been seen as beyond the pale, the extremist to the supposed moderate Advani or Vajpayee, the possibility that he could be sidelined for a fundamentalist like Adityanath or Ajay Bisht, a man with a criminal record of rioting and inciting sectarian violence, was surely not lost on the Indian prime minister. Modi's own own track record, however, was more consistent with inaction and dog-whistling, if not categorical calls for violence against Muslims and Dalits.

The website IndiaSpend, which tracks cow-related violence among other initiatives, has shown that the trajectory of such attacks has been on the upswing since 2014, with 2017 being the worst year on record for such violence[44]. Modi stayed silent through a sustained period of mob lynchings and vigilante murders by Hindu groups.

Long story short, Modi did not seize the moment of 2014 to reinvent himself as a statesman nor did he advocate for the inclusive India that he had promised to bring about for all Indians. From the launch of many schemes with much fanfare, to an emphasis on optics and advertising, from the targeting of critics to the relentless expression of a patriarchial, masculinist and aggressive Hindu nationalism, the face of Hindu nationalism seen in public space was mirrored in, and contiguous with, the forms it took online.

The Weaponising of Social Media in Pax Modica

Every form of social media, Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp (a messaging network, that for convenience, we may treat as social media) is used by the Hindu Right in specific ways, even as combinations of these media forms are also deployed in concert with each other. Twitter is primarily used for tactical purposes. It is used both as offense and defence, to divert attention from either a domestic event or occurrence that may reflect poorly on Modi or his government, to shut down criticism from the international press or critics, well-known or otherwise, and to intimidate and harass critics of the government. Facebook and WhatsApp overlap a little more in the modes in which they are used by the Hindu Right. Facebook, with its vast reach, is used to normalise the ideology of the Hindu Right, to entrench as hegemonic common sense both the classic tenets of Hindutva and its new-found obsessions, such as the discourses of ‘inner engineering’ promoted by godman Jaggi Vasudev or the notion of vegetarianism as trendy, promoted by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and Hindu student associations in universities in the US. WhatsApp, sealed by encryption, enables the BJP to access closed loops of communication. For the Hindu Right, Twitter’s value lies in helping it achieve tactical and short-term objectives. Facebook serves as a counter-archive of alternate accounts of Indian history and memory. And WhatsApp is best understood as serving medium-term objectives such as changing the political climate for an upcoming election, creating a scare about a

planned government takeover of Hindu temples, or a proposed Congress-plan to fund mosques at the expense of Hindu places of worship. Each network or platform also serves as an instrument of fake news.

Twitter: discipline and punish

Twitter's use as a disciplinary and punitive mechanism for the Hindu Right became apparent early on in the Modi administration's rule. Following the lynching of a Muslim man, Mohammad Akhlaq, in Bisara, near Dadri in Uttar Pradesh by a Hindu mob of his fellow villagers in 2015, over fifty prominent artistes and intellectuals returned awards that they had received from the government[45]. The 'Award Wapsi' movement, as it came to be known, was to protest the rise of Hindu majoritarian violence, which, the artistes and intellectuals contended, had been implicitly encouraged by the Modi government. It was also meant to condemn the Modi government's refusal to take action against such vigilantism. Modi's own silence was seen, at best, as a refusal to condemn these violent groups for fear of losing an important part of his base, and, at worst, as a tacit endorsement of the actions of extremist Hindus. In its idiom, the protest of the artistes and intellectuals was not particularly new or original. India has a rich tradition of protest and can boast a highly developed sense of political consciousness among large cross-sections of its citizens, regardless of whether they may be formally educated or not. Whether it is mobilising idioms of Gandhian resistance, as Anna Hazare claimed to have done in his fast for a Lokpal Bill, refusing to accept salaries, as contract workers in Tamil Nadu will often do if they are paid less than promised, or more extreme expressions of anger like burning buses, protest is an integral part of life in India.

Modi's supporters and Hindu right-wingers had freely and fully exercised their right to protest against the Congress-led government that preceded NDA-2. BJP politicians like Smriti Irani had led public protests on issues like price hikes. Online, Modi loyalists had been relentless in their criticism of then Prime Minister Manmohan

Singh, from nicknaming him ‘Maun-mohan’, or ‘mute,’ to openly mocking his weakness and reliance on Congress matriarch Sonia Gandhi. Yet when it came to the artistes protesting the culture of violence enabled by the BJP-led government after 2014, Modi supporters subjected them to vicious abuse, online and otherwise, indicating that in their view Modi was above criticism and deserved to be treated differently from all other politicians. From garden-variety trolls to prominent supporters of the new political dispensation, including actors Anupam Kher and Paresh Rawal, an online mob in unison accused the award returnees of being anti-national and politically motivated against Modi and the BJP[46]. Accused of sympathising with the Congress, the protesters, in a creative cooption of the term ‘intolerance,’ were blamed by Modi devotees for being intolerant toward Modi because of an inherent political bias[47].

The same conflation of Modi with the nation, and the same oversensitivity and angry response on Twitter was seen in the social media and Twitter attacks on Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan, a complex project in which the Modi government itself was complicit. At an award function in November 2015, Khan voiced his concern about the rising tide of intolerance in the country and mentioned that his wife Kiran, who happens to be Hindu, had suggested moving out of the country for the safety of their family[48]. Khan also expressed his support for those who had returned their awards, on the grounds that they had the right to profess their views and exercise their freedom of expression. Khan’s remarks were condemned by the BJP, he was accused of ‘hatred’ for Modi, of hypocrisy for refusing to similarly criticise violence by Muslims in Paris and elsewhere[49]. And as with the Award Wapsi controversy, Bollywood figures with Hindu nationalist sympathies, like Anupam Kher, were quick to criticise him too. The attack on Khan was also meant as a warning to other celebrities. Khan himself has since stayed silent on political matters, keeping his views to himself while other celebrities have been overeager to praise the government’s policies to demonstrate their loyalty.

It was discovered later that the BJP government, through the agency of its social media cell, had generated a campaign to get the

online retail company Snapdeal to drop Aamir Khan as its brand ambassador. In an account shared with journalist and author Swati Chaturvedi for her book, *I am a Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army 2016*, former BJP member Sadhavi Khosla, who had become profoundly disillusioned with Modi and the BJP, claimed that the BJP IT cell head Arvind Gupta had set this campaign into motion[50]. Gupta denied the allegations claiming that Khosla was not part of the IT cell team, but comments made by then-Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar, suggested that the BJP had wanted to teach Khan a lesson for his alleged lack of love for his country[51]. Reporting on the book, foreign correspondent Amy Kazmin notes her own experience with trolls on Twitter[52]. Kazmin had written a story about Indian authorities denying an environmental activist working for Greenpeace India the opportunity to travel to deliver to deliver a talk in London. As Kazmin recounts:

> I tweeted the link to the story, then, ill-advisedly, added a provocative hashtag, #acchedin, Hindi words meaning the 'good days' that Mr Modi had promised to usher in. Next morning, I found 150 tweets to, or about, me. Most called for my deportation or worse; it was obscenity-laden verbal violence from strangers that made me queasy.
>
> The onslaught began when an Indian Twitter personality with tens of thousands of followers, including hardcore Modi supporters, critiqued my tweet and story. Her followers, like a swarm of angry bees, took that as a signal to go for me.
>
> My sense of being subjected to an organised attack might not have been misplaced.

Kazmin is not alone in this experience. Other foreign correspondents, too, have been accused of deliberately and unfairly undermining and attacking the Modi government, being accused of everything from a colonial mindset, pro-Congress agenda, anti-Hindu Christian bias, and the like. In a depressing replay, the Aamir Khan story repeated itself with another well-known Indian actor, Naseeruddin Shah, who in December 2018 shared similar concerns about the safety of his children in an India in which minorities seemed to be under constant

attack. The same script was followed, on Twitter (as well as on television), with the usual suspects, from BJP politicians, BJP IT cell employees, and Anupam Kher questioning Shah's loyalty. The same petty and ugly accusations that had been hurled at Khan on social media, of a treasonous Muslim bearing sympathies for Muslim-majority nations like Pakistan, were directed at Shah too[53].

The Twitter attacks on celebrities and on Kazmin are instructive. The Modi government, Modi himself, and the Hindu Right generally are especially sensitive to the image of the government as portrayed by celebrities, given their popular fan base and vast reach. But more than the literal influence that they wield, it is the symbolic value of the rejection from celebrities that rankles the Hindu Right. Celebrities are seen as belonging to the same elite strata as the Congress Party, the chatterati, and secular liberals. Any criticism of Modi, the symbol of an aspirational India of young men and women from dusty small towns with their dreams of making it big, is seen by his admirers as a criticism aimed at themselves, of their desires and hopes, and of their claims upon the nation[54]. Seemingly paradoxically for a nationalist government, the Modi government and its supporters are highly touchy about coverage and comments of the foreign media. But maybe it is not paradoxical at all, for nationalism as a pathology is marked by deep insecurity: it needs both 'Others' and adversaries, and at the same time craves affirmation from these very Others. There is also an acute sensitivity to satire directed at Modi, across all social media platforms. The satirical parody Facebook page, Humans of Hindutva, for instance, was forced to temporarily shut down after its founder's identity was revealed and he started receiving death threats[55].

The extreme reaction to satire on the part of both the Modi government and the Hindu Right, I think, has to do Modi's own egotistical and thin-skinned personality, as indicated by Nandy's prescient analysis, Modi's obsession with being in the limelight, his craving for affirmation from celebrities, and his authoritarian style of functioning. Unhesitating in skewering and lampooning Manmohan Singh or Rahul Gandhi, Hindu right-wingers seem to demand that Modi be judged by another standard, exempt from being the butt of humor or jokes. My sense is that Modi is seen as a symbol of

patriarchal Hinduism and his image is very closely tied to the sense of masculinity of his male followers. Add that to the cult of personality that surrounds him and the image that he has cultivated over the years, with the 56 inch chest, the strongman who can teach China a lesson, the expert at yoga, the razor-sharp mind who does IIT entrance-exam problems for discipline, and the tireless selfless nationalist who works eighteen hours a day. To poke fun at Modi and to question his carefully cultivated image then becomes something akin to committing an act of heresy. It is not accidental, therefore, as both Indian and foreign commentators have noted with puzzlement and often dismay, that many of these Hindu right-wingers with extreme misogynist views and records of tweeting threats against women (or advocating violence in general) are followed on Twitter by the prime minister. For example, in the aftermath of the murder of activist and journalist, Gauri Lankesh, a Twitter user named Nikhil Dadich compared her to a dog who had died a dog's death, and, by implication and suggestion, one that she deserved[56]. The author and journalist, Raghu Karnad, also drew attention to the fact that Modi followed people who openly called for Muslims to be killed as well as other Twitter accounts that were busy retweeting pornographic images on the Indian prime minister's timeline[57]. The rather unconvincing defence of Modi's peculiar taste in Twitter profiles offered by the BJP IT Cell is that the prime minister follows a range of people with different political views and that the fact that he follows some individuals with extreme perspectives and a record of violent abuse does not necessarily mean that he endorses their views. Yet, Modi's own increasingly acerbic rhetoric as his term has progressed, as well as the outright communal sentiments expressed by BJP leaders such as Amit Shah and Adityanath Yogi in every theatre of Indian elections, suggests that Modi's decision to follow Hindu right-wingers with extreme views is both a matter of ideological affinity as well as an act of indirect signalling of his political inclinations to his base and to the nation at large.

Facebook: Shifting the lens of Indian history and Memory

Facebook and WhatsApp, which is owned by Facebook, are in a similar situation in India that Google and Yahoo! faced in China some years ago, though Facebook right now is in troubled waters in the US and in Europe as well. These companies are unable or unwilling to live up to their professed commitment to certain values in these settings such as fostering community and communication, or enabling private communication and respecting individual privacy, because the state itself is either the biggest violator of the platforms' values and principles or because the rules of the country militate against the meaningful implementation of their principles.

