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**Performing Identity on Social Media:
Ethno-nationalism in a digitised India**

A thesis presented

by

Tara Iyer

to

The Political Science Department

in fulfilment of the requirement for Honours in Political Science

Trinity College
Hartford, CT

Advised by Dr. Reo Matsuzaki

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Introduction

The world is currently witnessing a massive upheaval as we see our ideals of international democratic stability under severe threat. Democratic institutions around the world are seeing large-scale decay and transformation within their election process, general escalation in widespread violence and manipulation, as well as an incredible increase in the disintegration of rights and protections. Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance found that 2022 was the sixth consecutive year that saw a global decline of democracy, becoming the longest streak of decline since the organisation started its data collection in 1975 (*Democracy under threat around the world -intergovernmental watchdog* | reuters). They found that elections, parliaments, independent courts, and other aspects of the legislative systems in countries that have either historically been formal democracies, semi democracies, or weak democracies, have all seen major issues with protecting rule of law and holding states/politicians accountable. All responsibility has been entrusted onto independent media, journalists, and non governmental organisations to act as informal checks and balances to counteract the rise of authoritarianism and radical populism (*Global democracy weakens in 2022*). Freedom House too found that global freedom has seen its 18th consecutive year of decline in 2023, with political rights, civil liberties, and support for pluralism being severely diminished across the globe (Gorokhovskaia and Grothe 2024). This crisis in democracy is an important avenue of study especially when cultural, ethnic and right wing populist and nationalist ideologies are at the crux of such a global state.

The advent of hyper globalisation and instantaneous information sharing/consuming due to digitisation and the use of social media has also had great impacts on both, the sustaining and decaying of democracy. Allowing greater public participation and multitude of perspectives to thrive, social cyber spaces have been both a boon and bane for liberal democracies due to its ever changing and personalistic nature. Social media has been able to make information flow to even the remotest parts of a country, and thus also ensured that their rural and often marginalised voices are heard by the centre. This makes studying the presence of online platforms in a democratically declining world even more pertinent. If populism and nationalism are at the root of determining democracy and democratic strength and online platforms are now also a determining factor for democratic sustenance within a country, it only is logical to analyse their interaction. Looking at how populism and nationalism as ideologies propagate/assimilate themselves into digital space will allow for a better understanding of the causes of democratic decline. We are yet to fully study the relationship between populism and nationalism with regards to political claim making, let alone their interaction on social cyber spaces. Both populism and nationalism as political concepts deal with the idea of identity and socio-political relationship building between person, community, and state. Therefore, their presence on social media, an avenue greatly dependent and influenced by individual's personal actions, behaviours, thoughts, and identities, is critical to analysing their broader impacts on regime type and democratic stability.

One method of such analysis would be through the use of performance and performance studies as a key theoretical framework. Since this interdisciplinary field also primarily works to understand identity as a driver for socio-political change, it provides an unique perspective on how political claim making can utilise artistic and aesthetic

performances as a way to communicate ideas and intentions. Using a performative lens to navigate social media as a meaning making tool for intersecting populist and nationalist ideologies, would give us insight into the reasons behind popular acceptance of the decline in liberal democratic value systems and regimes.

This thesis uses India and the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) political domination within the state as its primary case study to study the performed/dramatised interactions of populism and nationalism online. As an inherently ethno-nationalist party, the BJP has established itself as the popular choice, with Narendra Modi being the prominent populist in service of "his people". The way the BJP has utilised populist and nationalist rhetoric is an interesting point of research for this bigger phenomena that the thesis tries to explore, especially since Modi's entire political campaign strategy relies on online platforms and social media discourse. With over 462 million social media users in the country, digital avenues of political communication are a critical space for investigation (Kemp 2024). A performative lens to understand ethno-nationally derived populist discourse online would enlighten us on how people are perceiving themselves, their relationship to the state, and subsequently their equation with liberal democracy. Therefore, the main question this thesis asks is "to what extent and in which ways do social cyber spaces, in either promoting or dispelling Hindutva Performativity, shape national identity in Modi's India?" The hypothesis this paper works under is that the use of theatre within political campaigns on online platforms promotes a sense of emotionality and sentimentality within audiences consuming said performances. The meaning made through performative symbols and connections drives audience participation which in turn legitimises the political claims made. Subsequently, divisive, ethno-nationalistic rhetorics and political action are made valid, compelling and intrinsic to personal identity, thus jeopardising the strength of liberal democracies.

Literature Review

"Almost every year the United Nations admits new members. And many 'old nations', once thought fully consolidated, find themselves challenged by 'sub'-nationalisms within their borders- nationalisms which, naturally, dream of shedding this sub-ness one happy day. The reality is quite plain: the 'end of the era of nationalism', so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time" (Anderson 2016, 3)

With these words Benedict Anderson points to the ever growing nature of nationalism and its fixed presence in our socio political and economic understandings of self. Acknowledging the difficulty in defining and subsequently analysing phenomena like nation, nationalism and nationality, seminal authors of the field, namely Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Rogers Brubaker, Roger Smith, and more, try to present tentative ideas of what these concepts look like, how they come to be, and why they persist. From their many takes on the same, the one thing that does come through is the protuberance of the nation and national identity in intra and inter politics, thus reinforcing the importance of constantly studying and tracking the evolution of nationalism and its manifestations.

For Gellner, nationalism is the belief that the state¹ and the national unit *should* be congruent and any movement emerging from this sentiment arises when either the political principle is sensed to have been violated or to have been fulfilled (Gellner 1983, 1). Gellner feeds into the modernist theory of nationalism. For him, power, education and literate high culture that extends to the population and political agency, as well as a centralised order created by an identifiable political unit ensuring division of labour according to the mode of production the society is based on, are important to the creation of nationalism. This boils down to his reasoning that industrialisation is the birthgiver of nationalism. The coming together of will, culture and polity is the basis for a nation that is defined and engendered by the age of nationalism and its push for “standardisation, homogeneity, and centralisation of culture for the entire population” (Gellner 1983, 55). This imbibes a certain willingness and fervent-ness in identification of self to the same. Gellner is an ardent believer in the fictitious nature of nationalism, calling it an “artificial, ideological invention” (Gellner 1983, 56) in which the cultures it claims to defend are either completely manufactured or reshaped beyond recognition. As a pervasive false consciousness, nationalist ideology enables societies to worship themselves, playing into outward and self deception through an imposition of “high culture” on previously “low culture” majorities.

While Anderson too buys into the modernist theory of nation building and nationalism with crediting print capitalism and the industrial revolution for “setting the stage for the modern nation” (Anderson 2016, 46), he rejects Gellner’s claims about the falsity of nations and nationality. Instead he defines nations as imagined political communities that are both inherently sovereign and limited and can command immense emotional legitimacy (Anderson 2016, 4&6). By arguing that nations are imagined communities, Anderson allows for a deeper look into how affinity and horizontal comradeship is created in minds of society, thus leading to ideological ingroups and outgroups based on territoriality, culture, and nativity/tradition. Although his main argument revolves around the establishment of linguistic power and the unification of communication and exchange through a fixity of language as the reason for the creation of a national consciousness, he (though briefly) acknowledges the Euro-centric nature of his thesis that dilutes the impact of colonisation on nation building and nationalism. For Anderson, the colonised world understood and cultivated nationalism based on the imaginings of colonial states or their former “rulers”, and that the creation of a people via the census, the assuming of territory via the map, and the affirmation of history via the museum are what shaped the way (post) colonial states imagined their dominion. Anderson, in his ideas about the nation state, also states that there is a certain element of populism that pervades when the “locus of sovereignty” are presented to the collective of all readers and speakers of the same language (Anderson 2016, 82). This allows for a reading of ingroup-outgroup formation rooted in nation building.

