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Masculinities in Digital India
Trolls and Mediated Affect

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Abstract. This article analyzes the proliferation of post-2014 social media trolling in India assessing how a pre-planned virtually mediated affective deployment produces physical ramifications in real spaces. I first unpack Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's hyper-masculine social media figuration; then study the generative impact of brand Modi Masculinity through a processual affective rendering regulated by hired social media influencers and digital media strategists. Finally, I assess the impact of Modi Masculinity on individual social media users, who voluntarily or sometimes circumstantially become enmeshed in this constructed network.

Keywords: masculinities, social media, trolling, affect.

For Baisakhi Chakraborti, a routine bus journey from her departmental office at a North American University in November 2018 turned into "nothing short of a nightmare".[1] Oblivious to her surroundings and with the deceptive assurance that the school bus was a safe space, she was in the middle of an animated conversation with her colleagues about the current state of Indian politics when she was rudely interrupted. This was before the recently concluded Lok Sabha elections in May 2019 when Narendra Modi was re-elected as the Prime

1 The subject's original name has been changed to protect her privacy. This excerpt is from a conversation I had with her on 10 January 2019. Names of all social media users have been changed for privacy reasons.

Minister of India for another 5-year term. Baisakhi had referred to the rise of Hindu vigilantism when she was belligerently interrupted by a group of young men, presumably from the same university. They accused her of spreading lies and misinformation about her country. Soon after, she got off the bus, too scared to engage with this unexpected burst of vitriol. This was only the beginning of targetted social media attacks.

In another incident that took place on a different scale, on 23 April 2018, an Indian journalist, Rana Ayyub, found herself trapped in a targeted viral social media hate campaign. Ayyub, who had been targeted many times before for her Muslim identity and her often critical condemnations of India's government, was not unfamiliar with the online ecosystem of hate campaigns. However, this time she became the victim of "an online lynch mob" (Chatterjee 2018). This targeted, online blitzkrieg was prompted by a communally charged fake tweet in her name from a Twitter handle posing as the official account of Republic TV (a prominent right-wing media channel in India). Soon after, a pornographic video with her face morphed on it was relentlessly circulated on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter alongside the personal details of her address and phone number. More recently, on 3 July 2020, in the aftermath of another violent encounter between militants and security personnel in Kashmir's Sopore region, Ayyub spoke out against the unlawful killing of a 65-year-old man, Bashir Ahmed Khan. She was again inundated with hate messages online; a Twitter account called 'Hindu Rashtra' (Hindu Nation) reminded her of Gauri Lankesh—a journalist who was shot dead in 2017 (Taskin 2020).

1. Methodology

From October 2018 to the months leading up to the general election from 11 April 2019 to 23 May 2019, I performed a close reading of both official and personal Twitter accounts. I first singled out the Twitter accounts that had specifically participated in disseminating the initial false tweet and the pornographic video ascribed to Rana Ayyub in 2018. I first traced the *DailyO* news report, which had shared Rana Ayyub's tweet, to find the troll accounts. Some of these accounts appeared to be defunct or bot accounts. However, this search rendered a pervasive online digital ecosystem where I repeatedly noticed similar online behavioral patterns. Out of the first hundred accounts that came up with the initial tweet, ninety-two of them belonged or *appeared to belong* to men.[2] While Baisakhi's virtual abusers were more toned down in terms of their abusive rhetoric, the comments on Rana Ayyub's profile on every tweet reflected a persistent toxic culture of online vitriol. Several investigative media reports further confirm that global digital trolls overwhelmingly turn out to be men (Gudipaty 2017; Megarry 2014). An examination of these Twitter accounts and their general online behavioral patterns revealed an over-reliance on images and text that can be attributed to traditional representations of 'manliness.'[3] Due to the frequent nature of their occurrence and similar replicative patterns, I have parsed these traits to launch an analysis of masculinities in the Indian digital ecosystem. By way of evidence, I draw from a multi-disciplinary corpus, moving from an investigative account by the journalist Swati Chaturvedi (2016) to official BJP social media campaigns and to scanning Twitter for a close reading of accounts[4] that regularly participate in trolling.

2 Some of the accounts appeared to be generated by generic online bots.

3 By 'traditional representations of manliness', I am specifically alluding to socialized as well as culturally idealized representations of heteronormative masculinities, such as personality traits that refer to initiative, risk-taking, and physical prowess, among other things (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Reeser 2011).

4 This article mainly provides a study of masculinities as a heuristic to understand the online architecture. For security reasons, the names of personal profiles have been changed.

Following the available scholarship on Hindutva masculinities (Banerjee, 2005; Chakraborty 2011; Vijayan 2019), my work primarily locates Hindutva masculinities in the contemporary Indian digital ecosystem, attending to its semiotic dissemination in both real and virtual spaces. In the first section, I trace the particular constituents of Modi's hyper-masculine figuration, evident from his constant social media use. I note how he has emerged as the perfect embodiment of a traditional ideal of Hindu masculinity, highlighting how his digitally mediated masculine persona results from careful semiotic branding. I then unpack the nature of its processual rendering by both individual and collective economies by considering the role of pre-planned affect and semiotics in the dissemination of the Modi masculinity brand. It is necessary to note here that I have used masculinities mainly as a heuristic to observe dominant practices in the digital ecosystem. More specifically, I note how digitally mediated masculinities are produced through a pre-planned affective deployment, further enabling the construction of a vigilante public culture.