Like the amorphous structure of the Hindu Right, the structure of social media networks and platforms gives their users a certain deniability and the basis for exculpating themselves from responsibility for their consequences. The ethical question that arises, then, is whether passing on a message in good faith is a crime, if down the line that message causes someone to engage in an act of violence. How is a chain of culpability to be established in such a case? Facebook seems to have been caught unawares and genuinely surprised by the use of the platform to foment anti-minority violence in Myanmar and Sri Lanka[58]. In all contexts and countries though, one of the key problems is that Facebook (and WhatsApp) operate with a dangerously reductive understanding of societal concepts like 'community,' 'connection,' and the like. To some extent, this is true of Twitter as well. The final chapter of the book, which engages with the issue of the social and political responsibility of social media platforms, will take up this question in detail, examining it with regard to not just India but other societies too.

Although by no means can every expression of the Hindu Right on the platform be seen as part of an elaborately constructed and intricately plotted conspiracy with a singular purpose, the broader project of the Hindu Right on Facebook might most productively be viewed as part of a longer-term project of historical rewriting, of reshaping the political memory of younger and older generations about recent events, the era of post-Independence Congress rule, and the longer arc of Indian history. The goal is not just to provide 'alternate facts', to use a term from Trump counselor Kellyanne Conway's justificatory rhetoric defending the White House's dubious

account of events, but to simultaneously promote a new lens through which to view Indian history – one that sees it largely as a tale of the sacrifice of Hindus, made, variously, by India's Hindu army, Hindu politicians, and the average Hindu, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari[59]. In this, Facebook has taken over the function of the portal, website, or blog in the earlier era preceding the time of Web 2.0.

The distinction between Facebook and Twitter, while meaningful, should not be treated as absolute. Facebook is also used for tactical purposes, as a space of usually lengthier responses to specific controversies or for promoting the viewpoint of the government or particular officials. Modi's following on Facebook is formidable, exceeding forty million. It is another avenue through which he can directly address his fans, admirers and Indian citizens, without having to utilise the tools and protocols of official government communication. Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, who also maintains an active Facebook presence, has been using it regularly to defend the government's policy of demonetisation or to articulate the rationale behind the government's shifts on the Goods and Services Tax, topics on which he engages, across different media, in a back-and-forth with several Congress political leaders[60]. Hindutva pages also serve a surveillance function; for example, a pro-Hindutva page, which was eventually taken down, listed details of 100 couples in inter-faith marriages and asked fellow Hindus to hunt the Muslim men who, the page stated, had lured Hindu women into 'Love Jihad'[61]. There are numerous Facebook pages, often ephemeral, that are dedicated to spreading fake news as well.

In tandem with these modes of use, and aside from official Modi government or BJP pages, an examination of Facebook pages shows a vast number broadly related to Hindu nationalism, uneven in their reach, number of followers, or activity, devoted to the following themes, which share some degree of overlap: achievements of the Modi government, pride in being a Hindu, Narendra Modi fan pages, Hinduism and science (like quantum physics), internet Hindus, 'sickularism', as well as pages dedicated to foundational Hindu nationalist figures like Veer Savarkar. Along with a host of sites like PG Gurus and OpIndia.com, videos on YouTube, and Wikipedia entries, the discourse of Hindu nationalism on Facebook serves the

purpose of an accretion of a mass of information that appears persuasive in part because of its sheer volume and size. An article about the massive amount of false information on Nehru notes that YouTube is teeming with videos that vilify Nehru and provide an alternate account of practically every aspect of his life[62]. Nehru, as more than one commentator has noted, haunts Modi. Modi aspires to the status of Nehru but on his own terms, and Nehru's policies and idea of India are precisely the policies and vision that Modi and the Hindu Right, from the RSS down to the ordinary BJP IT cell employee, want to relegate to the dustbin of history.

One respect in which Facebook is directly implicated in troubling interference in democratic processes is through its unit that provides political assistance to groups seeking power[63]. Alarmingly, Facebook itself often works with trolls to help clients secure political power by engaging in the deliberate spread of 'misinformation and propaganda.' As Etter, Silver, and Frier note[64]:

> The initiative is run by a little-known Facebook global government and politics team that's neutral in that it works with nearly anyone seeking or securing power. The unit is led from Washington by Katie Harbath, a former Republican digital strategist who worked on former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani's 2008 presidential campaign. Since Facebook hired Harbath three years later, her team has traveled the globe helping political clients use the company's powerful digital tools[65].

India is one of the countries that the authors list as a location where Facebook has provided these services. Given that it is currently in the spotlight for a host of its policies and practices, from data gathering to vulnerabilities that allow infiltration into user communities, as in the case of Russian manipulation of the 2016 USA elections, it is not clear whether Facebook will offer these services to the BJP in the forthcoming 2019 elections.

WhatsApp: Transforming the social political climate for political capital

In the Indian context, WhatsApp offers political parties the tremendous advantage and political value of being able to get one's message across to diverse societal groups, at different levels of granularity, size and scope. These collectives include workplace groups, family groups, neighborhood society groups, college friends, college alumni, and interest-based groups like car lovers or environmental activists. More alarmingly, though, for everyday civil and political society, WhatsApp also offers a combination of two features, namely, deniability and anonymity, that make it ripe for misuse in societies fraught with social tensions or in moments of crisis when tensions between different communities run high or in situations where there is a high distrust of authority. WhatsApp's promise of privacy, especially in a society like India, with its dense sociality and where notions of privacy and individual space are markedly different from those in Western society, is partly what bestows the platform with an attractiveness to Indians. It is, unfortunately, also what allows WhatsAp to be weaponised by any number of groups.

WhatsApp is immensely popular among Indians. Like Facebook, which owns it, India is WhatsApp's largest market with 200 million users[66]. Indians use WhatsApp for everything, from business communication with a real estate agent to ordering groceries or medicines to be delivered to one's residence, from sharing jokes in family groups to audio and video conversations with friends and family, from daily greetings that clog up the internet to the routine act of socialisation. During my last two visits to India, I was struck by the fact that WhatsApp had taken over the role that SMS messaging used to perform earlier in the Indian context. WhatsApp has been adopted in very distinct and unique ways in India, reflecting the fact that the impact of media technologies is neither predictable nor straightforward, and that the context of reception strongly influences patterns of media adoption. I have, just in the last few weeks, received jokes about Modi, the false news – perhaps deliberately

fake, though I have no way to tell – that BJP spokesperson, Sambit Patra, had been fired from his job (a story I readily believed given Patra's penchant for aggression and even abuse of political opponents on television), a video clip of friends in India, family photos, and several corny jokes. A few examples, all but one from India, of fake news and fake quotes will provide the reader with an inkling of the kind of information that circulates on WhatsApp in India. The grammatical errors in the Warren Buffett quote (Figure 4.1), for instance, makes it clear that the quote is inauthentic. Likewise, the incorrect spelling of 'stomach' in the quote attributed to the City of Cape Town (Figure 4.2), as well as the shoddy attempt to mimic an official-sounding designation, reveal this message to be a hoax. The third example (Figure 4.3), pertaining to the accidental death of a well-known Indian actress, Sridevi, in a hotel in Dubai, offers a conspiracy theory about the 'real' reason for her demise. The last image is a mish-mash of a photo that looks suspiciously like Nita Ambani, the wife of India's richest man, Mukesh Ambani, and a somewhat incoherent quote by Indian godman, Osho, about the power of a housewife (Figure 4.4).


Excellent Tips by Warren Buffet
On Earning: "Never depend on single income. Make investment to create a second source".
On Spending: "If you buy things you do not need, soon you will have to sell things you need".
On Savings: "Do not save what is left after spending, but spend what is left after saving".
On Taking risk: "Never test the depth of river with both feet".
On Investment: "Do not put all eggs in one basket
On Expectations: "Honesty is very expensive gift. Do not expect it from cheap people".

Figure 4.1

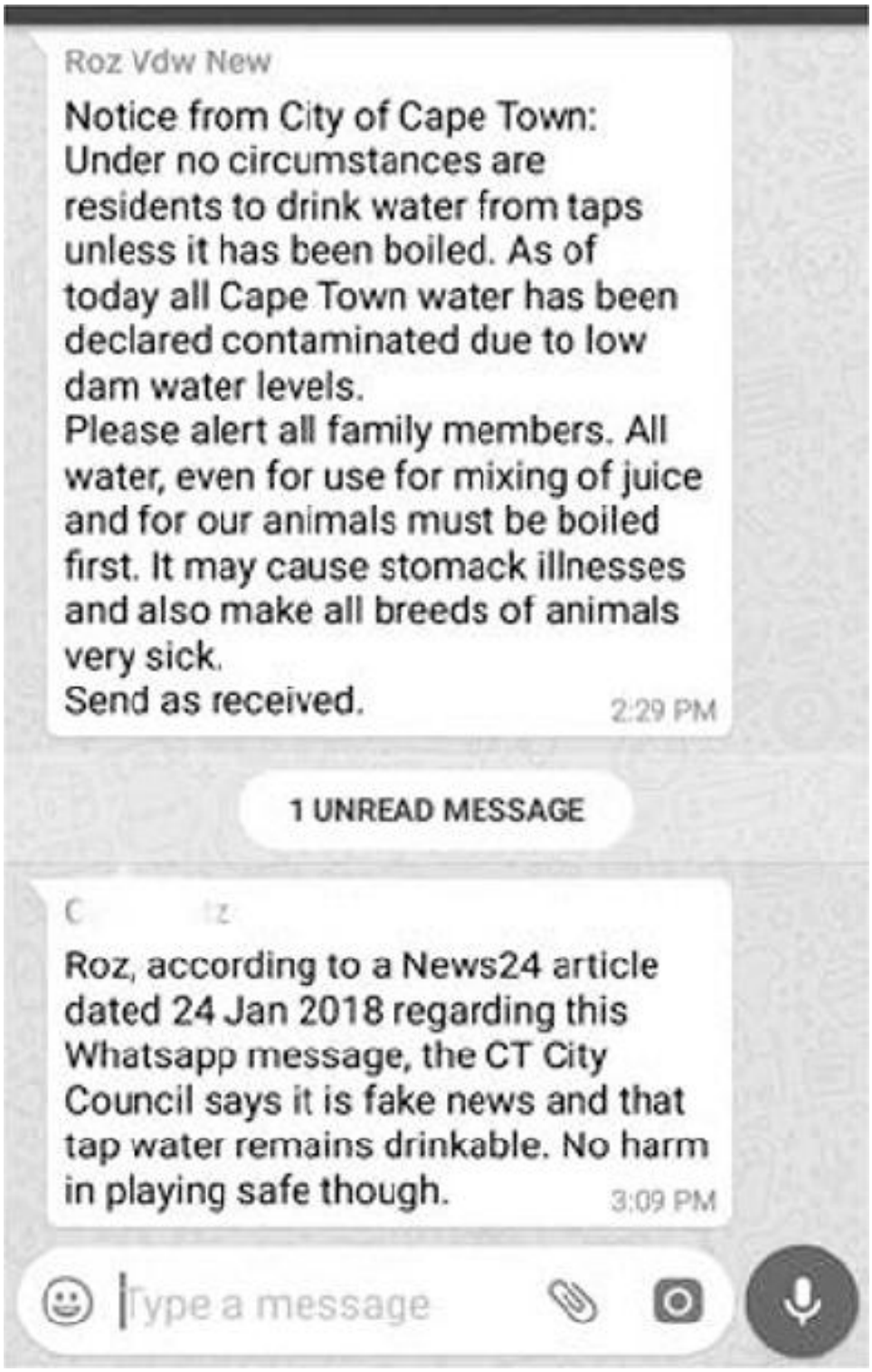
Roz Vdw New
Notice from City of Cape Town:
Under no circumstances are residents to drink water from taps unless it has been boiled. As of today all Cape Town water has been declared contaminated due to low dam water levels.
Please alert all family members. All water, even for use for mixing of juice and for our animals must be boiled first. It may cause stomack illnesses and also make all breeds of animals very sick.
Send as received.
2:29 PM
1 UNREAD MESSAGE
Roz, according to a News24 article dated 24 Jan 2018 regarding this Whatsapp message, the CT City Council says it is fake news and that tap water remains drinkable. No harm in playing safe though.
3:09 PM
Type a message

Figure 4.2


Sridevi passes away yesterday - but actual reason is not cardiac arrest (as told publicly) it is anti aging medicines & multiple full body Botox responsible for blood thickening n low down immunity in the body (she was facing for last 2 years).Received this message on WA ...