Anderson and Gellner allow for an understanding of the nation as a physical entity or a “thing” that has emerged and speak to the phenomena of their construction. The modernist theory of nationalism they subscribe to limits its focus on identifying the reasons behind the creation of nation and nationalism without delving further into how these ideologies transform and evolve, both in themselves but also in how they shape socio-political, economical and cultural identities and affinities. For such thinkers, the nation is a fixed,

¹ Taking a Weberian approach to defining the state as an agency within society that holds monopoly over the use of legitimate violence.

static entity- an unchanging substantive collective. Such thought continues to thus inform all study of nationhood and nationalism, wherein “nationalism is a drama in which nations are the key actors” (Brubaker 1996, 14) Herein lies Brubaker’s biggest criticism of such study of nation and nationalism.

In cautioning against realist and substantialist approaches that treat nations as real entities and end up adopting “*categories of practice as categories of analysis*”, Brubaker emphasises the need to step away from reproducing “reification of nations in practice with a reification of nations in theory” (Brubaker 1996, 16). In thinking of nationalism as a process, he argues that nations do not engender nationalism but instead are “induced” by socio-political fields. He proposes looking at nations as a cognitive frame, as “an institutionalized form, not as collectivity but as practical category, not as entity but as a contingent event” (Brubaker 1996, 18). Moving away from whom he calls “developmentalists” (Hobsbawm, Gellner, Anderson, etc), in viewing nationness as an event, one must think of it as something that happens or occurs over a period rather than something that “develops”. If such is the case, nationness is also a variable that shapes and is shaped by relationships, groups, and “relational settings” (Brubaker 1996, 18). Championing an analytical framework of “nationalism without nations”, he separates the notions of nation, nationhood, and nationness as a “practical category”, as an “institutionalized form”, and as an “event” respectively (Brubaker 1996, 21). For him only nationalists end up succumbing to the ideal of “the nation” as an enduring structure which is not a viable analytical tool for political scientists. Brubaker’s framework allows for a shift in the study of nationalism, with it being deemed as a discourse rather than a “thing” or a product.

In the same vein of studying nationalism as a discourse, Rogers Smith points to the power of stories of peoplehood in the creation of political communities that dictate the sustenance and maintenance of nation-states. He finds that political “peoples” (he turns to the idea of “peoples” as an encompassment of national “insiders” and the political communities left out by traditional nationalist lenses, thus broadening scope for an overarching study of political identity formation and membership) have been created in multitudes of places and time periods through shared beliefs and understandings. Furthering that idea, Smith argues that stories- especially ethical constitutive stories- are critical to the politics of peoplehood and to the cultivation of trust and belonging to such political communities. While economic and political stories that allude to the leaders’ abilities to deliver goods and that also point to certain regime types/constitutional values and alliances that are to be thought of as beneficial to members of the political community are important to people building, it is ethically constructive stories that define the people on the basis of moral codes, values, and ethics which oftentimes are more long lasting narratives. Working as the basis of identity and foundation of self morality, these stories lie within the themes of religiosity, kinship, tradition, and gender norms. He claims that the reinforcement of morals considered “intrinsic” to communities of peoples allows for the success and well functioning/ the unquestionability of national institutions, policies, logics, practices, etc. Smith brings up an idealistic understanding of diversity in narratives and assumes that the more narratives that exist, the easier it will be for non totalistic, non essentialist narratives to take up space and be dominant within the toolbox of stories political people uphold. This claim must be taken with a grain of salt since he is assuming narratives are only created by elites and political leaders as opposed to a vertical AND horizontal exchange of stories within society that may hamper the championing of secular and humanistic stories (as we will see with the

introduction of social media in the Indian context further in the paper and lit review). However, Smith's study of the power of stories in building trust, communal ethics, value based practices, and in persuading, coercing, manipulating, and legitimising, political communities allows for a more holistic overview of nationalism and national identity building.

This lens of nationalism as an ongoing discourse that is rooted in narratives and stories that generate imagined affinities and communities shows that there is a severe performative element to nation building and national identity formation. We see the use of imagination, story making and transmitting, narrative building, emotionality and catering to an audience, and even the use of language like actors, spectators, audiences, stages, etc, within both politics (nationality based politics to be precise) and the performative arts. The spectacle of identity making and nationalism is often overlooked when conceptualising and studying those phenomena, especially when trying to see how they present in society and how they manipulate identity politics. There is a great necessity to incorporate a backdrop of performative politics and affect theory into understanding the reasons behind nationalistic affinities and their generation over due course. Considering the case of right wing nationalism in India and its manifestation within socio-political arenas, going beyond eurocentric or postcolonial discourse to specific cultural rhetoric of nationalistic pride and social groupings being understood through political performance and theatre theory is the need of the hour.

Shirin Rai puts forth the idea that the legitimacy of the meaning making behind political action rests on how convincing the performance of said action is. Performative politics "seeks to communicate this meaning making of policy, institution, governance, to an audience", through "representation, repetition, ritualisation, engagements, and the manipulations of logic and rationality" (Rai 2014, 1-3). A commonality between performance and politics is the heightened emotion it presents/brings forth within a collective. Symbols, narratives, images, and more, are all methods of inducing emotion which is imperative to national rhetoric and uniting a sense of nationalism within a society (this is not to say there cannot be multiple understandings of "feelings of nationalisms" in one nation-state). Elements like the body (digital profiles), the stage (the digital space and the format), the speech (text/non-text based communication), and performative labour that go into a performance are mediums through which claims or in this case a government approved national rationale is made (Rai 2014, 16). Studying the use of humour, rhetoric, occupation of specific spaces, and through dress and linguistic choices that invokes different identities and makes connections with multiple audiences, shows us that ritualistic paradigms of speech and behaviour on and offline help create and multiply identity based affiliations and loyalties, which is often a precursor to emotion based affinity to a nation, its people, and its "supposed cause." It also brings to light the importance of theatricality and the elements of performance in consolidating power.

Furthering Rai's study in understanding power, its generation and sustenance, Jeffrey Alexander presents the idea that culture and power are present everywhere very much intertwined. Culture is often tied to emotions and power to calculation and choice. Therefore, their amalgam is important to locate and understand. For political actors to consolidate power, they must utilise culture to create a symbolic representation of emotionality and collectivism that enables masses to consent to said power consolidation

(Alexander 2006, 1). This creation of “feeling” rooted in culture is often made available through performance and political “acts.” As per Jeffrey, “when political actors act and speak, they evoke meaning and symbolic weight”, and it is the cultural turn of linguistics that makes “seen, heard, written down symbolic languages externalize subjective meaning” (Alexander 2006, 98-99). Culture creates the mise-en-scene that “sets up” the political performance that in turn enables a projection of power as well as meaning within the audiences (Alexander 2006, 68). Using language, act, and appearance that are deeply familiar to the audience (often that means they are rooted in cultural discourse and shorthand) allows for the political actor to gain legitimacy or authenticity, since the audience is able to understand and perceive the power held by said actor. The BJP has made religion and culture as its primary basis for the amplification and advertising of its power, thus creating its own avenue to gain authenticity within the country.

Another method to get legitimacy in a performance, as identified by Drixler and Matsuzaki, is creating a transactional and rational relationship between the actor and the audience; an interactive and audience participative performance. The authors bring up the concept of facade fiction, a consensual form of performance that resolves conflict through compromise and indeterminacy. They find face fictions to be “collaborative endeavors in which all parties actively participate in the performance; the goal is not to transmit a particular representation of the self or the situation to the other participants, but to jointly enact a performance that solves specific problems through compromise or indeterminacy” (Drixler and Matsuzaki, 27). This outward compliance with law, alongside a mutually choreographed permitted deviance allows for greater stability and benefits for all parties involved. Drixler and Matsuzaki find that the authenticity of performance or the realism of performance is not highly relevant. What is important is the authenticity of the willingness of both parties- the state and the citizens, to participate in the performance. As long as the performance breaks the fourth wall, with audiences shaping said performance, it becomes legitimate. Public affirmation of performance through direct involvement has become key to BJP’s nation building rhetoric, with audience behaviour changing national policy and vice versa. The way people perceive themselves is through the performance the party is able to create, and the party generates its performance based on what it knows the majority will be interested in. The Hindutva project relies on the actors and their audiences to work in tandem to ensure maximum success in terms of legitimacy.