2. Vigilante Nation and Hindutva Masculinity

While the above two incidents appear to be isolated cases with varying degrees of harassment, they only provide a microscopic glance of what seems to be a seamless continuum in Indian digital space, regardless of the specificity of the geographical location. Additionally, contemporary Indian public spaces (social, political, real, virtual) are inundated by visual codes and semiotic cues that demonstrate solid allegiance to Hindu iconography. From pictures of Ram and Hanuman to the ubiquitous usage of the color saffron and repeated exhortations to a revisionist history delineating a mythical Hindu past, images and texts actively abound in the public imagination, affectively generating Hindutva and, in turn, the *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu nation) as the default logic and end-goal of contemporary governance. Though Hindutva is by no means synonymous with Hinduism, right-wing leaders and their followers (both local and global) have ensured that they appear as a singular, uniform entity (Banaji 2018). From the Sabarimala Temple issue of 2018[5] to cow-vigilantes lynching Muslim butchers on the suspicion that they were trading beef, to the recently resolved Babri Masjid issue (November 2019), where the Supreme Court permitted a Hindu temple to be built on the same site as the previously demolished mosque—there is a repeated adherence to Hindutva as the governing logic, right down to the granular details at every level.

It is important to note here that Hindutva is not a monolithic cultural construct (Banerjee 2005); it has undergone several mutations according to its cultural context's specificity. Though some organizations are depicted as key ancillaries of the Hindu right like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and current Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), there are some tactical, ideological differences between them; however, all these organizations present a formidable meeting ground of Brahmanical patriarchy with virulent nationalism. Excessive militarization is the *sine qua non* of these nationalist organizations, situating violence and the masculinist logic of decisive leadership as the structure of Hindutva nationalism. Initially mobilized by Vinayak Savarkar in the 1920s, Hindutva is a religious-political ideology that identifies the creation of a Hindu nation as its ultimate goal (Ba-

5 The issue related to the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala rendered visible the entrenched patriarchy of Hindu religious laws which restrict the entry of women into temples. In September 2018, the Supreme Court lifted the ban on the entry of menstruating women to the temple, citing the practice as illegal and unconstitutional. This sparked nationwide protests against the verdict by millions of devotees of the Sabarimala deity who saw the Supreme Court verdict as a violation of their religious beliefs (Babu 2019).

nerjee 2005). This logic is emboldened by technological affordances,made accessible in neoliberal India, which further promote the politics of hurt and religious divides against Muslim minorities cultivating a pervasive atmosphere of hate (Appadurai 2019). The politics of hate is then affectively translated as aspirational in contemporary India.

In my consideration of contemporary Hindutva masculinity, I highlight the diffuse processes of networked exchange which translate Hindutva into a "mediating discourse by its own right" (Reddy 2011), consistently presenting itself as the bedrock of Narendra Modi's projected narrative of a *Hindu Rashtra*. In the following sections, I draw attention to both personalized and collective official, state-sanctioned social media transactions and the circulation of semiotic codes that enable the production of a vigilante public culture in real and virtual spaces. The group of young men who interrupted Baisakhi and the online mob who trolled Rana Ayyub belong to these "vigilante publics" (Banaji 2018)—generating a consensus for a majoritarian Hindutva discourse, mobilized by the present BJP and its cultural ideologue, the RSS.

3. "Modi Hai Toh Mumkin Hai": Social Media Transactions and Affordances

Detailed scholarly ethnographic accounts show how mediated images, texts, and audiovisual content have been historically deployed by the BJP and RSS since their inception to enable a nationalist Hindu project by culturally indoctrinating everyday consumers in their political agenda. Central to this dissemination is the idea of a composite Hindu identity that fosters modes of belonging and recognition of a primordial grand narrative of secure Hindu supremacy. Scholars have focused on the visual landscape (Brosius 2005), the internet (Lal 2014; Jaffrelot and Therwath 2012; Udupa 2018; Sinha 2017), and traditional media artifacts like state-sponsored television channels (Rajagopal 1994).

The 2014 Lok Sabha elections saw an unprecedented use of social media campaigning through which voters were mobilized to support Narendra Modi, the prime ministerial candidate. Modi is known for his active participation on various social media platforms. His engagement on Twitter in the form of personalized political broadcasting, endorsement, and self-promotion has become central to the management of his public persona (Govil and Baishya 2018). This persona is carefully calibrated to promote a visually inclusive space through the dissemination of personalized messages in the form of the monthly program 'Mann Ki Baat'[6] (Voice to the Heart), which is first delivered on the radio and then shared across various digital platforms. Unlike previous Indian leaders, Modi does not conduct press conferences—in doing so, he has effectively deregulated mainstream media and unequivocally endorsed alternate digital channels of communication. Modi's usage of technology, social media, and popular culture is integral to the processual rendering of his public image as deeply personal (Rai 2019).