While we are all mourning the untimely demise of Sridevi, it is important to remember why this may have happened to her. Society demanded that she stay slimmer/look younger than a 40 year old, 50 year old and plus 50 woman needs to be--hence, the continuous surgeries.
When I met her about 6 years ago, she was beautiful but a sad version of that self that we loved so much in a movie like Chandni. What a lot of pressure to keep her weight down, to make sure that her face had no wrinkle lines.....continuous clinic visits in Southern California.
As a friend of mine, Dipanwita Basu wrote this morning...do we need a metoo movement in fashion, not size 0?
Milan has already implemented this but these patriarchical implants were in her head -- the husband, who claimed to love her so much should have intervened, did he love the way she looked as his arm candy more than he loved her?

Figure 4.3

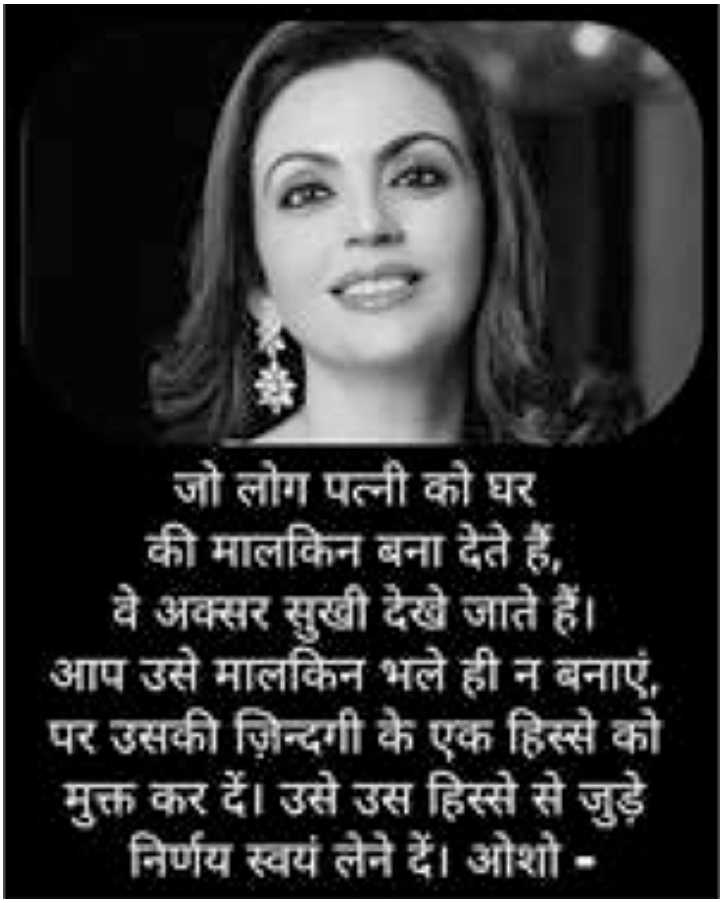

Figure 4.4

'Indians,' notes journalist Annie Gowen, 'sent each other more than 20 billion New Year's Eve greetings' in 2018. Yet, as she adds right after, '[a]lmost from the beginning, WhatsApp messages have been used to incite mob violence in India. WhatsApp rumors about child abduction led to the murder of three people in Tamil Nadu state in the past two weeks.'[67] It is highly likely that there are deeply irresponsible and unethical individuals who are engaged in the deliberate act of spreading rumors and falsehoods through social media networks and platforms just for the sake of doing so, perhaps without thinking through the consequences of such actions. Yet, clearly there are political actors too in India who use WhatsApp with the deliberate goal of fomenting inter-religious trouble. As mentioned earlier, there is ample empirical evidence to show that politicians benefit from a polarised electorate. There is, accordingly, sufficient incentive for politicians to instigate such violence. And an instrument

like WhatsApp, which makes it hard to trace the route and origins of inflammatory and incendiary messages, is an ideal tool for such purposes.

The closed loops of communication on WhatsApp, following the general logic of the internet and of how closed circles of communication work, may be exempt from the conventions of speech in more diverse settings. People may not hesitate to express their more bigoted and biased thoughts in WhatsApp groups of family members, school friends, co-religionists, men, and so on, thoughts that, for a variety of reasons, they would never express in person in other settings. There are tacit assumptions at work in these groups about shared beliefs; a group of Modi supporters may assume that everyone in the group is in agreement with their view that Modi is the best leader in India or that Rahul Gandhi is a recovering cocaine addict who frequently takes off for trips overseas to detoxify and meet some mysterious Colombian girlfriend.

Given the diversity of human thought and experience, it is natural that these groups will have some internal disagreements and tensions. What seems to happen then is that some members either leave or become lurkers, who may read messages but do not respond. This has the effect of exacerbating group polarisation, a feature of internet discourse at large, as noted by Cass Sunstein in his book, *Republic.com 2.0* (2001). It also has the effect of enabling the spread of incorrect information or 'cybercascades', as Sunstein terms the phenomenon[68]. Sunstein draws attention to the crucial difference between the paradigm of print, as embodied by the humble op-ed article, and the internet. Assuming in the case of the former, that an op-ed presents a point contrary to the typical ideological fare presented in, say, the *Hindu* or the *Wall Street Journal*, the very fact of its existence on the page means that one is compelled to at least acknowledge the existence of another point of view even if one chooses to ignore it. And it may well be the case that one day one chooses to take a look at this alternate point of view, which, in turn, sets into motion the practice of intellectually engaging with a different perspective with the possible reward of developing a more complex view of the world.

It is, no doubt theoretically possible, then, that social media networks, whether Twitter or WhatsApp, could be used for such a purpose. But part of the problem in a society like India is that the Hindu Right and very likely the government itself are responsible for spreading some of these messages. It may be the case, too, that some rogue political elements within the ruling party or a state-level or village-level party official may, of his or her accord, take a decision to circulate a rumour that benefits the party on the whole with the leadership insulated from the consequences of such action.

The point here is not to demonise social media or to blame it as the sole cause of polarisation, social discord, and violence between communities. For that too is a form of technological determinism that rests on a mystification of the power and properties of these media forms. It is sobering to remember that other media forms have also been used for the purpose of dehumanising the Other and then enabling violence against them, whether through descriptions of Jews as rats in Nazi Germany, the Hutu Commandments in Rwanda that played on the radio describing Tutsis as traitors and cockroaches, or rumours about Sikhs that circulated through speech networks in Delhi in 1984 in the lead-up to the planned genocidal violence against the community.

Given that social media in general, and WhatsApp in particular, along with the new arts of data mining and analysis, will be absolutely crucial to the next election which is just around the corner for the world's largest democracy, the burning question for Indian society may be stated as such: How should the complex issues to which we have been alerted by the relationship of Hindu nationalism and social media be addressed by social media and network plaforms, the Indian state, and Indian civil society?[69]

In an article, Aditya Kalra shares some astonishing figures that indicate the salience of this question not just for India but for global democracy, politics, and the use of media technology in general. India has 900 million eligible voters, 500 million of whom have access to the internet. The country also boasts of 455 million smartphone users. With 300 million Facebook users and 200 million WhatsApp users, these tools and platforms are central to election-related communication and political communication in general. Modi has

forty-three million followers on Facebook and forty-five million on Twitter, compared to Rahul Gandhi's 2.2 million and 8.1 million on each. An older 2017 story notes that the Congress has upped its social media game and had planned to target 300,000 WhatsApp groups by the end of that year[70]. The BJP, however, shows no sign of ceding its first-mover advantage and dominant position in cyberspace. Almost everyone expects that the social media component of the election contest will be nasty and acrimonious. The bigger worry, though, is whether, following the recent assembly election defeats of the BJP and judging by the take no-prisoners tenor of recent speeches of Modi, Shah, and Yogi Adityanath in election battlegrounds over the last year, the political battle will take a communal turn. If so, how will social media be used? Will it lead to communal violence and death as the inevitable collateral damage of the political contest? The final chapter of the book grapples with these and related issues through an examination of what the phenomenon of online Hindu nationalism in the age of Modi and social media may tell us about the future of social media itself. It also engages with what current debates will be held regarding social media and what the possible future trajectories of social media development may tell us about the future of Hindu nationalism, in cyberspace and on the streets.

5

Conclusion:

The Futures of Hindu Nationalism and New Media

I live in San Francisco and currently work in the city of Santa Clara, where I teach media studies at Santa Clara University. My thrice-weekly commute from the north to the south of the Bay Area takes me through many Silicon Valley towns. Barring a few residential pockets, for all the technological magic that it has produced, the Valley has one of the dullest, most unremarkable landscapes imaginable, essentially the equivalent of an office with cubicles. The same holds for Route 101, the highway I often take, which offers little for the eye beside monotonous urban sprawl, one nondescript building after another and a profusion of billboards advertising the latest product or service to hit Silicon Valley: enterprise software, cloud services, data analytics, and, of late, artificial intelligence.

About a year and a half ago, an advertisement caught my eye, for it articulated an idea that was genuinely provocative as opposed to a routine witticism about an automated payroll system or a new fitness tracker. On a prominently placed billboard on highway US 101 North, the Mozilla Foundation declaimed that along with food, water and shelter, the internet too was now a basic need (Figure 5.1). The advertisement classified these universal human needs as ‘global’ resources, while affirming that Mozilla was dedicated to the

protection of the ‘newest’ addition to the list. Interestingly, a discussion of the same idea on the blog of the Mozilla Foundation states it is a global *public* resource, something akin to the air or climate, then, that belongs to all of humanity, a global commons that is, at once, a shared good and a shared responsibility[1].

Figure 5.1

The advertisement instantly brought to mind Abraham Maslow’s pyramid of needs (Figure 5.2), which presents a hierarchy of the range of human requirements, from elemental ones for survival and sustenance to more elevated and complex wants, such as the social interaction, cultural enrichment, and cognitive stimulation needed to lead a rich, fulfilled life[2].

Figure 5.2

In the Mozilla advertisement, the first two elements are from the bottom two levels of Maslow's pyramid. To place the internet at par with elemental and basic human needs may seem odd at first, especially given that large numbers of people in the world still live in conditions of abject wretchedness, without access to food and water, safety and shelter, or even a modicum of stability, let alone healthcare or education. Indeed, while the world has made important strides against extreme poverty, a vast swath of humanity, largely in countries like India and Nigeria, still continues to live below the poverty line[3]. As of 2018, India has almost 200 million people who

qualify as undernourished[4]. It would seem obvious and commonsensical, then, that developing countries should focus on meeting these basic developmental goals before investing in internet infrastructure development and providing their citizens with inexpensive access to the internet.

And yet, for all the fetishising and romanticising of technology in Silicon Valley, and the inevitable element of hype that advertising carries, both of which were no doubt reflected in the advertisement, there was an element of truth in Mozilla's message. If the internet itself becomes so central a part of contemporary life that it is essential for communication, commerce, health, food delivery and the provision of emergency services, then no nation, developed or developing, can afford to wait to solve all other problems before addressing key concerns about the reach, nature and quality of access to the internet. An analogy, even if inexact, may be that it is myopic for a developing nation to wait till it achieves certain benchmarks in primary or elementary education before developing its higher education sector. Besides, Maslow's theory may be a trifle simplistic; in megacities like Mumbai, for instance, a person may not have a fixed place to live and yet may be placed well above the poverty line. The same person will also likely have a cell phone, which is instrumental for their livelihood and contributes positively to their standard of living. It goes without saying that whether in a developed nation like the USA, which is also beset with problems of chronic hunger, dire inequality, and pockets of deep poverty, or in a developing one, issues of poverty, hunger, access to healthcare, basic education, rights, and human dignity should be addressed as a priority, even as the development of the internet remains a crucial focal area of policy.

Given the centrality of the internet, and the fact that it is a global resource – and, therefore, a common, shared, one, as pointed out by Mozilla in its advertisement – there are, schematically speaking, two sets of issues that are key to any discussion of the internet and the widely used apps, platforms, Web 2.0 initiatives, and forms of new media enabled by it. The first set of issues deals with the question of equity of access to internet: with ensuring that the widest cross-section of people across and within borders can get access, time or

leisure, and the skills to benefit from the internet as well as use it to participate in global civil society. The second set of issues relates to the *terms* on which the internet is to be accessed by various social groups within and across societies. Who gets to decide who sees what content? Should all sites be accessible by all users at the same speed? What kinds of speech are permissible and what kinds not on the internet? What principles do we take into account in determining the rules, standards and guidelines for free speech, offensive speech and hate speech? What place is there for the laws and guidelines of different countries in which new media and social media platforms are used? Under what circumstances does internet speech or social media speech become dangerous and incendiary? What should be the policy and response of platforms for potentially harmful speech? What role should the government play? How do citizens get to have a meaningful voice and say in these debates? Does Big Tech, consisting almost entirely of private for-profit companies in the USA that have an immense global reach, get to decide the answers to these questions? If so, on the basis of what kind of authority? In practical terms, how can they be held accountable to national and global communities of users or citizens?