The study of right wing politics through a performative, theatrical lens is important and allows for a completely new viewing of nationalism and the generation, sustenance, furtherance of ethno-nationalistic rhetoric and identity building. However, the study of such in physical and traditional media spaces is an outdated avenue. With the advent of digital globalisation and the increase in socio-political and cultural discourses on the internet, it is important to pay heed to ways social media is changing and influencing discourse around national politics and subsequently about identity and nationalism. Taking a chapter from Anderson’s book, social media is the new “print capitalism” wherein nationhood is shaped. Thus, it becomes imperative we study the ways in which it builds and sustains such discourse.

Jungherr et al in their study of how social media is retooling politics, have found that “digital media has changed the character and business model of news organizations, with turning actors into active participants wherein they can create and push various kinds of content and audiences can determine which stories and narratives are to be spread widely

and given heed” (Jungherr et al 2020, 3). This has led to the emergence of new voices in political discourses, an erosion of authority of traditional media sources, changed the way we understand and coordinate collective action and support, as well as changed the way political actors perceive the world. All of this in turn has shaped how contemporary democracies are practised and understood, ensuring a shift in the power dynamics of *who can* be political. Users as citizen journalists have been curators and informers of various kinds of content that pertains to nation-state building. This shows that while social media has inherently not changed political needs, it has changed the way such need is communicated, thus democratising politics with its horizontal flow of information. Historically, nationalist discourse has been elite driven. However, the decentralised and democratic nature of social media has allowed for the masses to contribute to national myth making. The authors find that ‘digital media is much freer from temporal, spatial, and contextual constraints compared with the use of traditional media technology (Jungherr et al 2020, 109). This makes users more likely to engage in politics, in turn making them more interested in wanting a say in which the country is run, the way in which society is shaped, and the way in which they as a polity are understood. It further allows for people across a country to formalise their “imagination” of their community and their nation furthering an interconnection based on nationality within members of the polity.

Performances online have become key to BJP’s nation and national identity building rhetoric. The invasive and widespread nature of social media makes national consciousness building much easier and quicker, especially through the use of themes that are more personalistic and symbolically familiar to audiences. Authoritarian regimes have historically used performance and theatre as means to create meaning that pertain to either imagining a new reality within the country or reframing the country’s socio-political identity. However, the advent of online spaces has enabled the masses to join in on this national myth making and consciousness building project. The question then becomes, how does right wing Hindu nationalism present itself dramaturgically on social media and how are people interacting with said drama? The larger question this poses is what the aforementioned interaction would mean for the way the people understand themselves and their role in Indian nationalism. This thesis hopes to dig further into the gaps present in the scholarship available surrounding the ties between performance and nationalism and the ways digital spaces can shape said relationship.

Methodology

Deemed as “the largest democracy in the world”, India presents as an important case in the field of democracy studies. Focusing on India as an observational, single case oriented study will allow for greater insight into the way social media and identity politics work in tandem to generate national narrative in various parts of the world that are currently seeing a rise in right wing nationalism. Its immense geographical size, vast population and diasporic community, and its incredible range in cultural, linguistic, and socio-political and economic diversity, also indicate the crucial nature of this case. India’s influence in the subcontinent and its ability to not only influence policy in other South Asian countries but also act as a deterrent to China’s sphere of power in the region, make its growth and regime type salient, especially since the West relies on it for support against China’s growth in the Indo-China sea. For the West to continue showing support to India, all in the while ensuring an ally in the Indo-China sea, it is critical that India maintains (even if just a facade) its status as a liberal democracy working under the neoliberal capitalist structures. Therefore, the effects of right wing nationalism on Indian democracy and Indian identity become an important variable of study.

Since this paper deals with the rise of ethno-nationalism within the country, its manifestations on social media and the way it is changing the very fabric of Indian identity, it is important to have a fundamental definition of these concepts that underlie this paper. To understand the rise of ethno-nationalism, it is imperative to study the “before” of such outcome and this very transition from civic nationalism to ethnic nationalism has been abetted by social media. For this paper, civic nationalism is the formation of collective identity revolving around state based institutions, citizenship, and constitutional ideals/values (for example, historical French nationalism revolved around civic principles of *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*) (Tudor 2018, 111). This paper finds ethno-religious nationalism to be a subtype of nationalism wherein members of a nation are defined and consolidated based on ethnicity (ethnocentric culturalism), race, religion, and imagined genealogy based kinship, with such identities not only becoming politically salient but also being considered morally and politically superior within national territory (Yun 1990). Language, ancestry, culture, traditions, religion, and common history become pertinent as markers of national “ingroups.”

Ethno-nationalism within the country has taken shape in the form of Hindutva or Hindutva-Vaadism. Hindutva is a political ideology that at its core believes that Indian identity, culture, and nationalism is congruent with the Hindu religion. Based on the writings of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Hindutva demands for a hegemony of Hinduism over India and desires for the country to be a Hindu state as opposed to the secular state it is currently (as declared in the constitution post 1947). The main proponent of this ideology has been the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a right wing paramilitary voluntary all male organisation that works to spread the message of a “Hindu Rashtra”, the sangh parivar and other organisations under the broader umbrella of RSS that includes various wings of Hindu nationalist organisations like the Bajrang Dal (its youth militant wing), the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (its student union), the Vishva Hindu Parishad (its religious wing), the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (its worker union), and most importantly The Bharatiya Janata Party (its political wing). All of this to show that there is a large on ground following and a very intricate network of organisations that dedicate all their time and efforts to champion Hindu supremacy and working for a Hindu state. Their work has culminated into an active state of polarisation and dispelling of secular values within the country’s political reality. As outcomes we see the passing of the CAA/NRC bill which tries to create a national registry which attempts to exclusively deprive the Muslim community of its citizenship and voting rights, the abrogation of article 377 to consolidate autonomous Kashmir into mainland India, the increase in cow protection and anti-romeo/love jihad identifying squads, public lynchings of muslim and dalit individuals, enabling “Hindi” hegemony in official state spaces, the push to rename India as “Bharat”, and a lot more. Understanding why these outcomes are occurring, in addition to why they are garnering support or even lack of opposition, is at the heart of this paper and so through a process of backward tracing, this research will see how and where such support is gathered (via performance on social media) and what is causing this (the changing rhetoric around nationalism in these spaces and the creation of a new Indian identity rooted in Hindutva).

Digital platforms and online discourses have changed the face of Indian politics. Considering the vast scope of social media, the availability of various digital platforms for varied diaspora to air their views and the fact that the digital space, particularly post COVID 19, social cyber spaces have become the primary source of information and dialogue for most

citizens with internet/phone. Therefore, it is important to delve further into these cyber spaces and study their impacts on real life/physical interpersonal and intraregional interactions. Looking at right wing rhetoric on social media will allow for a deeper understanding of how Hindutva ideology has meshed with populist agendas and thus impacted Indian democracy. By dividing the discourse/content looked at in 3 areas namely- 1) party based or party affiliated social and political elite disseminated content, 2) “non party”² based social and political elite disseminated information, 3) citizen and NRI disseminated content, we can study the means through which ideologies, mindsets, and rhetorics shift/evolve based on pathways of influence used by different political actors of the state. This will also ensure an overview of top-down, horizontal, as well as bottom-up interactions³ occurring on social media, indicating its wide reach and disaggregated nature. In each of these interactions the individual, be it within the masses or the elites, is central. It is the people who are to be convinced or turned in order to create and sustain a national narrative. The personalised nature of social media allows for an individual level of analysis with how the self is understood under the bigger paradigms of existing nationalism within mass collectives and what that means for the entire nation-state. The individual level will help provide an overview of the state level dynamics.