Much of the semiotics of this social media branding is focused on projecting his image as decisive and unflinching, inflected with a brash aspirational machismo. Modi framed himself as the deliverer from Congress party's corruption through the projection of the Swaach Bharat (Clean India) campaign, announcing himself as the ultimate mascot of development or vikas for neoliberal India (Srivastava 2015; Jaffrelot 2015).[7] The theatrical semiotics

6 Narendra Modi conducts a monthly broadcast called 'Mann Ki Baat' (roughly translated as 'Voice from the Heart') through All India Radio. Since television is not available all over India, radio was selected for maximum outreach. Through this program, Modi conveys his ideas directly to the general population.

7 I use the phrase 'neoliberal India' to hint at the growing disparity between the rich and poor in India. BJP came into power with the agenda of 'development' which they hoped to achieve through more foreign investment and neoliberal economic policies—which essentially meant more privatization and access to global markets through

of his political campaign on social media engendered a brand of populist politics, uniformly integrating disparate public cultures underlined by class caste intonations into a singular ideological construction. This discursive branding of him as an ideal leader is initiated through an innovative mix of Hindutva protectionism and developmental rhetoric.

Through popular sloganeering and simplistic rabble-rousing messaging like "India First" and "Make in India,"[8] Modi has dominated public discourse as the ultimate embodiment of a leader who stands for a bold national character, daring to deliver the country from parasitic elite figures that cling illegitimately to power (Sinha 2017). While Modi's 2014 electoral victory capitalized on the anti-incumbency wave against Congress, which was the ruling party before 2014, in 2019 the rallying cry was "*Congress mukt Bharat*" (Congress-free India) and the popular '*chowkidar*' (watchman) campaign. The Congress party failed to secure 10% of the seats (55) in the Lok Sabha, leaving the present government without an official opposition party. The BJP alone won 303 seats and 353 seats in total with the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

Complementing the developmental rhetoric of 2014 with increased emphasis on national security, the BJP's 2019 election campaign mobilized muscular Hindu nationalism as its key ancillary. I want to draw attention to the semiotics of popular electoral campaign rhetoric, publicly visible through Modi's and the BJP's official social media accounts: a case in point would be the much-publicized '*chowkidar*' campaign.

Modi announced the '*chowkidar*' campaign for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections on his official Twitter account on 16 March 2019. He followed this announcement with a four-minute video clip, which immediately started trending on Twitter. Featuring Indian citizens from all walks of life—from peasants to corporate professionals and women dancers in traditional, regional attire—, everyone was seamlessly interpellated to the lyrical cadence of '*main bhi chowkidar hoon*' ('I too am a watchman'). Immediately following this campaign's launch, Indian social media resonated with renewed fervor, with BJP supporters and ministers adding the prefix '*chowkidar*' to their social media handles. While mapping the Twittersphere at this point, I noticed most of the social media accounts who had actively participated in the trolling of Rana Ayyub, on several accounts, had also added the prefix '*chowkidar*' to their handles.

This campaign can be regarded as a demonstrative example of Narendra Modi's reliance on social media. A closer inspection of the signs and symbols pertaining to this campaign and other popular campaigns undertaken by the BJP during the last five years, from Modi's father-daughter selfie campaign to '*Modi hai toh mumkin hai*' ('It is only possible with Modi'), reveals a persistent invocation of desirable Hindu masculinity. This is visible through the consistent patterns deployed in the semiotics of the official political messaging in the '*chowkidar*' campaign: repeated calls to militarize and collectively organize to protect the nation and capitulate to Modi's vision. A snippet from the video of this campaign featured Modi on a tank dressed in army clothes. This image was relentlessly circulated across all social media platforms. Gesturing to conflated discourses of protectionism and patriotism, as articulated through the figure of the watchman—someone who stands guard— a particular brand of Hindu masculinity was discursively injected into the national public sphere. This construction is twofold: the watchman is virtuous/patriotic and aggressive/militaristic—with Modi as the perfect embodiment of both these qualities. Widespread, digitally mediated circulation further enables an idealized representation of Hindu masculinity, which

'minimum government, maximum governance' (a popular election slogan).

8 Both of these slogans render visible the explicitly nationalistic imperative of the current administration.

is then affectively cast as aspirational. In the following sections, I track popular instantiations of the semiotics of this discursive deployment vis-à-vis official BJP social media accounts and personalized responses to them.

4. Key Regulators of Hindu Masculinities and its Affective Deployment

While seemingly abstract and expansive in scope (what is masculinity?), the term becomes more recognizable when analyzed for its iterations or *performances* (Butler 1988). The appearance of masculinities then becomes familiar when seen in the light of its manifestations through speech (verbal as well as non-verbal acts), embodied behavioral patterns, gestures, and seemingly projected dominance against its perceived antithesis, femininity (Srivastava 2015). Its hegemony is further emboldened through various channels such as the state and its mechanisms, laws and regulations, family, popular culture, and media. Among these, media and its various ramifications remain the most formidable and prolific site for the transmission and circulation of global and local ideas of masculinities (Athique 2012). This was clearly visible in the Lok Sabha elections in 2014 and 2019.

A 2019 study by the University of Oxford identified India among 70 nations where the government has deployed "cyber troops" for social media manipulation. This study identified Indian cyber troops as "medium-capacity," which means they are full-time employees hired to control public online information (Sirur 2019). Indian investigative reports have noted that Modi has a team of "150 paid social media influencers hired by PR companies, according to an insider who is photographed with the prime minister at various times" (Ninan 2019). These influencers run Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups, which relentlessly spread fake news, doctored videos, photoshopped images, and paid news.