The first set of issues identified above has been central to discussions about the development of the internet at least since the invention of the first 'killer app' that so dramatically transformed the scope of internet use, namely, the World Wide Web. The web redefined the internet from a communication tool used by academics, researchers, and the American defence industry to a global network that influenced the development of world society in powerful ways, impacting every sphere of existence, including finance, commerce, politics, art, media, dating, leisure, human rights, and journalism[5]. In the early years following the invention of the web, concern about access often manifested itself in terms of two extreme visions. On the one hand, there were breathless cyber-utopian celebrations heralding the arrival of a new basis for radically egalitarian communities in which differences and inequalities of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and nationhood would cease to matter. On the other hand, techno-pessimists worried about an impending digital imperialism, and gloomily predicted that the internet, controlled and used by wealthy

elites in the first world, would lead to a cyber-dystopia in which existing inequalities would simply be exacerbated further. The internet, in this vision, would just be another tool of exploitation, a means to use the labour of the weaker, more vulnerable sections of global society and another instrument of the commodification and consequent economic exploitation of their lives, experiences, and practices.

Howard Rheingold's book, *The Virtual Community* (1993), reflecting a popular term that he invented, was a classic example of the cyber-utopian vision, while Dan Schiller's book, *Digital Capitalism* (1999), can be classified as its pessimistic doppelgänger[6]. Ironically, while these works were diametrically opposed in perspective, they were guilty of the same troubling assumption of technological determinism; the former somewhat uncritically celebrated the power of the new technology of the internet to liberate and empower individuals and groups, while the latter conceived of the internet largely as a force that would undermine democracy[7]. Other scholarly works, like Manuel Castells' seminal analysis of the network society, did not take such extreme positions though tended to skew in one direction or another. Castells took an optimistic view on the whole about the possibilities and dangers of the internet, yet he recognised, presciently, that those who do not get a chance to share in the spoils of the new globalised, networked world order would react strongly to it by seeking recourse in the solace of a rigid, hardened, and even fundamentalist, identity politics. In the last two decades, many global developments have, indeed, reflected the rise of exactly the kind of insular identity politics that Castells' described in his work, *The Power of Identity* [8]. From the economic insecurities of working-class whites in America that partly fueled the victory of Donald Trump in the USA elections of 2016 to the results of the Brexit referendum, in which a majority of citizens of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, from the anger of disaffected young men in India who join extremist and violent Hindu right-wing organisations to a general resurgence of xenophobia across Europe, nation-states across the globe are haunted by the spectre of a parochialism that rejects the very ideas of a globalised world, pluralistic societies, and the acceptance of

difference. However, along with perspectives like that of Rheingold and Schiller, marked by an extreme libertarian optimism and Marxist pessimism, respectively, right from the early years of the internet revolution following the invention of the web, scholars and policymakers have taken up the vital questions about the 'digital divide' – the gap between those who have access to the internet and those who do not. This divide did not necessarily translate into a first world versus third world cleavage. While on aggregate, no doubt wealthy industrial and post-industrial nations can boast of better quality and more widespread internet access for their citizens than can residents of poorer and developing nations, there are pockets of serious poverty and inequity in privileged nations just as there are pockets of prosperity in poorer nations. This uneven distribution of access perhaps reflects the outcomes of globalisation itself, which has created areas of prosperity all across the world, from Silicon Valley to parts of Mumbai, Bangalore, Shanghai and Singapore, while also disenfranchising groups and areas internationally, from the once-flourishing industrial belt of Midwestern states in the USA, now termed the 'Rust Belt', to the border areas of Mexico where an exploitative industrial economy has emerged following the North American Free Trade Agreement.

This peculiar situation means that, thanks to the logic of globalisation and the internet, one can be globally connected while paradoxically being locally disconnected. As I tell my students while teaching in one of Santa Clara University's 'smart' classrooms, which is equipped with state-of-the-art technology, we can speak from our classrooms to people in Mumbai, Berlin, or Cairo, yet we may not be able to communicate with a family merely a few miles away in East San Jose or East Palo Alto, the proverbial wrong side of the tracks in both cities[9]. Families living in these areas may not be able to afford access to the internet, and if they do have access via their mobile phone subscriptions they may not have the leisure to communicate for anything non-essential. Indeed, a recognition of the fact that information is a kind of capital and that information poverty in the form of a lack of internet access is likely to compound the other disadvantages faced by low-income Americans is what compelled the Obama administration to announce the ConnectALL Initiative, a

scheme ‘to help Americans from across the country, at every income level, get online and have the tools to take full advantage of the Internet’[10]. Better internet access for more people across the span of the world also promises clear benefits in economic terms for companies like Google and Netflix, which are seeking to significantly ramp up their presence in India.

Over the last decade, scholars, journalists, privacy-rights activists, and advocates have also repeatedly drawn attention to a second set of more foundational issues about ownership, control, and power over the space of speech, politics, and social interaction enabled and powered by the internet, new media and social media. In his 2011 book, *The Googlization of Everything (and Why We Should Worry),* Siva Vaidhyanathan points to the fallacious logic of Google Vice President Melissa Mayer that privacy is something that can be apportioned such that a little privacy can be given up in return for services. As Vaidhyanathan noted:

> But Mayer and Google in general both misunderstand privacy. *Privacy* is not something that can be counted, divided, or “traded.” It is not a substance or collection of data points. It’s just a word that we clumsily use to stand in for a wide array of values and practices that influence how we manage our reputations in various contexts. There is no formula for assessing it: I can’t give Google three of my privacy points in exchange for 10 percent better service[11].

Challenging the ‘cultural imperialism’ theory, which posits that content from developed nations, the West, or America that is circulated via media in non-Western nations amounts to a form of imperialism since it imposes Western cultural values on indigenous non-Western values, Vaidhyanathan argues that the more pressing and urgent concern is what he terms ‘infrastructural imperialism’, that is, the dominant power of those who control ‘the pipelines and protocols of culture, not its products – the formats of distribution of information and the terms of access and use’[12]. While Vaidhyanathan is right in critiquing the Leftist bent and attendant myopia of the classic form of the cultural imperialism theory, which he says ‘has become a useless

cliché', his argument echoes Marx's postulate that those who control the means of production essentially hold power in a society[13]. Edward Snowden's revelations in 2014 about the mind-bogglingly intrusive and vast surveillance programmes run by American government agencies in collusion with foreign governments and private telecommunication firms revealed that we, anywhere in the world, are living in a new kind of surveillance society. The extensive collection of data and metadata means, in a sense, that no one is outside the digital dragnet. In the new information and surveillance order, to go silent and drop off this grid could itself be a sign of suspicious behaviour[14].

Yet, despite such voices and perspectives, it is only recently, following the Facebook Cambridge Analytica scandal and the savage sectarian violence unleashed by the use of social media in India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka last year, that the urgency of the need for governments, technology firms, and civil society to address these critical questions has been recognised as essential to the enterprise of civic life and democracy. We, as representatives of government, academia, the non-profit sector, and as ordinary citizens have taken at face value the claims and self-valorising narratives of the technology firms about 'doing no evil' or fostering 'connections' or transforming charitable giving and denting poverty. We have let these platitudes suspend our critical judgement about the relationship between technology and society.

We were possibly seduced by the genuine convenience and value added by the platforms and apps to numerous aspects of our lives to not worry about their hold over us. Recent scholarship contends that, addicted to social media via our devices, we experience a kind of small high each time our presence is acknowledged, our thoughts met with a response, or our very existence validated in these communication networks[15].

A spate of unflattering revelations about Facebook, each one cropping up at regular intervals, has possibly compounded the long-overdue examination of the social media behemoth. For example, a detailed investigative story undertaken by the *New York Times* in December 2018 claims that Facebook has become the *de facto* and self-appointed arbiter of speech worldwide[16]. Aside from the

principle of the matter and the arrogation of authority, what is alarming, in the view of Max Fisher, the journalist who researched and broke the story, is the clumsy and inconsistent manner in which this monitoring, regulation and policing take place. Perhaps this is inevitable when taking into account the massive reach of Facebook and the volume of posts that need to be monitored for content each day. Fisher suggests, though, that in part the lack of rigour may stem from the company's desire to not compromise on its profit even as it seeks to remove dangerous or vile speech. 'How can Facebook monitor billions of posts per day in more than 100 languages, all without disturbing the endless expansion that is core to its business?' asks Fisher. He gives us the answer: 'The company's solution: a network of workers using a maze of PowerPoint slides spelling out what's forbidden.' This is a compelling image of incongruity if there ever was one: a global technology powerhouse, which otherwise responds to, and shapes, human tastes and needs based on algorithms, has to rely on an inefficient and archaic method for weeding out errors with a tool from Microsoft, a firm much maligned for being a dinosaur by the young kids on the Silicon Valley startup block. Similar concerns have also been voiced in recent years about Google. Amazon, likewise, has become a world in itself, with its laws rules, and courts, requiring an arsenal to specialists to navigate its byzantine procedures[17].

Yet this image of humans manually seeking to address the consequences of automated technologies accurately conveys the many issues that need to be analysed and addressed to salvage the positive potential of the internet, and to realise, even with realistic limitations, some of that early utopian hope about the technology of the internet to function as a force for good. This thicket of issues spans many complicated and interrelated areas, including: (a) the relationship of states or governments and private technology firms, in which they both collude in data mining, monitoring, and profiling citizens for the purposes of surveillance and profit, yet also clash on issues of free speech, privacy and rights; (b) the dual role of the state as both aggressor complicit in the misuse of social media for violence and as enforcer of the law; (c) the issue of the credibility of information and the question of who might be an appropriate

gatekeeper of the content that circulates on social media and the internet more broadly; and (d) the challenge of finding a means of harnessing the democratic power of the internet while minimising the potential for its misuse.

The Indian experience with new media and social media, and the Hindu nationalist experience in particular, both in the longer duration and in the last few years since the onset of what I have termed Pax Modica, exemplifies most, if not all, of these thorny issues. India is especially important for the big social media firms. As the largest market for Facebook and WhatsApp, with a rapidly growing user base, India is central to the growth prospects for these platforms, as it is for other social media firms. Foreign investors also have some expectation that the next unicorn in the startup world will emerge from India. Finally, the doublespeak of the Hindu nationalist government of Narendra Modi on the topic of social media weaponisation for threats, mob violence, and lynchings even as it is guilty of the very same behaviour make India both a complicated and instructive case for the firms[18]. Similarly, whatever initiatives the technology companies take at this point in light of the current controversies over data mining and surveillance, whether of their own accord for the purposes of maintaining a good public relations record or under pressure from various governments, will dictate the use and misuse of social media in the Indian context.

This broad set of questions can be discussed under four main categories. The first relates to the nature of free speech online and its relationship to hate speech as well as to another category of speech, which can be termed offensive speech or problematic speech. Offensive or problematic speech may not technically rise to the level of hate speech but has clear consequences such as intimidating people or forcing them off a particular platform.

The second category concerns the production and dissemination of fake news online. Though it is a global problem, the challenge of addressing fake news in the Indian context is compounded by the absence of a robust watchdog sector such as exists in the USA. The third category relates to the potential of social media and new media by social movements or collectives, whether these are ‘progressive’ initiatives, like the Women’s March in Washington, DC, in the

aftermath of the 2016 American presidential election, or the negative uses of the internet and social media platforms, for example the exploitation of online forums by terrorist groups like ISIS for recruiting volunteers to their cause. The final category pertains to the use and abuse of the internet for the purposes of surveillance, the scope of such surveillance, and the challenges in holding states and corporations accountable for violations of privacy.