Looking at platforms like Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, and YouTube, will allow for a broader understanding of how discourse is shaped on mediums that rely on different forms of content (for example, short video bites and trendy posts on Instagram, succinct commentary on X, longer dialogue videos on YouTube). This paper will study language, images, video design and content, colours, icons/emojis, and even the scale of interaction received/audience engagement on these platforms and look at their direct messaging, their subliminal messaging, as well as the conversation they generate either in comment sections, in smaller (open to public) group chats, as broadcast messaging, as primetime debates, memes (both from the right wing and the left wing)⁴, music, official and official-looking infographics, news and news like articles, cartoons, socio-political and economic commentary writeups, and more. These are all content spaces that will and should be studied to discern the conversation they generate within masses and how that either encourages or discourages national policy making, criteria of national identity forming, and even national unity. Creating new social media accounts that are not entrenched in algorithmic value judgements or are subject to “echo chamber” effects will ensure a true representation of general and unbiased discourse on social media. While the study of these multiple dimensions of social media will provide a sufficiently broad overview, there are limitations to what the researcher can do. A lot of right wing content and dissemination happens on closed incel groups either on Signal or Telegram. These are spaces that cannot be accessed without jeopardising the safety of the researcher. This does make it more difficult to learn why masses engage with certain content over the other or even why creators generate certain types of political performances on social media. However, regardless of these challenges, the study of trends on social media in addition to using a theatrical lens will allow

² I put non party in double quotations to indicate that though formal organisations, activists, journalists, media houses, political commentators, etc, may claim to be unbiased or unaligned with party ideals. However, with the current political climate in India, anyone who considers themselves liberal or left leaning is automatically “anti-BJP”, thus not only feeding into the Congress vs BJP polarisation but also projecting party preferences and leanings.

³ Different pathways of dialogue hierarchies and non hierarchies.

⁴ Memes in the “Andhbhakt”(translation- Blind Devotee) category as well as the ‘Liberandu” (translation- a word play on liberal and “gandu” which is a Hindi language cuss word) category-the former being anti BJP the latter being anti Congress.

for a co-constitutive understanding of the whys and hows of digital political performances even if not fully concretised.

Social media is a space that is highly curated for mass consumption, and interestingly the curation is dependent on what the audiences like and engage with. The use of social media by itself is a form of interactive theatre. Therefore, this paper will use theatre theory and tools of dramaturgy to study aforementioned social media content. A preliminary glimpse of social media content also shows us that Indians are now perceiving themselves and the regime they are living under based on information and performance generated both by people in power and the masses in an interactive, horizontally engaged space. Social media narratives are now also impacting people's physical and political actions with regards to who they vote for, what policies they champion, why they protest, and more. All of this is due to the emotional and authenticity based performance that Hindutva generates which leads to a change in India's identity as a nation and subsequently has major consequences for its nationals. Using theatre as a main lens to dissect content created on/for digital platforms will help us better understand the tools and strategies used to create such emotionality and personalism that impacts audiences in ways that shape their ideologies and behaviours.

The relationship between performance and politics is not a new one. Politics inherently uses the language of the theatre- with words like "actors", "audiences", "staging", "backdrops", "participation", "dialogue", etc, being used in every analysis or presentation of political situations. Theatre is tied to politics with theatrical forms like Theatre of the Oppressed, 'Political activist theatre', Street Theatre, etc, and eras of theatre like postmodernism, avant gardism, experimentalism, performance art, and more holding politics, societal justice, and the issues pertaining humankind at their centre. Augusto Boal, a famous Brazilian political theatre maker coined the term "SpectACTOR" wherein the audience is meant to be part of the theatre. They are meant to act. The removal of the fourth wall is a key way of ensuring the audience dives deep into the world of the performance and is able to engage and think critically about the messaging. The arts allow for a personalisation of experience with people that interact with an art form, be it fine, film, musical, or theatrical, taking away a completely different message or feeling from the piece. Art plays with or more aptly crafts emotions which in turn persuades people to enact these emotions. Using affect theory as an approach to understand power that can sometimes only be captured by language and impacts how a person realises themselves internally and within socio-cultural spaces, this paper looks at the theatre of politics as a means of changing mass worldview and action. As anthropologist Kathleen Stewart writes, "power is a thing of the senses" and it is theatre that allows for a complete assault of senses even when done digitally (Schaefer 2016). Therefore, the analysis of social media in studying nationalism through a theatrical lens is critical.

This paper tries to create a new framework of studying political performance on social media using theatre theory. One does so by looking at narratives and story arcs created within verbiage on social media, stock or stereotypical character types presented via dialogue and image interpretation, repetition of colour based on light theory, the theatrical or imaginative world created with the generation of new lingo and new usage of language, and even delivery and motion that allows for symbolism and association with varied cultures, histories, and societies. There is evidence of India seeing a decline in its democratic standing due to the rise of right wing religious nationalism. However, how that happens or how such

political claims are made can only be understood by studying performance and their power of conviction and persuasion within mass audiences. Though performance can be interpreted in multiple ways, it is the primary source of persuasive meaning making. Authenticity is what makes political performances convincing as well as what makes audiences either accept or reject claims made by political actors. Additionally, to find whether a performance is deemed authentic or not, one must look to see how many people participate in the discourse. If the audience engages with the content and determines their dialogue based on what they are seeing, the performance in itself gains the badge of authenticity. Jeffrey Alexander defines authenticity to be “an interpretive category rather than an ontological state arrived at, (that) is contingent and results from processes of social construction; (that) is also always contested, unstable and open to re-interpretation” (Alexander 2006, 7). Using his definition allows this paper to propose potential theatrical interpretations of social media performances and how those meanings may/are impacting society rather than definitive or conclusive answers for the same. Rather than considering this uncertainty of intention and interpretation as a limitation of such theatrical analysis of social media, the fluid nature of theatre and performance theory enables this paper to provide a whole new paradigm of political understandings that centre the individual within their imagined collective and shows how theatre can be both successful and unsuccessful depending on the changing nature of how it is received.

This interpretative nature of theatre and thus, of political performance, is furthered by the many actors that can engage in said performance when presented online. As stated before, social media has become an avenue for many political voices to be present at the same time in various capacities. Individuals, organisations, political parties, and politicians, utilise social media for their own agendas. But a new phenomena that is interesting in itself is the delegation of social media content creation to designated social media influencers or “social media/PR departments” for political parties and actors. The BJP has one of the biggest and most well endowed PR departments for each municipality or township within every city spanning the entire country. Modi’s entire 2014 election platform was built on his digital presence and his party’s media presence. In response, other parties like Indian National Congress, Shiv Sena, Aam Aadmi Party, Nationalist Congress Party, etc, have had to fund social media platforms for themselves to counteract BJP leaning content. Elections are now fought on social media. The way political elites and their parties interact with the masses digitally has a massive impact on the way these audiences understand their role in society and their national identity. Therefore, to understand the ways political elite think about and utilise social media and its widespread reach ethnographic interviews were conducted. The interviews helped provide a deeper comprehension of how socio-political elite and their digital media presence managers use these many platforms, what they perceive the role of social media to be, and what they think the impact they see it have on democracy and nationalism.

With India being such a large state and with the current political climate, interviewing people at the very top of the chain was difficult. This research faces a few limitations with severe bowdlerization prevalent in the country. In trying to curb censorship and potential unwillingness in participation, the snowball method for interviewing was used⁵. However, even over the course of 3 months, only 6 interviews were secured since either opposition party members were too scared to comment or it was too dangerous for the

⁵ List of interview questions attached in the appendix at the end

researcher to try and converse with leaders in governments. A few interviews had to be cancelled at the last minute due to governmental scandals occurring, making it even more unsafe for the researcher to meet politicians one on one. This led to a smaller scope of parties that were interviewed. Furthermore, since these politicians agreed to be on record based on personal extended relations in addition to there being a general sense of fear surrounding asking the wrong question or even in the wrong tone that could “offend” the political elite, there was no room to further interrogate or ask further questions based on answers received. All the questions, especially when interacting with BJP members had to be previously submitted leading to a more rehearsed script being presented in those interviews. However, the snowball method allowed for a considerable sample of 6 elites across different parties (2 BJP, 2 INC, 2 AAP) operating from the financial capital of Mumbai. The snowball effect was helpful in avoiding general uncooperativeness that is considered characteristic of Indian politicians as well as reducing the fear and uncertainty of conducting research that could be deemed anti-BJP thus having severe penal consequences⁶.