Investigative journalist Swati Chaturvedi's 2016 book *I Am a Troll* puts forward a revelatory account of the organized social media presence behind the enduring success of the BJP. Chaturvedi notes that the overwhelming majority of these social media influencers, who could be defined as committed Modi *Bhakts*, are men hailing from mostly semi-urban, lower-middle-class backgrounds (2016: 81). Neoliberal consumption, with its easy access to affordable smartphones and internet connections, has fostered a "distinctly middle-class discourse which has gained prominence since the urban middle-class constitutes a major group of Internet users in India" (Udupa 2018). These influencers generate specific iterations of digital Hindu masculinities to write the nation into being through a combination of affect and publicly endorsed religious, socio-political discourse. Pre-planned affect is thus retooled through increased digital consumption to foreground an "affectively charged ideal of communicative immediacy" (Govil and Baishya, 2018).

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) famously described affect as something that exists "beyond subjectivity" existing at the pre-subjective level, free from discourse or language (Reeser 2017). Susanna Paasonen's (2019) work on networked affect studies the capacity of bodies to affect and be affected by one another, stating that affect cuts across and joins together bodies human and nonhuman, organic and machine, material and conceptual, of flesh and of thought. The collective affective economy of networked affect are always in transition, moving in between bodies (both material and virtual). This is key to the semiotics of the affective deployment of masculinities by social media influencers and 'cyber-troops.'

Chaturvedi further reveals that among the Twitter handles followed by Modi, 26 accounts "routinely sexually harass, make death threats and abuse politicians from other parties and journalists with special attention given to women, minorities and Dalits" (2016: 6). All these handles profess religious and/or national sentiments, ranging from 'proud Hindu' or other variations like '*garvit hindu*' to '*desh bhakt*' (lit-

erally, 'devoted to the nation') and '*Bharat mata ki jai*' ('long live Mother India').[9] They also identify themselves as 'blessed to be followed by the prime minister of India.' Far from distancing himself from these people, Modi legitimized their trolling activities by inviting them to a selective meet-and-greet under the banner of 'Digital Sampark,' held at his official residence on 1 July 2015 (*The Quint* 2015).

As is evident from the online trolling of Rana Ayyub, women who openly criticize Modi and the BJP's exhortation of a *Hindu Rashtra* are subjected to violent organized trolling by Hindutva proponents. Repeated sexualized trolling in the form of rape threats and online doxing results in many women closing their accounts and choosing to stay away from any kind of social media engagement. Mohan (2015) identifies these influencers as *Internet Hindus*: bloggers and tweeters who are fierce supporters of Hindu nationalism, people who cohere in digital spaces to generate opinions passed off as pithy truisms. Their activities include sharing memes, posts, and videos in support of Modi, consistently ridiculing Rahul Gandhi, sharing posts calling for the protection of cows and banning burkhas for 'security' reasons, and sharing the false propaganda of love jihad.[10] The sheer force and gravity of the consistent messaging and its related semiotics produce truths out of unverified, misrepresented, incomplete data points that take on the semblance of factual certitude.

People who dare to question these facts are routinely denounced as 'sickular,' 'libtards' or 'presstitutes' (derogatory terms directed at liberal-left journalists).[11] Special hashtags targeting journalists deemed anti-Modi are created every day. Thousands of tweets are then rapidly sent out in quick progression by these cyber troops—each of whom has thousands of followers. Sometimes tweets are generated through active bots, thereby amassing online consumers as a cognate around politically charged keywords.

In the following section, I examine the semiotics of the affectively modulated processes engaged in the transmission of masculinities through the repeated sharing of crudely composed memes, social media bios, and virulent hashtags. I also circle back to the opening incidents to highlight how bodies (virtual or physical) are transformed after coming into contact with the premeditated affective intensities, like the '*chowkidar*' campaign deployed by the current BJP government in India.

5. Anatomy of Official 'Internet Hindus'

For a closer study, I singled out Twitter accounts from Modi's list of followers who, at first glance, did not appear to be profiles of public personalities. Most of these accounts mention that they are being followed by Narendra Modi and the BJP President, Amit Shah. For instance, I came across an account named Rajiv Sharma—his Twitter bio described him as an RSS follower, graphic designer, student, social media strategist, cricket enthusiast, and 'blessed to be followed by PM Modi and Amit Shah'—with over 37,000 followers. His profile picture, presumably his portrait, revealed a strapping youth, flexing muscles in a tight shirt and Ray-Ban sunglasses. From direct Islamophobic content to shared images of rows of muscular men wielding sticks, his newsfeed revealed a dominance of an exclusively male homosocial space. Under his tweets, the comment threads indicated a frequent male readership, while he retweeted images shared by other men with common hashtags as captions. All these accounts were collectively engaged

9 These handles visibly demonstrate love and devotion for the nation and are meant to be read as signposts for their ideological allegiance to the creation of a Hindu nation.
10 'Love jihad' is a term that has come to be pejoratively associated with Muslims since 2014. It refers to the act of feigning love for non-Muslim women by Muslim men with the agenda of converting them to the Islamic faith.
11 Chaturvedi also points out that not every one of these trolls believed in Modi—some were also doing it for money.

in the dissemination of socio-cultural idioms that have previously been weaponized and imbued with an exclusive Hindu consciousness by the BJP and their cultural ideologue, the RSS.