Free speech online

At a conference on the theme of Digital South Asia, held at the University of Michigan in 2015, Professor Sangeet Kumar of Denison University shared with me the astute observation that that the First Amendment of the USA had become the default free speech standard of the world[19]. In the three-odd years since that conference, as technology companies and platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Google – which have become the preferred avenues of communication for billions across the globe – have gone from strength to strength and increased their individual and collective reach and user bases as well as their respective cash piles, this fact rings ever more true. Users based in India who may upload a video on Twitter, for instance, are, at least in the eyes of Twitter itself, subject to American copyright laws[20]. The universalisation of a particular historical arrangement regarding protected speech, copyright and hate speech curiously echoes the manner in which US domestic law became *de facto* international law in the aftermath of the September 9/11 terrorist attacks. Even as the USA, ironically, violated international law in proceeding to spearhead a coalition of nations that invaded Afghanistan and then Iraq, its domestic policies on carrying out assassinations on foreign soil, on assassinating foreign leaders, and on assassinating American citizens, were simply extended to the world at large. And where legal restrictions tied American hands on its home turf, such as regarding the prohibition on torturing enemies on American soil, the USA developed an arrangement, named ‘extraordinary rendition’, in which other nations became the site for the torture of captured enemies and suspects. In

other words, the globe became a landscape for the exercise of American legal and policy principles without the benefit of American rights and protections. Something similar can be said to have happened with the domain of speech and the global dominance of the big technology firms, which also happen to be media, advertising, and communication companies, even if they are not regulated as such.

In concrete terms, what has this entailed for India or other similarly placed countries like Mexico, Brazil, or China, and what does it mean for them going forward? Given the immense power and global reach of Big Tech firms, the introduction of new criteria or frameworks for judging acceptable, offensive and extreme speech in any of these or other societies manifests itself as a *de facto* imposition on the countries in question; an action that further complicates and muddles what is anyway a fraught area of social existence. Add to that the penchant of big technology firms for radically naïve understandings, if not outright ignorance, of history and culture, their cultish belief in the power of technology to solve social problems, the idea that technology is the key ingredient in projects of social engineering, and an unreflexive confidence in their own belief to do good, and you have the perfect recipe for trouble. From Christopher Marlowe's sixteenth-century play, *Dr Faustus*, about an overreacher who sells his soul to the devil for knowledge, to science fiction films in which evil geniuses try to remake human existence, the arrogant belief that one can change the world betrays a resolutely imperialistic arrogance. And the idea that one knows better than, say, Indians, Chinese or Brazilians about what is best for them is a classic colonial attitude – that is, after all, the exact argument that the British used to justify colonial rule in India, as did other European colonial powers with regard to their respective imperial possessions. It is not accidental, and is quite telling in fact, that one of Silicon Valley's most prominent figures, Marc Andreessen, a venture capitalist and board member of Facebook, went on a public rant a while ago about how 'anti-colonialism' had been disastrous for India, by invoking a lazy reference to 'the Hindu rate of growth', an attitude that was echoed by his colleague Benedict Evans'[21]. Andreesen, who was forced to issue an apology by Mark Zuckberg thereafter, was expressing his frustration at India's decision to reject

Facebook's Internet.org and Free Basics projects on grounds that these initiatives violated the principle of net neutrality by placing smaller providers of internet services at a disadvantage[22].

At the same time, companies like Yahoo! and Google have a less-than-stellar track record in standing up to government demands, whether in the USA, Russia or China, thereby undermining their commitment to free speech, to their own professed goals, and to the First Amendment. This inconsistency means that nations like India get the worst of both worlds. In the USA, for instance, third-party organisations or individuals can sue Facebook and the USA for violating their First Amendment rights. This recourse is clearly not available to Indian citizens, who are now normatively governed by a free speech standard that is different from the one that applies in the country in which they live, yet one that can be suspended at any point of time for any number of reasons.

For example, the Indian state's paranoia and penchant for secrecy and censorship, which it has inherited from its colonial predecessor and continued to lovingly nurture thereafter, accounts for the persistence of archaic defamation laws, which are effectively an instrument of the wealthy and powerful to harass critics, investigative journalists and activists. The implicit First Amendment standard that guides the policies of Twitter or Facebook is no protection against these tools of harassment in India. India, in sum, is subject to an ethnocentric model and standard of speech when it comes to social media platforms that cannot but be awkwardly and inconsistently enforced and applied within the country.

In the abstract, the First Amendment of the American constitution is a fine principle on which to ground an edifice that would serve as a defence for free speech. With many Western-trained lawyers now at the forefront of rights and free speech battles in India, such as the fight concerning Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, the First Amendment has no doubt had a positive, if indirect, influence on the Indian legal sphere and through it on Indian society at large. The Indian Constitution, the longest in the world, has, in any event drawn on numerous constitutional traditions in seeking to provide the Indian state and society with a robust basis for democratic and secular civil life. Yet, the key question here is one of choice and imposition, and

the terms on which a new free speech standard is to be developed, implemented and followed. Any such project needs must be sensitive to history, context, and the possibility of any unintended consequences of hasty changes, no matter how idealistically motivated.

That history is briefly worth revisiting here[23]. Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India grants Indian citizens 'the right to freedom of speech and expression', while Article 19(2) lays out the reasons that might limit such freedom imposing 'reasonable restrictions … in the interests of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence'[24]. The two sections of the Indian Penal Code that are routinely invoked to limit freedom of speech or to deter it though the chilling effect of a punitive example, namely, Section 153A and Section 295A, are based on a conception of India as a collection of communities rather than of individuals. This notion of Indian identity has its roots in the logic of British colonial governmentality, which was centred on negotiating and managing relations between various Indian groups, as these were defined by religion, caste, ethnicity, language, and so on. Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code deems it a crime to promote 'enmity between different *groups* on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, etc'[25]. (emphasis added). Section 295A ventures into the realm of the sacred, criminalising the act of harming, damaging, or defiling 'any place of worship, or any object held sacred by any *class* of persons', once again locating claims of injury in membership of a group, community, or collective[26] (emphasis added).

While Indian civil society activists, pundits, mediapersons, and legal experts routinely call for these laws to be done away with – an entirely reasonable and rational position – one problem with doing so is that these acts also serve, in whatever problematic manner, as legal safeguards against hate speech. To do away with these and India's equally cumbersome defamation laws, which, like Section 153A and Section 295A, are used as tools of harassment against journalists, activists, and detractors by politicians, industrialists and powerful Indians in general, will require a reimagining of free

speech and hate speech laws that addresses both the imperative of free expression and the necessity to protect citizens from hateful speech or speech that could translate into physical harm and violence. In such a hypothetical reimagining, the First Amendment could surely play a role as a frame of reference but not in the hamfisted and opaque manner in which it has become a factor in Indian public life.

There is, finally, one other global development worth noting, in the context of debates about free speech. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has for long been an absolutist defender of the principles of free speech and expression, to the point of fighting for the right of Neo-Nazis to march in public, White supremacists and members of the Ku Klux Klan to burn crosses on their own yards, or critics of the American state and governments to burn the American flag in public. In the wake of a White right-wing rally in 2017, titled 'Unite the Right', during which a protester was killed by a White supremacist, certain chapters of the ACLU have modified their approach stating that free speech protections don't necessarily apply in situations where there is the risk of supremacist violence[27]. While the ACLU has expectedly come under fire for this stand, mostly from conservatives and the Right in the USA, it has emphasised that its new position does not in any way mark an abandonment of its principles and is consistent with its longstanding and principled defence of free speech[28].

The rally in question was part an aggressive resurgence of the American Right that had started during Trump's presidential campaign and has still not entirely abated, even though the spate of ugly racist incidents, physical violence, and abuse on social media targeted at minorities seen before and immediately after elections has subsided. One consequence of this strident assertion of White majoritarian ideology by the American Right has been a normalisation of the kinds of extreme racist views that till recently would have been considered beyond the pale in American public life. The media, including venerated liberal icons like the *New York Times*, have also played a role in this process by granting a sheen of respectability to rabid right-wingers and the 'Alt-Right'[29]. There are strong parallels between the normalisation of the perspectives of the

American Right in the US and the normalisation of the equally radical views of the Hindu Right in India. Many ideologues of the Hindu Right have now, oddly, become must-invites to the rash of literary festivals that dot the country's cultural calendar, despite such individuals having produced very little of literary, cultural, or artistic worth. Despite the odd author with intellectual pretensions and the occasional revisionist history that rises above the status of the eminently forgettable, there is no real intellectual dimension to the project of the Hindu Right in India. The self-preservatory move on the part of the organisers of literary festivals, whether media groups, non-profits, or others, is largely a sop thrown to the Hindu nationalist Modi government.

There is no easy solution to the tension between a commitment to free speech and protecting the rights of the vulnerable, online and offline. In cyberspace, it is well known that women from racial and ethnic minorities or groups recognisable by visible difference, whether through their names or images, tend to be especially vulnerable to abuse. Milo Yiannopoulos, a leading figure in the US alt-right, was responsible for spearheading and setting into motion a racist, abusive attack in 2016 on Leslie Jones, one of the lead actors of the *Ghostbusters* remake[30]. Perhaps we will need to articulate a specific category of speech that can be prosecuted for inciting or causing verbal abuse and intimidation online – which I have broadly referred to as 'problematic' and 'offensive' speech earlier in this chapter – but developing such a category as a viable basis for prosecution will require treading cautiously in all aspects, from what to call such speech, to the criteria under which it draws censure or censorship, and the scope of the application or any censure or disciplinary action in response to the exercise of such speech[31]. By way of concluding this section, one may note that 'under U.S. law, many falsehoods and even some deliberate lies receive the full protection of the First Amendment'[32]. But what of fake news then? How do we address that problem, in India, in the US, and in other locations?

Fake News

‘Don’t believe everything you read on the internet.’ This quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln and circulating in cyberspace as a meme may bring a smile to our lips for its witty self-referential idiom, mocking both itself and people gullible enough to believe anything that they might read online. People, including those who pride themselves on being well-informed, may be forgiven for thinking of fake news as a relatively new problem and one that is largely the creation of the internet and social media. Fake news is news right now because of the unlikely trio of Donald Trump, Russians, and Facebook. As a victim of fake news, Hillary Clinton could also be included as one additional, related, reason for our interest in fake news, making the trio a quartet. It is generally accepted now that Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election did influence its outcome and that Russian operatives, with links to Putin, had flooded Facebook with fake news and content sympathetic to Putin[33]. Facebook, whose leaders have been called to Congress in relation to the matter, has since attempted to put safeguards in place to prevent being hijacked in the same manner again for elections anywhere in the world. Trump is a veritable volcano of falsehoods, spewing them at a bewilderingly profilic rate while at the same time dismissing criticism, unflattering stories, and information that he does not like as real ‘fake news’ instead[34].

The purpose of fake news is to misinform for deliberately malicious or self-serving ends, whether it is to make money, to tarnish someone’s reputation, or to spread a lie for political advantage. Fake news, as noted earlier, also serves the purpose of confusing readers by blurring the distinctions between what is true and false, making readers doubt information and sources that they have typically considered credible. In this sense, fake news, while not exactly the same as propaganda, does share something with it, though it is distinct from incorrect news or information that in good faith may have fallen prey to errors. Memes, which may draw on outright falsehoods or may fall under the realm of satire, have also been weaponised in the new media and social media environment as a tool of propaganda[35]. Fake news is then best understood as functioning in an ecosystem in which outright falsehoods overlap

with other kinds of politically motivated propaganda, satire, innocuous lies, and speculative rumour and gossip.

Fake news, or a fake news system of this kind, played some role in earlier elections as well, notably in the run up to 2008 elections in which Obama emerged victorious. Much of this news, perhaps even the majority of it, focused on Obama's identity, roots, and origins. In an interesting historical twist, Donald Trump fed gullible and pliable audiences one such story about Obama, which continues to linger on well after the latter completed his second term as president of the United States. That story concerns Obama's birth certificate, which, according to Trump, cannot be authentic given the latter's claim that his predecessor in the White House was not born in the United States[36]. Other stories about Obama, along with the conspiracy theory about his birth in Kenya, contend that he is a Muslim. Often accompanied by racist images, these stories circulated on forums, websites, discussion lists, and email before the 2008 elections. Yet they seemed to function outside the purview of the election process proper, the debates, policy discussions, and self-presentations of both candidates, and the public relations efforts of their teams. In 2008, they could be dismissed as the work of fringe groups and crackpots, unlikely to hold any real influence on the electoral process. In 2016, that distinction could no longer be taken for granted.