Conclusion

This thesis divides the empirical analysis into four parts, each a new chapter. It starts with laying the foundation about the nature of nationalism within the country, and the role of social media in political action. It then proceeds to try and understand theatre as a tool for political communication, and assess how performance impacts democratic participation and identity.

The first chapter will look at the relationship between nationalism and democracy, and how India has seen the changing nature of both ideology and regime type since inception to present. From gaining independence in the image of a civic, inclusive nation under the INC, the country now sees a shift with Hindu right wing nationalism becoming considered as the true form of Indian nationalism. This shift is aided by the BJP’s ethno-nationalist agenda as well as their use of cultural populism to redefine the Indian populace has incredible impacts on India’s liberal democracy.

This will be followed by a detailed study of how social media has paved way for nationalist rhetoric to sustain itself and how the BJP has used this to its advantage in outcompeting its opponents. We compare the way social media is used and thought about by three major Indian parties, and dissect the differences between their strategies that end up playing in the BJP’s favour. This chapter also looks at the ways social media algorithms and interface designs better aids ethno-nationalist content as compared to general political content.

The third chapter presents the use of theatre and performance theory in order to analyse social media content generated by either the BJP or its affiliates, by creating a new analytical framework. It lays groundwork for how performance allows subjective meaning making and goes into explaining the PPF2.0 framework that utilises the study of dramaturgy to look at the elements of political performance. This framework is then used to analyse

⁶ Journalists, educators, students, photo-activists, researchers, have been made targets for non bailable imprisonment under the UAPA act for “anti-national” work.

content from the BJP's official electoral campaign as well as from their unofficial, underground campaign that is usually spread by affiliates or "Bhakts"⁷.

And lastly, chapter four looks at how citizens participate in the performance via online platforms and make Hindutva rhetoric legitimate. In imbibing the theatre and being affected by emotionality, the chapter finds that audiences completely submit themselves to Hindutva ideology, thus furthering divisive discourse online. Online participation in Hindutva performances further permeates into on ground violence and right wing political action, thus jeopardising Indian liberal democracy.

The thesis ends with a discussion on what it means for ethno-nationalist narratives to become legitimate in India, especially when considering Indian identity, both at the personal and state level. This section looks at how liberal democratic values and Indian identity are made to be at odds with one another due to Hindutva identity becoming integrated and integral to Indian identity. Finally, this paper also hopes to become a template for the study of other varying authoritarian or semi authoritarian regimes and their use of online performances in shaping national discourse and reality for future research.

⁷ Bhakts is the hindi term for devotees. With reference to the BJP, Bhakts as a term is used to indicate a "blind follower".

Chapter 1

Nationalism, Democracy, and their give and take

Post its trials with colonisation, the Republic of India was formed under the determination of being an inclusive, socialist democracy. From day one of inception to present, it remains the largest and one of the most unlikely democracies to come into existence. From being the most populous, demographically diverse, incredibly impoverished, illiterate, unequal, with little to no expertise in centralised governance over this large a territory; India checked the boxes of a nation having great difficulty in establishing a well functioning government, let alone a democracy and a sufficiently strong one at that (Chibber 2006). The world maintained scepticism over India's supposed "idealistic" goals of being a strong, democratic super power championing the third world. This sentiment seemed justified in the light of the religious nature of partition, Pakistan technically becoming a theocratic state, as well as the non democratic nature of the region that was India. On top of such inherent obstacles, India did not have a formal constitution until 3 years after its independence. While the word secular was not included in the Indian constitution until 1975, the country and its democracy were founded on the principles of religious inclusivity and overlap which basically entailed the convergence of religion and state in a respectful and responsible manner rather than a separation.

After 1950, Indian democracy has not been without its ups and downs. The country has had its moments of democratic decline during emergency from 1975 to 1977, the rise of the Vishva Hindu Parishad and the subsequent demolishing of the Babri Masjid and its aftermath in 1992, periods of intense corruption and economic stagnation, the continued brutalisation and policing in Kashmir, Punjab, and Assam, and many others. In spite of this, the country has always reverted to its democratic principles and has maintained a status of a "Free" democracy or been on the top ranks of the "flawed democracy" charts for most of its years (Publication archives, Global Insights & Market Intelligence). Maya Tudor and Dan Slater link such a strong democratic foundation to independent India's sense of nationalism. While inclusive nationalism is not a determining factor for democracy, the authors find that it is a 'critical antecedent' that disposes the emerging country to democratic value building and sustenance (Tudor and Slater 216, 33).

With the kind of nationalism adopted becoming a crucial criteria to the strength and sustenance of a democracy, is it only fitting to study the rise of the BJP and the subsequent decline in democracy through the lens of right wing ethno-nationalist rhetoric they have adopted. This chapter hopes to argue that in trying to redefine "the people" of India to ensure Hindu domination within the country, the BJP has changed what it means to be Indian. The violent and unconstitutional nature with which such redefining of the populace is occurring is what is fundamental to the change in democratic levels of the country and even in the way the masses and the government understand what it means to be a democracy. Through the perversion of the constitution and its liberal values, the BJP with its cultural populist ideals presented in the form "true nationalism" (read Hindutva) have dampened the spirit of the inclusive, liberal democracy India had set off to be under the leadership of the INC. This chapter will conclude that the main avenue through which such change in nationalistic rhetoric, that subsequently is jeopardising Indian democracy, is social media. The BJP's prolific use of social media to promote Hindutva has ensured the crossover from civic to ethno-religious nationalism within the country.

The INC as founder of Indian Nationalism and Democracy

Founded in 1885, the INC was formed by English Bureaucrat, Allan Octavian Hume, in hopes of building better relations between the British governing parliament and the Indians. Composed of social elites, upper class men who worked in journalism, social reform, and education, the party was created to bridge gaps between the rulers and the subjects. The goal initially was not to end the British Raj but to make Indian voices more prominent within decision making and create a platform for them to put forth their grievances (kind of like a safety valve) (Singh). While vernacular newspapers and regional leaders that were coming together to form the INC had already helped create regional identity and consciousness, the INC at a national level sought to consolidate the population into a nation as a whole, grow a renewed spiritual, political, moral, and social awakening within the masses, and bring together the English and Indian union to create a robust, inclusive empire state (*Indian National congress* Oxford Ref.). Initial nationalist movement, while with a touch of anti-coloniality, focused solely on uniting the Indian peoples in a way that made communicating with the empire an easier task.

This initial stage of the INC found success in rare intervals but was frequented with criticism from both the British and the Indian population, for disrupting the status quo and for not doing enough for the people respectively. Considering the organisation was mainly led by political, upper class elites who had majorly studied abroad, large swathes of people and regional leaders felt the leadership was out of touch with the common person's reality. With time as the INC started to permeate into different areas of the country, differing ideologies and aspirations for the future of INC programming took root. This led to the bifurcation of the INC into the moderate faction (led by Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Surendranath Banerjee) and the extremist faction (led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak) with the moderates building a brand of nationalism that used existing colonial structures to empower the indigenous peoples whilst the extremists wanting a complete disruption to political and social hierarchy within the subcontinent (Singh). Tilak's vision for nationalism was more radical and rooted in militant activity with calls for Swaraj or self rule in contrast to the cooperative stance that the moderates had taken especially in the face of the 1905 Bengal Partition and the subsequent formation of the Muslim League. It was only after Gandhi's return from South Africa to India in 1915 that the factions of the INC once again came together to create a unified Congress (Singh).