It becomes evident that through concerted, carefully calibrated messaging, these groups of social media influencers are aspiring for a performative transaction between them and other netizens by imbuing them with selectively designed information. They simultaneously bind them to a uniform affective register through repeated direct and oblique gestures to conventional codes of masculine performances, such as muscularity and virility. While virility as a character trait was not directly visible, Hindu-centric social media influencers are mostly engaged in disseminating propaganda that police and relegate sexuality to the private sector—some of these profiles did have family pictures depicting happy conjugal relationships. I also noticed that tweets and retweets are shared with captions and hashtags that have direct allusions to Narendra Modi as a 'strongman' leader through cues such as '56-inch chest'[12] and 'mard' (man)—all of which are suggestive of a 'strong masculinity' at the descriptive level.

One of the accounts named 'Hindu Rashtra' (literally 'Hindu nation'), whose Twitter bio states that he is the social media manager of the official BJP4INDIA account, shared repeated images of Modi—sometimes on a tanker in the olive green khaki jawan uniform, sometimes in a militaristic pose holding a stretched bow and arrow, as identified in popular images of Ram. In the aftermath of the Pulwama incident in February 2019,[12] there was consistent usage of the hashtag *Modihaitohmumkinhai* ('It is only possible with Modi') with catchy captions stating that Modi has given a fitting reply to Pakistan after he carried out the Balakot attack on Pakistan. This again underscored his projected digitally mediated militaristic, masculine, 'decision-making' capacity. These tweets were generated simultaneously by other official BJP Twitter accounts and hired 'cyber troops.'

Considering these accounts of state-sanctioned narratives, both officially as mediated through official government accounts and individually through accounts of recognized trolls followed by the Prime Minister, it is instructive to ask how these collective economies (state-sanctioned messaging) affectively cast individual performances (like the men Baisakhi encountered on the bus and the ones who participated in the online trolling of Rana Ayyub) embed within a shared ecosystem, where ideals of aggressive, muscular manliness are solidified and Hindu masculinity emerges as its most aspirational articulation. What are the commonalities that emerge from these transactions?

6. Individual Economy of Trolling and Its Affect

A survey of the Twitter accounts associated with the trolling of Rana Ayyub revealed repeated markers inflected with mood, diction, and speech traditionally associated with cultural definitions of hegemonic masculinities. Some of the Twitter handles went by names like 'alphacharlie,' 'mard,' and 'Gujaratichokro'[13] (varying linguistic degrees of direct reference to the word 'man') with expensive cars and motorbikes as display pictures. The hashtag *mard* (Hindi word for man) appeared very frequently on their newsfeeds, followed by images depicting strength (in terms of lifting weights or other kinds of muscular performances) and virility through captions and comment threads that could be directly linked to the erotics of desiring women.

12 On 14 February 2019, a military convoy of Indian security personnel was attacked by a suicide bomber in the Pulwama region of Jammu and Kashmir.

13 While by no means exhaustive, I identified a common pattern in the Twitter handles that appeared to be most virulent, i.e. the ones who were actively engaged in social media trolling. They also repeatedly changed the names of their Twitter handles, but each version signaled an active display of toxic machismo. Most of it was explicitly visible through the names of the handles themselves.

I noticed many images where users are seen in the company of celebrity Bollywood heroines like Aishwarya Rai and Katrina Kaif; as if proximity to celebrities amplified their aspirationality. Some of these accounts disappeared over the six-month window (May-November 2018) of my research, presumably owing to accusations of trolling against these handles. One of the tweeters had previously appeared on the radar for tweeting, "Barkha Dutt is WHORE of #India" (Centre for Social Research 2016). In addition to tweets with aggressive slurs and abuse directed at women journalists like Nidhi Razdan, Rana Ayyub, and Barkha Dutt, who are recognized faces of the opposition, they also shared regular tweets praising Narendra Modi's leadership.[14]

Two noticeable commonalities that are directly visible in this online ecosystem were the repeated invocation of Hindu gods and Hindu religious signifiers, especially the figures of Ram and Hanuman, and the depiction of Muslim men as primitive, bestial misogynistic figures. Several critical works (Anand, 2007; Bannerjee, 2005) have elaborated on the connection of Ram with an idealized representation of Hindu masculinity; while the Muslim man has always been seen as the "ravisher and active force compelling a response from the passive and supine Hindu" (Bahri 2004). One of the Twitter accounts went by the name of 'mandir wahi banayenge'[15] (will build the temple here) with a cover photo of Modi's face conflated with the faces of Ram and Hanuman—both widely recognized Hindu deities. Bahri (2004) also notes that the mythological figure of Ram is connected to a deep-seated, colonial fantasy of a utopian time when the Hindu nation was at the helm as a marker of progress and good governance. Hindu Gods and relegious signifiers are actively disseminated, serving as a cultural shorthand to activate the pre-existing mythology of the Hindu nation that has always been associated with the RSS and, in turn, the BJP. A February 2020 article in the *Guardian* reported that the RSS, founded 94 years ago with clear fascist inclinations, filled with men besotted by Mussolini's fascism, is the present day holding company propelling BJP's mobilization of Hindutva politics (Subramanian 2020). Modi's social media public persona endorses religious signifiers, borrowed from a pre-existing cultural repository, comprising signs and signifiers endorsed by the RSS with the goal of generating consensus for a brand of Hindu masculinity that is now imbued with the affective charge of aspirationality; this can be directly linked to Bradbury's (1978) theorizations on the science behind semiotics: "The transference of culture in time can, in large measure, be described as the conservation of sign systems serving as a control on behavior." The semiotics of online and offline Hindu nationalism in contemporary India are predicated on the successful transference of these religiously imbued signifiers to create an overpowering identity of the ideal Hindu man that is always seen in opposition to the Muslim man.