Fake news finds its start, as McIntyre suggests, with the history of the news itself, and with extraordinary longevity it seems to have endured through 'the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment', the French Revolution and the American Revolution, with illustrious individuals like Benjamin Franklin also guilty of disseminating fabrications[37]. With the emergence of the Associated Press, the first American wire service, in the late nineteenth century, a standard of objectivity began to develop, since the wires prepared by the service were used by publications across the political spectrum and could not afford to be seen as politically partisan or biased in favour of one publication or another[38]. However, at the level of the individual newspaper, partisan reporting continued to be the norm till the *New York Times* endorsed the principle of objectivity by focusing on factual reporting. McIntyre argues that this led to the establishment of the paradigm of objectivity, which till recently has informed the

practice of journalism[39]. However, developments in the digital realm have resulted in the return of blatantly partisan and maliciously motivated journalism or, as it is commonly known, yellow journalism[40].

The scourge of yellow journalism will easily be recognisable to anyone who follows the Hindu Right online. I have already emphasised the points about the relative absence of watchdogs and safeguards as well as limited protections for journalists in the Indian context. I will not belabour these again, other than to note with concern the paucity of fact-checking media initiatives aside from a few sites like BOOM and Alt News, which call out all fake news, regardless of the political party, organisation, or individual from which such news originates. There are a few dedicated individuals, too, who tirelessly expose orchestrated trends of tweets, bot-generated messages, and the like. Equally if not more alarming in the Indian situation is the near-total abdication of ethical responsibility in media coverage by most of the major media houses, including the Times Group, the group of India Today media properties, Network18 and the Zee Media Corporation Ltd. The owners of two of these groups, that is, billionaire businessman Mukesh Ambani, who owns Network18, and Subhash Chandra of Zee, are known to be close to Modi and to share some ideological affinities with him. The India Today group has a reputation for being a bellwether for the direction in which the political winds are swaying, while the Jains of the Times Group are known, like India's storied industrial houses, for playing it safe and hedging their bets.

But, here too, there is a new normal in play. Congress governments have by no means always been friends of the press – and the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975 stands out as the most prominent example – and have been as guilty as the British colonial state of banning and proscribing books or of demanding flattering coverage and hagiographic media narratives of Congress leaders and party members. But in the case of Modi's BJP, a difference in degree implies a difference in kind. A line has been crossed such that most media coverage of politics by the main Indian television channels and several newspapers is now practically indistinguishable from sycophancy. The major media channels seem

to function as arms of the BJP, in their attacks on Congress politicians, especially current Congress President Rahul Gandhi, conspiracy theories of murder plots against Modi, and interpretive leaps that see anti-Hindu motives and Muslim appeasement anywhere and everywhere. The Times Now channel of the Times Group and Republic TV are by far the worst offenders in the English-language media space, while openly pro-Modi anchors like Sudhir Chaudhary of Zee TV, who has had the distinction of serving time in jail for extortion, more than meet Goswami in their performance of partisanship. The fear of reprisal by the current government may well be a factor in this culture of obsequiousness and myth-making of Modi. NDTV, a channel that has been quite critical of Hindu nationalist ideology, the BJP, and Modi, especially compared to the other mainstream television channels, was the target of a raid by government authorities for supposed financial irregularities. The matter appears to have been settled for now, but since then NDTV, while generally hewing to its principles, has self-censored an interview with the former Finance Minister of India, P Chidambaram, in addition to to dialling back its criticism of Modi[41].

Paradoxically, these patterns among legacy media, especially television channels, of self-censorship, praise of the Hindu Right, and silence on events that may show the ruling dispensation in a poor light, indicate the power of social media in India. With some 23 million-odd users, a social media platform like Twitter punches well above its weight[42]. Examining the implications of this fact, scholars at the Digital South Asia conference mentioned earlier described how Indian television anchors seem to suffer from an acute anxiety about being scooped on a story by Twitter. Many television channels, accordingly, have started the practice of carrying stories on issues that were first highlighted in tweets, in addition to featuring regular stories about social media controversies involving Twitter and Facebook. This begs the question of whether the polarised and polarising nature of internet communities and communication, analysed, for instance, by Cass Sunstein, may be one contributing factor to the acrimonious conversations and screaming matches seen on Indian television every night[43].

Throw in to this mix a steady stream of misinformation put out by the BJP IT cell, whose chief, Amit Malviya, incidentally, is notorious for spreading outright falsehoods and refusing to ever apologise for them. Add a host of Hindu right-wing propaganda sites such as OpIndia.com and Postcard News. Garnish liberally with countless Facebook pages, which are dedicated to spreading canards about Nehru, singling out Modi critics for attack, circulating photoshopped images showing Muslim aggression and Hindu victimhood, documenting Congress transgressions, real or concocted, and triumphally shouting about the achievements, genuine or fabricated, of the Modi government. And you get a perfect recipe for damaging the credibility of the Indian news sphere and Indian democracy itself. Aside from the specific attacks on journalists, leaders like Nehru, and rival politicians, the greater harm to Indian democracy may come from the precedent set by the BJP in the deeply problematic practices of media abuse that it has inaugurated as a part of everyday, routine politics. To compete in this space, other political parties, whether at the national or regional level, will also seek recourse to the same strategies and means. The Congress has recently upped its social media and internet game, though it does not seem to have gotten into the fake news business in an extensive manner. Regardless of who wins the 2019 Indian general elections, which are round the corner, the next few years will decide the future of fake news in India. The other critical factor in this regard will be the policy changes made by WhatsApp and Facebook. Will WhatsApp, in response to the Indian government's request, do away with encryption?[44] Will it invest in a more effective monitoring apparatus, if such a thing may be possible? How WhatsApp manages the Indian government will also be key to scope of misuse of the platform for spreading fake news everywhere really.

Potential for Social Movements and Political Change

Almost immediately after the wave of populist protests known collectively as the 'Arab Spring' that, starting in 2011, led to the

overthrow of a number of dictatorial regimes in West Asia and North Africa, Silicon Valley as well as media commentators like Thomas Friedman began singing the tributes of Facebook, Twitter, and technology in general. Technological determinism, as I have indicated several times in the book, is the default philosophical position of Silicon Valley technology workers and journalists, insofar as their understanding of the relationship of technology and social change is concerned. The better part of a decade later, the movements associated with the Arab Spring have, at best, resulted in mixed political legacies. Perhaps this is what caused the cheerleaders of Facebook and Twitter to backtrack; if the platforms were to be credited for the democratic overthrow of dictators, then the rollback of democracy too should logically be attributed to them.

With the passage of time, those within and outside the domain of technology have begun to engage with the complexities of the political potential and impact of new media and social media technologies. Wael Ghanim, a young engineer at Google who played a key role in the protests in Egypt that led to the resignation of Hosni Mubarak, represents an interesting example of this phenomenon. Ghanim was in Egypt during the time of the protests in 2011. Attacked and taken into custody, he was able to communicate news of his incarceration and draw the world's attention to the democratic political upsurge taking place in Egypt. Ghanim did not claim any special credit for the transformation of the new political order. Yet, as perhaps is to be expected from a software engineer, he was awed by the role of the internet and its democratic potential. In a 2011 talk for TED titled 'Inside the Egyptian Revolution', he articulated his excitement and faith in the political power of the internet and its ability to concatenate the power of the people for positive change[45]. Four years later, with the democratic promise of the popular uprising in Tahrir Square in Egypt unfulfilled, and faced with sobering evidence of the negative ways in which the internet was being used, Ghanim delivered another TED talk, less euphoric, chastened, but still ultimately hopeful, in which he called for radically rethinking both internet communication design and internet communication norms for an everyday politics of civility, engagement, and productive debate[46].

Ghanim's naivete about political and social change, at least in his earlier video, continues to be echoed in the discourse of Big Tech firms, for example, in the reductive conceptions of the goals of community, connection, communication, or solidarity that they claim their products and services will deliver. Community and solidarity, for, instance, are assumed to be unqualified positives, yet one may note that a group of White supremacists on Facebook may demonstrate as many characteristics of community and solidarity amongst themselves as a group of dog lovers or benign elderly ladies who share an interest in quilting. Is all connection and communication necessarily good? For platforms like Facebook and Twitter, more connection, communication and engagement means more data, more opportunities for advertising, and more revenue. Yet, the nature of all connection, communication and engagement is not inherently positive. What will these platforms do if forced to make a choice between less revenue with less acrimony and therefore greater positive engagement or more revenue with greater overall engagement, much of which may be uncivil, aggressive, or abusive in nature? Can we, for instance, dream of a technology that provides autonomous spaces for solitude and reflection with no exploitation of users for collecting data or promoting products? Raising this question, however, brings into focus the sacred cow of profitability, and through that, of capitalism, which, in the context of Silicon Valley, Wall Street, and the USA, is often the limit to all discussion or beyond the scope of debate itself.

In India, the force of new media for mass-scale positive political mobilisation and change has been seen primarily in the case of the missed call initiative for the India Against Corruption Movement, even though that movement was gamed by the Hindu Right to garner support for Modi and cut the Congress out of the reckoning in the 2014 elections[47]. At the risk of some generalisation, one can state that in India while WhatsApp may have fostered communication among private networks, such as families, residential societies, caste or community groups, in both positive and negative ways, its large-scale impact, in the form of rumors about child abduction, cow smugglers, and inflaming mobs to engage in violence against citizens, has been negative.

If Obama was the first elected social media politician in the world and Modi was the first Indian Prime Minister to make devastatingly effective use of the internet, the 2019 elections in India will see the first WhatsApp-powered Prime Minister of the nation[48]. In Rajasthan, the Congress claims to have 90,000 volunteer-run WhatsApp groups while the BJP boasts of 100,000 volunteer-run groups and 15,000 directly-run groups[49]. These numbers, in just one state in India, point to the immense capacity for misinformation and, through that, for violence that the platform can generate. One option to prevent such political violence might be some kind of basic agreement across parties about norms of WhatsApp usage by their volunteers and workers, although it is extremely unlikely that any such compact will materialise. A more realistic scenario, specifically for elections, may be the introduction, by the Election Commission, of norms, or extension and appropriate modification of existing norms regarding advertising on billboards and other media, into the sphere of social media.

As far as everyday life is concerned, the problem is thornier and more intractable. The potential misuse of WhatsApp cannot be addressed without simultaneously addressing the wider climate of suspicion across religious communities, without detoxifying the communally poisoned body politic, and without minorities being convinced that they can live without fear in India with full dignity and rights as citizens of the country. WhatsApp itself could possibly serve a positive function in this regard, with its already significant user base in India and one that is set to rapidly expand. Utopian as this may seem, to repeat an insight from a fellow academic that I have shared in an earlier chapter of this book, there may be, and indeed should be, a place for the utopian in our political imaginations.

Surveillance

Finally, to offer a brief reflection on the question of surveillance, my sense is that the challenges over surveillance ultimately need to be resolved at a national level. To be sure, platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook need to take a stand about where they will

each draw a line on monitoring activity and sharing relevant information with the authorities. Threats of terrorist activity, for instance, are one such clear example where any platform should both alert the authorities and shut down the communication activity, unless requested to do so otherwise by the authorities. WhatsApp's commitment to privacy, which takes shape as the feature of encrypted communication, may be viewed as another such line. Yet, the enforcement of punitive measures in response to concrete violations of the legally mandated scope of surveillance, misuse of data, whether by government authorities or corporations, must, in the ultimate analysis, be a matter for national legislation. After all, other existing technologies that are capable of being used for surveillance, like cameras, for instance, are also utilised in accordance with specific limitations. The extent to which the intrusion and invasion of such technologies is tolerated or accepted is often cultural. Americans, for instance, are much more likely to resist extensive surveillance by cameras, while a city like London is constantly under heavy CCTV surveillance. Technology firms like Google have themselves had a sense of when they have overstepped with products like Google Glass that met with wide resistance, for instance, in San Francisco when Google employees turned up wearing them in bars. People sporting the glasses were quickly termed 'glassholes'[50]. What may complicate matters in a society like India is the refusal of the government of the day or the Indian state and the corporations in question to share details about the extent to which they are surveilling ordinary users, what kinds of data they collect, what choices for opting out of surveillance are available to users, and how the data that is collected is used and stored. India is by no means the only country that is likely to be less than fully transparent about these issues. After 9/11, nations across the globe have followed the example of the USA in developing and enforcing extensive monitoring and surveillance capacities, which they have sought to justify in the name of combating terrorism. The possibilities presented by new media and social media technologies strengthen these capabilities of the state, just as they powerfully enchance the profiling power of corporations to target citizens as potential consumers for an ever-wider range of products.