With Gandhi changing party politics for good, he was able to encourage strong central organisation for the INC along with mass membership and elaborate branches of the party into regional and divisional spaces within the country. With influential ethnic and religious minority leaders joining the INC, the party saw a boom in mass appeal and unity building. Under Gandhi and his protege, Jawarharlal Nehru, the nationalist movement turned into a social reform movement too with appeals for eradication of caste discrimination⁸, ethnic differences, poverty, and inclusion of women's socio-political rights. It was under them that the call for Poorna Swaraj was undertaken as the key objective within INC politics. While Gandhi tip toed the line of a religious secular figure, not averse to seeing India as a Hindu nation that safeguards minority rights and ensures that other religions can

⁸ It is important to note that Gandhi differentiated between the enabling and upholding of the caste system and the social hierarchy that it creates leading to caste based discrimination. While he was against people facing prejudice because of their caste, he did not believe in dismantling the caste system.

live within the territory, it was Nehru that lobbied for a secular India that ensured that the nation-state was not built in the vision of a religious ideology. This goal of a free Indian nation-state devoid of religious affiliations was achieved in 1947 alongside the harsh reality of partition.

The INC and its brand of inclusive, secular politics under Nehru's leadership, were key to the momentum built within the Indian freedom struggle. With the INC becoming the foremost party within the Indian political arena, this inclusivity became the breeding ground of democracy and democratic aspirations. The INC worked across class, caste, and religious lines to channel a free non empire that dismantled colonial hierarchies and managed in uniting its citizenry against the divide and rule politics. By personifying a party that represented broad swathes of the Indian population and championing a nationalism that encompassed all persons as equal citizens, the INC was able to gain power and also make the idea of liberal democracy a given for all stratas and subsections of the Indian population. Since the decolonial movement was rooted in such inclusive left leaning nationalism, even in the face of right wing party formation and authoritarian consolidation, that the INC continued its domination within the political arena and liberal understanding of democracy and democratic underpinnings consolidated as the "only game in town". The INC's legacy of national movement and identity building along with their higher level organisational skills led them to dominate the nascent Indian political arena by winning 6 consecutive terms. One party domination is often thought of as a hindrance to democracy and democratic proceedings. However, their commitment to an inclusive state made them a safeguard for Indian democracy, thus providing the country stability and guardianship against anti-democratic elements. Their work and propagation of democracy ensured that there was no desire for any other style of governance (Tudor and Slater 2016, 36).

The enduring nature of democracy has not just been the existence of inclusive nationalistic ideology but moreso the fact that the INC was able to institutionalise this ideology- converting inclusive nationalism to civic nationalism. Nehru, in the very first meeting of the Constituent Assembly in 1946, presented the Objectives Resolution that aimed to declare India as an independent sovereign republic with its own constitution to govern its future. Even in this preliminary resolution, that was thereafter accepted by the assembly, goals like justice, equality, freedom, for all regardless of religion, faith, socio-economic status, or political leanings, were envisioned. Nehru advocated for the protection of all minority, tribal, backward classes rights and freedoms too. This was reflected with committees like 'Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights', 'Minorities, Tribals, and Excludes areas Committee', and more being created to generate reports within their field and provide insight to the Constitution Drafting Committee. With Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a Dalit Budhhist scholar and revolutionary, leading the Drafting Committee, the constitution was inherently created by members of underrepresented communities with goals to fundamentally protect their rights, liberties, and identities within the Indian democratic framework. With multiple revisions and three rounds of debates and redrafts to include multitude of voices and concerns with regards to how best to encapsulate the diversity of thought, identity, and ideology present within the country, the motion to move forward the constitution as presented by Ambedkar, was passed in 1949 with the constitution formally coming into effect on 26th January, 1950 (*Stages of constitution making*).

As the longest written constitution of the world, the Indian document borrows its structure from the Governance of India Act of 1935, its philosophy from the Irish and American constitutions, and its political framework from the British. In creating a document that has characteristics of both a rigid and flexible amendment system, the founders of the constitution put forth a bicameral parliamentary federal system with unitary biases that upholds a balanced synthesis of parliament sovereignty and judicial supremacy with regards to implementing laws or amending constitutional orders. With emphasis on rule of law and an integrated, independent judicial system, the Indian constitution features 6 fundamental rights⁹, Directive Principles of State policy aimed at implementing a welfare state, and several fundamental Duties of citizens. Additionally, through envisioning independent electoral, auditing, service commission, and constitutional bodies, the constitution also hones in universal adult franchise and a 3 tiered governmental structure. The constitution also provided a set of emergency powers to the state to take control of all law and order directly from the centre (*Stages of constitution making*). Ideologically, the constitution was made to be rooted in democratic values, secularism, socialism, sarvodaya or welfare for all, humanism, liberalism, decentralisation, Gandhism, and mixed economic policies (*Constitution of India - major features: UPSC Indian polity notes*). The INC with a stable majority of their coalition ensured the execution of this democratic constitution that made equal representation, transparency of law, political competition, codified civil and political liberties, multilingualism, protective measures for scheduled or backwards castes, and more, integral within Indian society. In creating an inclusive imagined community, the INC was able to inculcate a strong democratic footing within the country and also maintain institutional safeguards protecting the said democracy by ensuring that the national identity and affinity took precedence over ethnic or religious affinities within Indian peoples. The importance of such a foundation was reinforced with Indian democracy being challenged periodically.

Indian democracy was threatened right off the bat with the subcontinent seeing partition of East and West Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and India. With mass migration, rape and violence, communal aggression, severe economic disparity, and continued pushback from religion and militant variations of nationalism, India's early years were marred by several undemocratic instances that, if not for the continued championing of secular and unified India by the INC, would have shaped the country into a weak, autocratic state. Under Nehru's leadership, the country was able to move past the trauma of partition to embrace non alignment, socialist economic policies, secularism, state driven industrialisation, and a non confrontational policy (Singh). Indian democracy soon found equilibrium and it wasn't until Indira Gandhi's Prime Ministry that the country saw a rise in authoritarianism.

Gandhi initiated emergency provisions within the country on June 25th, 1975, lasting over 21 months, after mass spread dissatisfaction and anger against her tenure started to spiral into calls for her resignation which was further compounded by the high courts debarring her from contesting elections. Under the pretext of immense internal and external threat to the country and its stability, Emergency laws were implemented whereby the citizen's mandated fundamental rights were suspended, free press was under threat with pre-censorship policies put in place, the media was at times under a complete embargo, the Parliamentary Proceedings Protection of Publications act was repealed, severe restrictions on

⁹ They are: Right to Equality, Right to Freedom, Right against Exploitation, Right to freedom of Religion, Cultural and Educational Rights, Right to Constitutional Remedies.

civil liberties and fundamental rights were reinforced, and even elections were disbanded. The imprisonment of members of opposition parties, activists, and journalists without bail as well as multiple reports of gross human rights violations (testimonies of sterilisation/vasectomy campaigns and mass relocation of urban slum dwellers) were key characteristics of Emergency (Jha). In the words of Jeffrelot and Anil, since institutions of democracy were not dissolved but rather perverted or restricted in extreme capacity, the country was still run under the paradigms of the constitution, making Emergency a unique “Constitutional Dictatorship” (Jha).