In terms of the visible, anti-Muslim content, there is a direct exhortation to a sense of fearmongering. Tweets dispensing misinformation such as exaggerated numbers of the rapid growth of the Muslim population and fake news, suggesting that they are instigating riots in different parts of India, are constantly circulated. One of the accounts, 'Alpha Charlie', who consistently participated in this messaging, shared statuses like, "If you see a cobra and M [short form for Muslims] kid, you know whom to kill first." Dibyesh Anand notes that the "inimical figure used to mobilize the Hindu nationalist identity is a stereotyped Muslim masculinity" (Anand 2007). Efforts to compen-

14 Chaturvedi too was systematically targeted over a period of six months in a vicious online campaign that insisted she had had a sexual relationship with a politician.

15 A reference to Ayodha as the mythical birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram and the demand to build a Hindu temple on that land.

sate for the hypermasculinity of this figurative 'other' are predicated on the drive to re-masculinize or over-masculinize the Hindu male body by constantly weaponizing the Muslim body as something that must be defeated for the safety of the nation. Some of the other Twitter bios of accounts that participated in this messaging had descriptions like, 'let's unite to establish a Hindu nation,' 'proud nationalist works from Canada, patriot, die-hard 56 inch Modi supporter', and 'non-secular, a supporter of Hindu nation, no blocking policy.' These descriptions reveal that 'internet Hindus' are not just specific to the Indian geopolitical space but are spread across all quarters of the world. Therwath's (2012) incisive study on diasporic Hindu nationalism reveals that Hindu nationalist organizations like the RSS have transferred the bulk of their online activities to North America, where the Indian diasporic population is over 3.2 million, revealing the development of new strategies of discretion to evade the gaze of authorities back in India. Therefore, it is not surprising that several of the virulent profiles I encountered that engaged in trolling against Rana Ayyub and Chaturvedi indicate a diasporic origin—they share images and posts in real-time from foreign locations outside India. They also have allied handles that are strategically deployed to escape detection. The relative anonymity dispensed by digital platforms enables these toxic engagements.

How, then, do these trolls produce embodied, cultural experiences through online iterations of gendered performances? More specifically, how do digitally mediated texts generate a kind of 'affective masculinity' that cannot be defined but exists in the pre-subjective? If masculinities are produced in the specificity of class-caste locations, affect too operates within that discursive register—an upper-caste Bengali Hindu male, residing in America, removed from the violence of the political conflict in Kashmir, will arguably not react to a digitally circulated image-text in the same way as someone residing closer to the physical geopolitical location. The semiotics of the personal and collective affective economies of networked media need to be considered together to measure its capacity to produce guided embodied reactions that can transcend the mediated contours of the virtual to affect the materiality of lived experience in real spaces.

This is explicitly visible in the opening scenario, where the life of a diasporic immigrant, Baisakhi, is affected in the bus's physical space by a group of young men, who have been influenced by BJP's political messaging. Online cultures of toxic machismo digitally networked through internet access to local public cultures are thus reflected in offline actualities of embodied space. Spreadable data, therefore, interpellate both viewer and creator in a *constructed* network.

The circulated image-texts shared on Twitter deliver a message that is deeply felt and personalized, provoking a response from the viewer. The image-text's affective force is rooted in the fleeting immediacy of the moment when one sees/reads it. Despite the spatial difference, due to geopolitical positioning, there is a degree of commonality in this initial affective viewing. Judith Butler (2015) notes that "norms impress themselves upon us, and that impression opens up an *affective register*." Through the repeated deployment of images and texts that are semantically housed within discursive presentations of traditional, Hindu masculinity/ies, generated *affective masculinity/ies* come to be housed within a Hindu cultural imaginary. It is important to clarify here that masculinity is always conceived in the plural, even if they appear to be monolithic in terms of their capacity to exercise hegemony over other kinds of non-normative masculinities (Connell and Messerschmit 2005). Multiple iterations of Hindu masculinity are therefore digitally transmitted. Combined, they contribute to a kind of *affective Hindu masculinity,* which can be read in Srivastava's (2015) words as 'Modi masculinity.' Digitally mediated images and texts available for free consumption

thus cater to a brand that can *travel* both spatially and temporally, existing in "a temporal sink, a hole in time as we conceive of it and narrativize it" (Massumi 2002). Through the composition and dissemination of pre-planned images, texts, or audiovisual records, it is a specific kind of *affect* that is deployed—one that has been conceived and narrativized before the real time of the act of viewing.