During several visits to India for the purposes of research on this book and other academic projects, I learned, through conversations with numerous journalists, the extent to which the BJP monitors social media use, over and above the well-known strategies of the BJP IT cell. Since I cannot share more details and have no evidence to present here, this may, from an ethical standpoint, strictly be considered hearsay. But it is useful to note since it gives us a sense of the difficulty of the task of rolling back the scale of surveillance activities undertaken by BJP-led NDA government. Aside from media 'war rooms' set up during elections in every state, the BJP is especially sensitive about its online image. According to one story shared with me, a senior journalist close to the Indian Finance Minister Arun Jaitley was tasked with providing him a regular summary of views about the BJP as expressed on social media. According to another senior and respected Indian journalist, the BJP also maintains a list of government critics, some of whom are seen as potentially 'anti-national' and details of their online statements are routinely shared with intelligence agencies. A recent development in which the BJP government has given ten government bodies with broad powers to monitor citizens' online activities has led to fears, even if exaggerated, that the BJP will take note of, punish, and disenfranchise voters who plan to cast their ballots in favour of the opposition[51].

The existence of such a regime indicates that neither will the global platforms be able to influence the surveillance practices of a particular government or state, nor will that particular government or state want to lose the surveillance capabilities and tools that a Facebook, Google or Twitter might provide it with – even if the government or state in question limits the possibilities for individual or corporates to engage in similar surveillance activities. This particular battle will have to be fought through legal challenges, in India and elsewhere, whether against the BJP, the Congress, or the Indian state in general. Luckily, there are precedents for it, both national and global. In the Indian context, activists, right to privacy advocates, citizens' groups, and concerned citizens can take heart from the Indian Supreme Court's judgment to strike down Section 66A of the IT Act as unconstitutional. Similarly, the ongoing legal

challenges to the biometric Aadhar programme also provide a model and example for questioning the invasive reach of the state, forcing the state to answer important questions, and compelling the state to develop a set of best practices for data collection, use and storage. It is also theoretically possible, finally, that if the platforms develop such an effective model centred on protecting privacy rights in one country, that can then be productively adopted, with some adaptation, in other countries too.

Conclusion

Indian society stands today at an interesting crossroads, at the juncture of two fascinating sets of developments. The recent shock victory of the Congress in the heartland of the BJP has indicated that Modi and the BJP can no longer take a victorious election romp home in 2019 for granted. Following criticism for demonetisation, changes to GST, and neglecting farmers' needs in numerous states, and generally under the scanner for coming across as more style than substance, Modi's once-infallible armour seems to have developed some chinks and vulnerabilities. There is even some talk of Nitin Gadkari, a minister in the cabinet, replacing Modi as the BJP's prime ministerial candidate in 2019, though cynics and sceptics say this is a feint to keep the votes of disillusioned one-time Modi supporters within the fold of the BJP and the Hindu Right. Whatever the decision about the prime ministerial candidate, Modi, accompanied by his organisational whizkid and trusted lieutenant, Amit Shah, is not likely to capitulate to the Congress or even to an internal rival in the BJP without a fight. During the campaigns for recent state assembly elections, Modi's rhetoric has been more nakedly communal, combative and inflammatory. Along with Modi and Shah, Yogi Adityanath, a communal extremist by any stretch of the imagination, has also addressed numerous rallies. In at least the last lot of three state elections in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, part of the so-called 'cow belt of North India', that, for a good while has been a BJP stronghold, the strategy of communalisation, without also addressing economic issues, has not worked. Going ahead, it remains

to be seen whether Modi will ramp up the communal rhetoric or return to the narrative of development as he campaigns on the national stage for the 2019 elections. If he chooses to take the first route, following his lead, we can expect to see the BJP use new media and social media as weapons in a full-fledged communal campaign war. If Modi chooses the latter route, we may still see communal discourse generated and circulated on WhatsApp, Facebook and other platforms, but it may be relatively more tempered and may complement an emphasis on development in Modi's personal speeches and other communication put out by the BJP.

As part of a global society, India is not exempt from being influenced by the changes that all the major social media platforms are being pressured to undertake by governments, activist organisations, and users. There is now a general consensus across several industries, including the technology industry itself and emanating from employees and ex-employees of companies like Google and Facebook, that the platforms can no longer hide behind the fig leaf of neutrality by arguing that they are simply platforms for speech. One possibility, though remote, is that the platforms develop a common minimum programme to combat abuse and prevent misuse. It is also the case that, so far at least, most developments undertaken individually by companies like Twitter to clamp down on threats to women, for instance, have been generally unsatisfactory. A more likely possibility is that European regulators are likely to impose constraints on the platforms, though whether they will be obligated to follow these, or will choose to follow these, outside Europe remains to be seen. The General Data Protection Regulation law on data privacy that holds for the European Union is a case in point. If something comes of the calls to break up Facebook, to get WhatsApp to forego encryption, or to compel Twitter to take more stringent action about hate speech, that may be a real game changer.

Political developments anywhere are hard to predict and, if I may be allowed the indulgence of exceptionalism, perhaps even harder to predict in India. It remains to be seen whether developments within the world of Hindu nationalism and the manner in which Hindu nationalists use social media tools will compel the Big Tech

platforms to rethink the features of their products or whether changes made independently to their platforms by Big Tech will compel and constrain Hindu nationalism to develop, mutate, and adapt in unexpected and unpredictable ways. Despite having followed and studied the relationship of Hindu nationalism and new media for almost twenty years now, I will refrain from prognostication, choosing to wait and watch what happens with curiosity and some degree of concern for the future of Indian democracy.

Notes

Introduction

1 Rohit Chopra, *Technology and Nationalism in India*: *Cultural Negotiations from Colonialism to Cyberspace* (New York: Cambria), 2008.

2 Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: NYU Press), 2013.

3 Prime Minister Modi's fanatical and dedicated followers are known as Modi 'bhakts'.

1 The Landscape of New Media Today

1 Times Now, Twitter post, 10 May 2018, 7.33 p.m. (https://twitter.com/TimesNow/status/994586135111188483).

2 The term 'libtard', as common in American political conversations as in Indian ones, is an amalgamation of the words 'liberal' and 'retard', and is used as a slur against liberals. 'Sickulars' is used to describe secular Indians, often conflated with Congress supporters, Left-liberals, and those who ascribe to the Nehruvian vision of India as a pluralistic, multi-faith, and secular society. The 'Lutyens-elite' refers to those who live in New Delhi's toniest neighbourhood, which also happens to be the seat of political power. The phrase denotes belonging or proximity to the Indian political elite. 'Urban Naxals' is a term used to demonise Left-leaning, liberal academics and activists or those who are of progressive persuasion and are committed to human rights and civil liberties. This last group is often accused of supporting India's Maoist extremists who are engaged in political and militant conflict with Indian state authorities.

3 An understanding of the entanglement of the internet with these larger currents of media, political and social practices, creative endeavours and the like is of key import to any study of the social impact of new media.

4 'Number of internet users worldwide from 2005 to 2017 (in millions)', Statista, 2019 (https://www.statista.com/statistics/273018/number-of-internet-usersworldwide/) (accessed 16 March 2019).

5 The number was shared at a workshop that was held at Facebook headquarters in California, that I was invited to attend in 2018, on the theme of finding common ground across communities. The number is public information, even though the scope and details of the discussions beyond the theme were confidential.

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10 Ibid.

11 Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*: *Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (New York: Picador), 2006.

12 Swati Chaturvedi, 'BJP's Troll Army Bullies, Abuses and Fights Dirty with Narendra Modi as the General', *Gulf News*, 12 November 2018 (https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/india/bjps-troll-army-bullies-abuses-and-fights-dirty-with-narendra-modi-as-the-general-1.1541941374832) (accessed 5 December 2018).

13 This is the thesis of Steven Pinker's book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (New York: Viking Books), 2012. The question remains, however, whether one can calculate the pain and suffering caused by violence at all. On the immeasurability of pain, see, for instance, Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1987.

14 Delna Abraham and Ojaswi Rao, '84% Dead In Cow-Related Violence Since 2010 Are Muslim; 97% Attacks After 2014', IndiaSpend, 28 June 2017 (https://archive.indiaspend.com/cover-story/86-dead-in-cow-related-violence-since-2010-are-muslim-97-attacks-after-2014-2014) (accessed 9 September 2018).

15 Alison Saldanha, Pranav Rajput, and Jay Hazare, 'Child-Lifting Rumours: 33 Killed In 69 Mob Attacks Since Jan 2017. Before That Only 1 Attack In 2012', IndiaSpend, 9 July 2018 (https://www.indiaspend.com/child-lifting-rumours-33-killed-in-69-mob-attacks-since-jan-2017-before-that-only-1-attack-in-2012-2012/) (accessed 9 September 2018).

16 Ciara Nugent, 'WhatsApp's Fake News Problem Has Turned Deadly in India. Here's How to Stop It', *Time*, 1 August 2018 (http://time.com/5352516/india-whatsapp-fake-news/) (accessed 9 September 2018).

17 There is an enormously large volume of literature on Hindutva or Hindu nationalism. The work of a leading scholar of the movement and ideology, Christophe Jaffrelot, provides an excellent and comprehensive introduction to the subject. See Jaffrelot's monograph, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1988, and his edited volume, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 2007.

2 Hindu Nationalism, Before and After the Internet

1 A good source on the Godhra controversy is Manoj Mitta, *Modi and Godhra: The Fiction of Fact Finding* (New Delhi: HarperCollins), 2014.

2 Though Savarkar was an anti-colonial nationalist to begin with, he went on to swear fealty to the British colonial authorities after his incarceration in the Cellular Jail in Port Blair in 1909.

3 Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*. (New York: Columbia University Press), 1998.

4 MS Golwalkar, *We, or Our Nationhood Defined* (Nagpur: Bharat Prakashan), 1939, p. 21.

5 An interesting parallel to this structure of equality in theory but hierarchical inequality in practice is the French colonial model of assimilation, which granted French colonial subjects parity with French natives in theory though not in actual practice.

6 The term 'pseudo-secularism' was, apparently, coined by BJP leader LK Advani. The high – or low – point of Advani's legacy, of course, is the destruction of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992.

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8 Zoya Hasan, **'**Minority Identity, Muslim Women Bill Campaign and the Political Process**',** *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24 (1): 7 January, 1989: 44-50.

9 IANS, 'Unlocking of Babri Masjid Was a "Balancing Act" by Then Government: Arif Mohammed Khan', *The New Indian Express*, 28 March 2017 (http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2017/mar/28/unlocking-of-babri-masjid-was-a-balancing-act-by-then-government-arif-mohammed-khan-1586887.html) (accessed 11 August 2018).

10 Even a quarter of a century later, no one has been convicted for their role in the riots, despite a specially tasked commission indicting Sena supremo Bal Thackeray and other Shiv Sena leaders for their role in the riots.

11 Sheela Bhatt, 'TADA Court Accepts Dawood's Role in 1993 Mumbai Blasts', *Rediff India Abroad*, 22 September 2006 (https://www.rediff.com/news/2006/sep/22sheela.htm) (accessed 11 August 2018).

12 Pradipta Tapadar, 'BJP Not Thinking of Ram Mandir Ordinance As of Now: Vijayvargiya', PTI. Reproduced in rediff.com, 2 December 2018 (https://www.rediff.com/news/report/bjp-not-thinking-of-ram-mandir-ordinance-as-of-now-vijayvargiya/20181202.htm) (accessed 11 August 2018).

13 See Harsha Kakkar, 'Politicising the Indian Army is Destroying Its Internal Fabric', *The Quint*, 8 November 2017 (https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/opinion-politicising-indian-army-could-ruin-its-internal-fabric) (accessed 15 October 2018). The spectacle of retired military personnel expressing blatantly communal sentiments on television, often at the behest of equally biased anchors, is an unpleasant first for many generation of Indians.

14 See the following resource in the *Guardian*, which documents the lengthy investigation carried out by the paper on the relationship between Facebook, politics, and data harvesting: 'The Cambridge Analytica Files', *The Guardian*, (https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/cambridge-analytica-files) (accessed 11 December 2018).