This period was one of the darkest moments in the history of Indian democracy and its effects are still felt to this day. However, what is interesting to note, that in response to such authoritarian crackdown, opposition parties, student groups, and new parties which were just formed, all dug deeper into their pro-democracy stance. Gandhi’s extreme left populist rhetoric that was edging closer to autocratic Peronism was met with movements like ‘Democracy Bachao Morchas’ (Save Democracy Protests). With people losing faith in Gandhi and thus, in the INC, the Sangh Parivar with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Janata Party found greater solidarity and loyalism from the populace. This right wing militant party, that has now given birth to a Hindutva chanting BJP, based its entire initial platform on saving India from Gandhi’s authoritarianism. In the elections of 1977, right after the end of Emergency, leaders of RSS and the Janata Party appealed to the people to choose their party as synonymous for democracy and true Indian values as opposed to Gandhi and INC who supposedly did not care for Indian democracy and constitutional safeguarding. The desire to “return to democracy” was still potent within the country and liberal democratic values were considered intrinsically Indian or key measurements of Indian political identity. The Janata party won the 1977 elections with a landslide victory, this being the first time the INC did not see majority seats in parliament¹⁰. Even here we see the commitment to democracy stand the test of time and allow for electoral competition and change in regime. As Tudor puts it, a liberal civic nationalism fervour within the masses is what gave Indian democracy its legitimacy and its bold championship even in the face of antidemocratic forces (Tudor 2018).

Many consider Emergency as a blip in India’s democratic journey. However, its effects marr Indian society to this day. One of the biggest legacies is the rise of the Sangh Parivar and the Janata party and the legitimacy they gained from being an opponent to Indira Gandhi’s autocracy. This allowed for Hindu Nationalism to gain powerful footing within the political arena and bring such ethnic radical ideology to the centre¹¹. Such confidence building within ethno-nationalist groups lead to them organising the Ram Rath Yatra that informed the demolition of the Babri Masjid and subsequent pogroms against Muslims in Gujarat, Mumbai, and other interior cities of the country. Additionally, post Emergency, India saw a move away from socialist economic policies to a more private capital investment structure. This enabled rampant “briefcase politics”¹² within the country and made capital and money synonymous with power. Emergency also opened up avenues for governments to take harsher and more radical measures to deal with internal or external threats to the unity of the country. We see this with Operation Blue Star that tragically led to the 1984 Anti-Sikh genocide, the 2019-2021 internet shutdown and military curfew in

¹⁰ It is important to note that the Janata Party alliance was extremely weak and so the INC won a grand majority in the 1980 elections with Indira Gandhi becoming Prime Minister again. Even after the Emergency, she still stood for political pluralism, welfare, secularism, and true Indian Nationalism.

¹¹ The BJP is the new avatar of the Janata Party. It is the same organisation with new branding.

¹² A corrupt system of monetary transaction wherein exclusive distribution of industrial licences were given exchange for monetary benefits to fund a political party. This exists even today.

Kashmir post the repealing of Article 370, curfews in states rallying for succession like Punjab, Assam, etc, as well as the drastic rise in internet shutdowns within the country post 2014. From this we see the many flaws that exist within Indian democracy and its implementation that has continued to this day. However, inclusive nationalism as propagated by the INC helped ensure that the people of the country still strongly believed in liberal democratic values and fought to uphold them periodically.

Up until 2013, civic nationalism protected the country from grassroots damage of its democratic institutions with undemocratic instances being met with constitutional law and order, independent judiciary, and great public participation. Nehru's long rule created a sense of democratic stability and trust within the functioning of the constitution that made all democratic decline unacceptable to the masses and this ensured that the country bounced back to its true democratic identity. This nationalistic fervour that safeguarded Indian democracy even in the face of Emergency, however, seems to have changed under Modi's reign. The relationship between nationalism, democracy, and the constitution have now seen a perversion with democratic decline becoming the norm rather than an outlier within the country.

The BJP and its shaping of Indian Nationalism and Democracy

In keeping with the tradition of maintaining a deep relationship with nationalism, as inaugurated by the INC, Indian democracy still finds nationalism and nationalist rhetoric to be a driving force for the way it shapes and presents itself. However, this relationship has seen a radical change in form, nature, and ideological leanings. The BJP as an organisation emerged as the political wing for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a paramilitary, all male, voluntary organisation built on the teachings of Hindutva to further propagate the same. Therefore, underlying all BJP politics is the championing of Hindu rights and aspirations. The BJP came to power in 2014, on the promise of economic growth, digitisation and modernisation, anti-corruption, and on creating a new understanding of Indian populist ideals. In redefining the Indian people as the Hindu people, the BJP put forth a new populus that they wanted to, did, and continue to represent. The very fact that they were challenging the existing inclusive civic nationalist discourse with one that was clearly ethno-religioustic made their candidacy attractive for certain sectors of Indian society that believe in Hindu supremacy within the country. The BJP's platform revolves around being the antithesis to the INC and its ideals- in counteracting INC's political hegemony in the name of democratic procedure, the BJP has changed what it means to be a democracy through a perversion of national identity formation and nationalist rhetoric.

Ever since coming to power in 2014, the BJP has deeply weakened Indian democracy through its mismanagement of law and order, judicial systems, policy making, and with corrupting political thought and freedom. As per Betsy Reed from The Guardian, "Modi and the BJP have pursued an accelerating, repressive and intimidatory campaign against opponents, independent media organisations, individual journalists, civil society groups and free speech in general" (Reed). While the BJP has had several great failures like the Demonetisation project, the corrupt rewriting of the Rafale Jet deal, declining state-farmer relations and severe farmer dissatisfaction, increased unemployment, poverty, and wealth gap, declining influence in the South Asian region, and more, its biggest critiques lie in its undermining of civil liberties, rule of law, and freedom of speech (Khurshid and Khan). The

current government has greatly weakened civic institutions like the parliament and the judiciary with the PM rarely ever attending parliament proceedings, derailing the appointment of the Lokpal¹³, leaders (including Modi) erasing all previous criminal proceedings against themselves, suspending over 141 opposition lawmakers from the parliament, removing Rahul Gandhi from parliament on flimsy and fudged charges, and even compromising the integrity of electoral transparency through the use of electoral bonds (Reed). The BJP likes to rule by fiat and we see this with the repeal of Article 370 and the subsequent internet and communications shut down in Kashmir that lasted over 2 years, the enforcement of trial NRC¹⁴ in Assam and the introduction of national CAA-NRC¹⁵ laws. Some more examples of their arbitrary and draconian can be seen in the compulsory linking of Aadhaar card to all personal documents, increase in surveillance and reduction in information policies, enforcement of anti Romeo, Love Jihad laws, and Cow Protection laws¹⁶. The creation of the Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance act, UCC laws that target Muslim Sharia laws and unwed persons personal relationships¹⁷ and even the way UAPA¹⁸ laws are imposed are just some more instances of this high handedness (Khurshid and Khan).

The BJP has made criticism of its governance equivalent to criticism of the nation, thus curbing all dissent and protest through violent means, be it non bailable imprisonment, use of tear gas, barbed wires, and police brutality tactics on protestors (long running in Kashmir, during the anti CAA-NRC protests in 2019-2020, the 2020 and 2024 farmers protest, the 2022 Indian wrestlers and sportspeople protests, and more). The government has also usurped all media platforms by buying state and private media channels through proxy owners, censoring and raiding independent journalists and media platforms, shutting down internet and communication access to regions within the country, banning movies and documentaries or shutting down the screening of the same, closing offices of NGOs and international organisations like Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, and even arresting/disbanding activists, journalists, NGO workers, and students (*India: Government policies, actions target minorities*). Modi government's prejudice towards Muslims has ensured protection of right wing militants and Hindu Nationalist groups who have taken to the streets to harass, rape, lynch, and murder Muslims and other minority communities. With party leaders inciting violence through speeches and police forces being complicit in attacks, violence against Dalits, Christians, Muslims, and other underrepresented communities seems to have increased three fold (*India: Government policies, actions target minorities*). Targeted attacks by Municipal Corporations have led to sudden demolishing of Muslim residences, shops, and slums, under the pretext of illegal encroachment. Communal biases and abuses are now officially sanctioned and even worse - justice is rarely served to people not aligned with the BJP due to the now heavily biased court system. Umar Khalid's case being a poignant example of this newly skewed judiciary¹⁹ (Khurshid and Khan). Through these many instances we see a complete disregard for democratic, let alone liberal, values within the working of the BJP and its affiliate organisations.