7. Modi Masculinity as Circulated Affect

The semiotics of Modi masculinity as an affect are directly imbricated in the neoliberal condition of global modernity with thriving free markets. A spirit of consumption governs everyday activities; active social media consumption is also symptomatic of this global modernity. Guided by nationalistic ideas, the semiotics of "Modi-masculinity's peculiar characteristic lies in its judicious presentation of Indian manhood as both deeply national (and hence territorialized) as well as global (and de-territorialized)" (Srivastava 2015). Directed at both local and diasporic audiences, 'Modi masculinity' as a brand affectively travels to enable a Hindu cultural consciousness. Motivated by an air of desirability, Modi masculinity thus becomes aspirational, and in turn, Hindu religious identity becomes aspirational. From his public speeches, where he quotes Sanskrit verses in his saffron attire, Modi wears his religiosity on his sleeve, and is quick to turn any opportunity into an endorsement of Hindu values. All the pre-planned affects that are strategically deployed by the BJP's social media influencers contribute to the constitution of Modi masculinity, which also becomes an idealized representation of Hindu masculinity. Unsurprisingly, images depicting him as reincarnations of Ram are actively circulated.

Drawing from traditional concepts of familial masculinity such as strength and protectionism, Modi masculinity is predicated on a perceived narrative of strong, bold leadership, which takes the form of model masculinity the consumer automatically aspires to emulate. Media discourses surrounding Narendra Modi attend to the perpetuation of this image, projecting him as a strong-willed, efficient, dynamic leader capable of writing a new history of dynamic progress and growth. His masculine, decisive image—"that of an inflexible man of action" (Jaffrelot 2015)—is further mediated by his political opponent, Rahul Gandhi, who is presented as weak, inefficient, and incapable. Gandhi's inability to develop decisive arguments and business models is seen as the perfect contrast to Modi's dynamic, powerful masculinity.

A preliminary examination of Indian digital media also reveals a proliferation of memes that allude to Rahul Gandhi's *failed masculinity*. Given the epithet 'pappu'—a term that directly refers to his 'weak' masculinity—, hashtags surrounding Gandhi regularly trend in real-time, further amplifying Modi masculinity. Some of the popular memes depict Modi and Gandhi in a wrestling match where Modi emerges as the clear winner. One particular meme, shared by a user calling himself 'Gujarati Chhokro' ('lad from Gujarat'), trended with the hashtag '*mard ko dard hoga*' ('men will feel pain'). In this meme, Rahul Gandhi's face is superimposed on a muscular body. He struggles to lift a clay vessel when Modi appears, whose face is superimposed on a frail body. He lifts the vessel with ease, gleefully walking away as the focus pans to the dejected face of a disappointed Gandhi. In another meme, Rahul Gandhi's face accompanies the hashtag 'Pappu is a duffer' with a limerick, 'Amul is the taste of India, Pappu is the waste of India.' There are various memes where Gandhi is shown hiding behind his mother, Sonia Gandhi,[16] an accomplished politician

16 Sonia Gandhi took over as the party leader of the Indian National Congress in 1998 and currently serves on the advisory board of the party after administering control to her son, Rahul Gandhi. She is regarded as the most influential voice in the party.

herself, once again drawing reference to his 'failed masculinity.' All these images reside in a pre-constructed simulacrum, which, to echo Baudrillard (1994), exists as a pure simulacrum, sealing creator and consumer within a fantastical projection directly imbued with meaning-making codes that can be retroactively traced back to cultural scripts of traditional manliness. Alongside Roland Barthes's conviction to treat "collective representations as sign systems" (Barthes 1972), any attempt to demystify the semiotics of these visual scripts must also take into account the specific role this affective charge plays in the greater scheme of things.

Affect then opens up a "discursive register of norms that is more forceful than it might appear without affect" (Reeser 2017). A man might be *affected* after consuming such images and then attempt to make sense of that *affect* through feelings that translate into physical actions. For example, when de-territorialized, non-resident Indian males living elsewhere, like the group of men Baisakhi encountered in the opening context, regularly consume nationalist images and texts circulating through WhatsApp messages, Facebook posts, or Tweets, they simultaneously become integrated within a generated national consciousness. These images then serve the purpose of *affectively* mooring them to a sense of national belonging and participation by constructing a vigilante public sphere where any subscriber can become an equal participant. Circulated affect then takes the form of feeling and emotion, which is demonstrated through various levels of interactions both in the real and the virtual space. In Baisakhi's case, this prior affective rendering found expression in the real, physical space of the university bus, where she was interrupted by a group of angry men. Similarly, Rana Ayyub was virtually lynched by an online mob who had been similarly affectively indoctrinated by trending hashtags and the strategic deployment of pre-planned data both at macro and micro levels. In this context, it is necessary to consider the limits of this digitally mediated constructed vigilante public sphere.