15 This, of course, was the somewhat naïve and ill-fated thesis of Francis Fukuyama's book, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press), 1992, which prophesied that Western-style liberal democracy was the inevitable political model that all nation-states would follow, with the collapse of communism symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall.

16 Readers interested in exploring the role of media in fomenting violence in these three cases may refer to the following texts: on Rwanda, Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families* (Picador: New York), 1999, on the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom, Veena Das, 'Specificities: Official Narratives, Rumor, and the Social Production of Hate,' *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 1(4): 1988: 109 – 130; and on the construction of Jews as the other, the early sections of Art Spiegelman, *Maus*. *I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (Pantheon: New York), 1986.

17 Rana Ayyub, *Gujarat Files*: *Anatomy of a Cover Up*, (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform), 2016.

18 Alexander Griffing, 'A Brief History of Lügenpresse, the Nazi-Era Predecessor to Trump's "Fake News"', *Haaretz*, 8 October 2017 (https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/the-ominous-nazi-era-precedent-to-trump-s-fake-news-attacks-1.5438960) (accessed 14 June 2018). The state of affairs is also well captured by the Hindi proverb '*ulta chor kotwal ko daante*,' which speaks of the chutzpah of a thief reprimanding a constable, ostensibly on ethical grounds.

19 Since I started the @IndiaExplained Twitter account, journalists, activists and others on the ground in India often share with me confidential information to which they are privy. For obvious reasons, I cannot name these sources.

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23 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread and Origins of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso), 2016.

24 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 2013.

25 Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989-1992*, edited by Patrick Champagne et al., translated by David Fernbach (New York: Polity), 2014, p. 115.

26 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage Publications), 1995.

27 Manik Sharma, '30 years of DD's *Ramayana*: The Back Story of the Show that Changed Indian TV Forever,' *Hindustan Times*, 13 January 2018 (https://www.hindustantimes.com/tv/30-years-of-dd-s-ramayana-the-back-story-of-the-show-that-changed-indian-tv-forever/story-og0vbfSYwK75Zl7mQmdsjN.html) (accessed 19 June 2018).

28 AK Ramanujan, 'Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation,' in *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker, (Delhi: Oxford University Press), 1999, pp. 131 –160.

29 Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 1993.

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31 Lance Price, 'India's Prime Minister is Addicted to His iPad Too,' *Time*, 14 April 2015 (https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/india-narendra-modi-election-social-media/390240/) (accessed 23 February 2017).

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33 Tim Berners-Lee documents the story of inventing the web in his book, *Weaving the Web: The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of The World Wide Web, by its Inventor* (New York: Harper Business), 2000.

34 'History of the Web,' *World Wide Web Foundation*, (https://webfoundation.org/about/vision/history-of-the-web/) (accessed 3 January 2019).

35 Ibid.

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37 See S N Vasuki, 'Election Media: Congress(I) Ad Campaign Flops,' *India Today*, 30 November 1989 (https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/nation/story/19891130-election-media-congressi-ad-campaign-flops-816817-1989-11-30) (accessed 21 August 2018).

38 A collection of Varsha Bhonsle's columns for rediff.com can be found at

(http://www.rediff.com/news/varsha.htm) (accessed 21 August 2018); Rajeev Srinivasan's at (http://www.rediff.com/news/srinivas.html) (accessed 21 August 2018); and Francois Gautier's columns on rediff.com at (http://www.rediff.com/news/franc.html) (accessed 21 August 2018). Judging by the archives, all three stopped writing for rediff.com at various points of times. Varsha Bhonsle tragically committed suicide in 2012. Srinivasan and Gautier continue to be active on other forms of media.

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41 Ibid.

42 PTI, 'Indians Accounted For More than 74 Per Cent of H-1B Visas in 2016 and 2017: USCIS Report,' *The Economic Times*, 8 May, 2018, (https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/64072608.cms) (accessed 17 June 2018).

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47 Karan Johar has firmly established himself as the maestro of this genre of the Bollywood film. See Patricia Uberoi's excellent analysis of the politics of these and similar films in her essay, 'The Diaspora Comes Home: Discplining Desire in DDLJ,' *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 32(2): 1998: 305 –336.

48 Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1999 and Meera Nanda, *Prophets Facing Backwards: Postmodern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 2003.

49 Pandya had claimed that he had been present at a meeting where Modi had given instructions to state authorities to not come in the way of Hindus seeking revenge over the killing of the fifty-eight Hindu *kar sevaks* at Godhra station in Gujarat.

50 As Sohrabuddin's family has pursued the case by challenging the ruling, and the investigating agency, the CBI, has faced allegations of tampering with evidence, a

staggering 77 witnesses have turned hostile retracting their earlier statements, to the benefit of Shah and others accused for the staged killings and consequent cover-ups. Finally, the third judge appointed to hear the case, Judge Loya, after two earlier judges had, respectively, recused themselves and been transferred, was found dead in murky circumstances, with the needle of suspicion again pointing to Shah, despite protestations to the contrary by the BJP.

51 Modi was seen as someone even more extreme than L.K. Advani. Advani, the man widely considered responsible for having lit the spark that had led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid, in turn, was deemed a hardliner in comparison to Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Vajpayee was the prime minister under the first BJP-helmed NDA government that held power from 1998 to 2004. See also, Arsha Afzaal Khan, 'Advani Told Us I Don't Want This Babri Masjid Structure to Remain After December 6', The Wire, 6 December 2017 (https://thewire.in/communalism/advani-told-us-i-dont-want-babri-structure-remain-december-6).

52 Masoom Gupte, 'I was a Serial Failure Before Becoming Successful: Rajesh Jain, Netcore Founder,' *Economic Times*, 26 October, 2016 (https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/iwas-a-serial-failure-before-becoming-successful-rajesh-jain-netcore-founder/articleshow/55062287.cms) (accessed 8 August 2018).

3 The Birth of the Rightwing Indian Media Ecosystem

1 As Mary Robinson, the former United nations high commissioner for human rights, notes, 'Simply stated, universality of human rights means that human rights must be the same everywhere and for everyone. By virtue of being human, every individual is entitled to inalienable rights and freedoms. These rights ensure the dignity and worth of the human person and guarantee human well-being.' See Mary Robinson, 'Universality and Priorities,' *Human Development Report 2000*, (http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/content/universality-and-priorities) (accessed 11 September 2018).

2 Aric Jenkins, 'Protesters Confront Ku Klux Klan Members at Contentious Virginia Rally,' *Time*, 8 July 2017 (http://time.com/4850427/ku-klux-klan-kkk-charlotesville-virginia-rally/) (accessed 17 June 2018).

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For a brief description of Subhas Chandra Bose's attempts to gain Japanese support for the Indian freedom movement, see Jon Mitchell, 'Japan's Unsung Role in India's Struggle for Independence', *Japan Times*, 14 August 2011 (https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2011/08/14/national/history/japans-unsung-role-in-indias-struggle-for-independence/) (accessed 16 June 2018).

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I had the chance to meet a senior office bearer of VHP America in the early 2000s, while a graduate student at Emory University in Atlanta, who mentioned that VHP America was an autonomous organisation with no connection to VHP India. This may technically be true in the sense that VHP America is registered in the USA. It also serves the purpose of protecting the members of VHP America, since in the Indian context, the VHP routinely engages in dispensing threats to those it deems to have insulted Hinduism as well as in acts of aggression and outright violence. A look at the archived magazines of VHP America makes its ideological affinities clear. See 'Archives: Magazines,' *Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America*, (https://www.vhp-america.org/mag/) (accessed 16 June 2018).

7 The United States had refused to grant diplomatic status to Bhishma Agnihotri, who had been appointed ambassador-at-large for NRIs by the Vajpayee government.
See Chidanand Rajghatta, 'US Refuses Diplomatic Status to Agnihotri', *The Times of India*, 10 August 2002 (https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/US-refuses-diplomatic-status-to-Agnihotri/articleshow/18683484.cms) (accessed 16 June 2018).

8 The nuances of the deep and rich history of Indians in the USA are often obscured by narratives of Indian-Americans as a model minority of achievers or self-congratulatory accounts of Indian-Americans being the wealthiest ethnic group in the United States in terms of median household income. See Nirmal Ghosh, 'Asians Set to be Largest Immigrant Group in US', *The Straits Times*, 17 September 2017 (https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/asians-set-to-be-largest-immigrant-group-in-us). The BJP, and now the Congress as well, are primarily interested in cultivating this segment of the diasporic Indian population.

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11 My thanks to Prasanto Roy and Nilanjana Roy, through whom I first learned of Jain. My thanks also to Amit Varma and Kumar Anand for facilitating the meeting with Jain. Kumar Anand works with Jain on his latest initiative, Nayi Disha, described above.

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(https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/may/12/facebook-free-basics-india-zuckerberg) (accessed 19 July 2018).

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Gupta has since founded an Indian digital news initiative, The Print, and is currently editor-in-chief of the venture. By way of disclosure, I should note that I have written for the publication.

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4 Hindu Nationalism and New Media in Pax Modica

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5 Conclusion: The Futures of Hindu Nationalism and New Media

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14 While Snowden's revelations did embarrass the USA government and energise privacy right advocates, they did not, in the USA at least, lead to any kind of mass protests, suggesting the arrival of a new normal in a post 9/11 world in which citizens expect to be surveilled anyway. For a superb account of the Snowden episode, see the documentary film *Citizen Four* (2014), directed by Laura Poitras. The Internet Ethics programme at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University is an example of an ongoing academic initiative that tracks areas of concern regarding the online universe. The programme critically examines the ethical implications of a host of relevant issues related to the internet, including interface design, data analytics, gendered violence online, and artificial intelligence. I have the privilege of currently holding the position of a Fellow at the Markkula Center, and have been involved in discussions on several of these initiatives over the last few years.

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19 The programme of the conference, providing a sense of the range of issues discussed, can be found at https://ii.umich.edu/csas/news-events/events/conferences/digital-south-asia---program.html

20 This was my experience with Twitter, when, while in India, I uploaded a video of the controversial godman Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in which he was writhing as if possessed, apparently to let his devotees know that he was in the throes of a religious trance. I had received the video via WhatsApp from an anonymous user who wanted it shared on social media with the objective of bringing attention to Sri Sri's charlatanry.

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24 See 'Article 19 in The Constitution Of India 1949', Indiankanoon, no date, (http://indiankanoon.org/doc/1218090/) (accessed 17 August 2018).

25 See 'Section 153A in The Indian Penal Code', Indiankanoon, no date, (https://indiankanoon.org/doc/345634/) (accessed 17 August 2018).

26 See 'Section 295A in The Indian Penal Code', Indiankanoon, no date, (https://indiankanoon.org/doc/305995/) (accessed 17 August 2018). Sec 295A was introduced following the publication of a controversial text, *Rangila Rasul*, about the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Published in the 1920s in India and supposedly written by one Pandit M.A. Champati, the book described Muhammad as a salacious and licentious character (the term 'rangeela' literally translates to 'colorful' in Hindi). Responding to protests by Muslims, the state authorities arrested the publisher, Rajpal, and sought to prosecute him on the basis of Section 153A. But the judge acquitted Rajpal on grounds that Section 153A did not apply to this case. The ruling seemed to inflame sectarian tensions in Lahore. Accordingly, the Indian colonial state enacted Section 295(A), on the basis of the judge's recommendation for the need for another law that would criminalise such actions. See Shoaib Daniyal, 'A Short History of the

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Index

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About the Book

From websites devoted to battling a 'Left-liberal' media ecosystem to the formidable internet army of Hindu Right volunteers, from online narratives of Hindu valour to Narendra Modi's impeccably managed social media presence, new media is an integral part of present-day Hindu nationalism.

The Virtual Hindu Rashtra examines the relationship of Hindu nationalism and new media as manifested across a range of internet spaces, including Twitter trends in support of the Bharatiya Janata Party government's policies, Facebook pages dedicated to the cultural project of establishing a Hindu state, and WhatsApp groups circulating jokes about Modi's critics. Situating online Hindu nationalism in a historical context, this book analyses the movement with respect to national and global political trends, such as the ascendancy of authoritarian political personalities worldwide and the phenomenon of fake news. Parsing the many expressions of online Hindu nationalism, it concludes with a reflection on the implications of the relationship between Hindu nationalism and new media for democracy in India.

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