Most cyber-theorists have acknowledged that the 'virtual' and the 'real' are not exclusive categories (Nakamura 2013); virtual, digital communities are built from offline interactions between real, full-bodied people located in different geopolitical spaces. Therefore, it would be reductive to assume that masculine performances in digital media are interchangeably linked to masculine performances in the real world. While there are both predictable and visible links between the two, the physical male body operates with different degrees of freedom in the 'real' world. For instance, the individuals who monitor dissent, acting as 'vigilante publics' like the trolls outlined by Chaturvedi, build a hyper-masculine online persona to appear aspirational to other digital consumers, also, perhaps, putatively compensating for a lack of something in the real world.[17] Material practices in digitally mediated environments operate through a constellation of hierarchical networks; as Marvin states, "the focus of communication is shifted from the instrument to the drama in which existing groups perpetually negotiate power, authority, representation, and knowledge" (Marvin 1988). Class caste regional vectors are more fluidly mediated in the digital platform, enabling the production of *traveling masculinities*, where users are free to occupy different subject positions that can appear impossible within the physicality of bounded regionalities in India, since class caste status is an important, immutable signifier of physical embodiment. Therefore, these *traveling masculinities* are produced within an interconnected transnational homosocial digital space that has already been charged by the pre-planned affective deployment of Modi masculinity. With respect to individual economies, each

17 Chaturvedi notes that some of the trolls she interviewed cannot speak fluently in English but engage in social media exchanges in English. Engagement in English is seen as an aspirational quality.

user can be identified as discrete named entities occupying distinct digital spaces; however, their individual gendered performances coalesce together to form a greater collective. This collective dynamically participates in the project of nation-building engendering an "imagined community" (Anderson 2006), which performs the task of producing the BJP's goal of a Hindu nation for mass consumption.

8. Conclusion

While digital media does offer enormous potential in terms of the production of different masculine subjectivities that can exercise hegemony over other variants through its intrinsic fluidity, in the context of the present political landscape, *traveling masculinities* are produced within a classed matrix.[18] Both ground-level majoritarian Hindu politics and their vocal supporters on digital media inform and strengthen the other existing in a mutually symbiotic relationship. In another article documenting the rise of cow vigilantism through WhatsApp messaging, Rahul Mukherjee (2020) highlights the consumption practices of cow vigilantes, pointing to the commoditization of religious practices through new media affordances, which is tightly braided with a consumerist performance of manliness: "Such performances involve riding fancy motorbikes, donning sleek sunglasses in pitch-dark night, incorporating the latest hip-hop music in entrapment videos, and inscribing a vande mataram tattoo" (Mukherjee 2020). The Twitter landscape also reveals similar semiotics; personal profiles engaged in Hindutva messaging appear to be continually performing an inscription of aspirational manliness that is simultaneously religious and modern, effortlessly imbued in technological literacy that allows for the easy tweeting, retweeting, creation, and dissemination of mashups and memes. The bios on their Twitter accounts sometimes mention they are government employees who are not officially affiliated with any political party. As Mukherjee points out, it also speaks to a culture of leisurely consumption, using the time outside work to indulge in the "high-tech consumption of smartphones and the most recent software apps to receive and forward the message of Hindutva" (Mukherjee 2020). The continuous proliferation of these social media transactions cast the online digital ecosystem into a dominantly heteronormative masculine space. Non-normative representations of masculinities are either side-lined through active forms of censorship or given visibility through the mediated gaze of the heterosexual subject, who inadvertently portrays these performances as caricatures that should be ridiculed and repressed (Shah 2015).

The digital homosocial space that emerges out of these affective subjective transactions is thus exclusively based on performing masculine roles that can be reverted to essentialist descriptors of strength and machismo grounded in a Hindu-centric discourse. This performance hinges on an enactment where dissenting voices are routinely harassed, as in the cases of Chaturvedi, Rana Ayyub, and Baisakhi. Binary essentialized representations of gendered identities are privileged, and toxic hypermasculine performances are exalted and expanded in sync with the "muscular nationalism" (Bannerjee 2005) endorsed by Hindu-centric right-wing groups. Through a planned affective rendering, Modi's masculine figuration emerges as the ultimate aspirational articulation of contemporary Hindu masculinity.

This article has demonstrated how digital media's power is effectively harnessed to produce a masculinist Hindu nation for mass consumption. Going be-

18 Most hetero-cisgendered Indian men who populate digital media, across different geopolitical spaces, also have access to some form of material wealth. This figure is mainly located within the socio-cultural matrix of an upper-caste Hindu. All other masculine performances are therefore constructed in relation to the upper-caste, heterosexual Hindu man.

yond the suggestion that digital media is a key component of the present administration's infrastructure, I have illustrated how the dissemination of digitally networked pre-planned images, texts, and memes produce a uniform idea of Modi masculinity that affectively stitch together disparate registers of class, regions, and religion into a uniform articulation of Hindutva as the ultimate goal and structuring structure of *Hindu Rashtra*, leaving Muslim voices, dissenting figures who do not subscribe to this imperative, vulnerable to relentless trolling. I have also shown how this affective rendering transcends the virtual to have direct corporeal ramifications in physical spaces, as the opening incident suggests. The connection between the digitally mediated affective inscription of an aspirational Hindu masculinity as a response to the projected 'dangerous masculinity' of the Muslim man fortified through trolling and general behavioral patterns by purveyors and consumers— is key to understanding the vigilante nature of contemporary online Indian ecosystem.

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