¹³ Anti -corruption ombudsman

¹⁴ National Registry of Citizens

¹⁵ Citizenship Amendment Act in conjunction with the National Registry

¹⁶ Read more about these here-

<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/anti-romeo-love-jihad-experiments-in-moral-policing-in-uttar-pradesh/>
<https://acleddata.com/2021/05/03/cow-protection-legislation-and-vigilante-violence-in-india/>

¹⁷ Read more here- <https://time.com/6692447/india-uniform-civil-code-bill/>

¹⁸ Unlawful Activities Prevention Act

¹⁹ Read more about this here <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-67980484>

Indian democracy has taken a hit in its standings on international democratic indices, especially post 2019. India maintained its standing as a free country according to Freedom House, well into the BJP's first electoral term, on grounds that it represented electoral competition, economic development, massive voter turnout rates, and implementation of rule of law. However, on indices that measure civil liberties like individual autonomy, freedom of expression and belief, right to dissent, associational and organisational rights, etc, India saw a decline (Publication archives). This showed that India lies only as an electoral or illiberal democracy and has no standing as a liberal society in recent years. Not only have international indices declared the country as a partly free nation-state ever since 2020, and have dropped India's ranking even within the "flawed democracy" demarcations, but non governmental organisations too have deemed the country as an unsafe place for people who voice concerns regarding the government and the suppression of civil and liberal rights (Democracy reports). Tudor finds that in labelling all dissent as 'anti-national' or 'unpatriotic', the BJP is able to manipulate and defunct the cornerstones of democracy. Through the pursuit of equating their party as the spokespeople of the Hindu people and of the Hindu nation of India, the Modi government is pursuing the mantra of "if you are not with me, you are anti-national" (Tudor 2018, 125). This allows for "the steady erosion of the important distinction between finding something just politically offensive versus it actually being illegal", in the process compromising democracy (Tudor 2018, 125). With organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch having their offices removed and disbanded from the country, we also see a suppression of civil society, media, voices of public dissent, and other channels of accountability within the country, thus furthering the peril of Indian liberal democracy (Amnesty International, C&SN and HRW accuse Indian government of harassing human rights activists and ngos). This attack on civil and liberal rights comes mainly from the new wave of nationalism prevalent within the country and its subsequent reimagination of Indian society, thus jeopardising democracy.

Populism and its role in shaping Nationalism and Democracy

The relationship between nationalism and democracy often is a tumultuous one, with the nationalism a people subscribe to dictating the kind of regime and governance structure they end up creating and living in. Tudor in her work on the relationship between nationalism and democracy, especially pertaining to the case of India, presents the idea that the shift from historical inclusive nationalism to an ethno-religious model of nationhood and national identity changes what is deemed important within a democracy, thus paving way for democracies to become weak (herein, i.e. India, an already weak or flawed democracy to shift gears into becoming a competitive authoritarian regime). In equating India as a historically Hindu nation, with radical saffronisation of architecture, governmental persona, constitutional changes, education structures and material, as well as permitted public behaviour, "Indian national identity becomes broadly accepted as fundamentally Hindu by the wider public and so, the Indian public becomes more willing to accept scape-goating as legitimated by a 'natural' political order" (Tudor 2018, 124). Myanmar with its high levels of minority discriminations and such be deemed "right" by the majority religious populus, plays as an important example of the path India seems to be taking with outlining its "democracy" through religious fundamentalist lenses (Tudor 2018, 124). If the majority does not mind the gradual erosion of secularism (the word 'secular' was allegedly removed from the Indian

constitution as per opposition members in the parliament who received new copies of said constitution in 2023), civic and liberal rights, and inclusive and just rule of law structures, the government then has no major backlash when reshaping the goals or identity of Indians and Indian democracy. Such are the ways the shift from civic nationalism to one based on religion and ethnicity have impacted Indian society and thereby, democratic governance.

This change also comes with Modi's brand of populism going beyond right wing populist campaign strategies to a redefinition of the populace itself. McDonnell and Cabrera find that the BJP's cultural populist roots go further than being a personal party that is dependent on a popular leader like Modi. The BJP holds immense ideological influence and structural support, making their vision of "the people", "the elites", and "the outsiders" integral to Indian identity and civic structures (McDonnell and Cabrera 2018, 2). Just as Mudde and Kalwasser argue that populism and the restructuring of peoplehood can be both democratising and de-democratising factors depending on regime goals, governance structures, and culture context, we find that a change in identifying the populace is not inherently undemocratic (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 6). Müller finds that democracy intrinsically is confronted by the boundary problem with determining who is a member (part of "the people") and who has a say in such governance (Müller 2016). From this we see that "the people" is an ever changing variable in democracy and so BJP's rhetoric to create a "new Indian populace" is not by itself a danger to democracy. What does make their redefinition of the Indian people insidious to democracy is the *way* such change is occurring. The nature of the process as well as the consequences of changing Indian identity is harmful to democratic regime sustenance and maintenance. The violence and the conscious depreciation of constitutional structures along with the oppressive ingroup-outgroup populist dynamics on the basis of religion and caste, created due to said change, is the issue pertinent to Indian nationalism and thus Indian democracy at present.

In stratifying the Indian people as Hindu patriots who deem the territory as their holy land, the BJP (following Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's Hindutva ideology) has ensured the othering of Muslims, Christians, and Ambedkari Buddhist Dalits who do not fall into this categorisation. Additionally, by making Hindu nationalism and the followership of the ideology as synonymous to Indian patriotism, thereby delegitimizing any other political worldview, the BJP has not only othered minority groups but also made enemies with individuals that do not align with their value system. The INC and other opposition parties have hence become the corrupt and power hungry elites uncaring of Indian democracy and anyone who counteracts the BJP value system, either ideologically or physically, is considered anti-national and therefore an outsider (McDonnell and Cabrera 2018, 2-5).

As detailed above, the BJP has ensured the perversion of the Indian democratic system by curbing freedom of speech, dissent, electoral sanctity, equal and unbiased law and order functions, as well as created space for extreme right radicality to perform itself in society and legal proceedings without checks and balances. The exclusion of minority communities from the supposed national in-group has not only led to societal stigmatisation and communal infighting fanned by political propaganda but has also allowed for law enforcement, judicial, educational, and governmental systems to facilitate oppressive conducts that have altered the very nature of Indian democratic politics. Calling India "a country of particular concern" in its 2023 report, the US Commission on International Religious freedoms points out that despite the secular principles embedded in the Indian

democratic constitution, the BJP led government has “facilitated and supported national and state-level policies that undermine religious freedoms for minority groups” (*International Religious Freedom*). Right wing Hindu nationalist groups have resorted to beating Muslims and Christians, burning down mosques, fanning media hate, banning Hijabs, and even harassing interfaith couples. The violent nature with which the ingroup is being reimagined is now being institutionalised since lawmakers, police officers, supreme court and high court judges, politicians, and news channels not only don't want to stop/control said violence but rather are endorsing it in the name of “true Indian nationalism” (*International Religious Freedom*). By creating a political and ideological hegemony, the BJP has made Hindu nationalism, disregard for liberal democratic proceeding, and rampant anti-minority sentiments, core elements of the new Indian identity they are building. This aggressive course of action whilst reshaping the Indian population to an ‘ideal people’ has led to a severe autocratic descent for the Indian regime.

The violence within the process through which ethno-religious nationalism is overtaking civic nationalism in the country, though scary, is not unexpected or surprising. The implementation of early Indian nationalism post the British Raj was incredibly violent and harsh. Colonial divide and rule policy instilled deep religious divide and a fear of “the other” for both sides. A sense of mistrust between the Hindus and Muslims was fanned by the empire and this allowed for the division of the subcontinent based on religion as a precursor to independence. The intense and gruesome nature of Partition and other pre-independence brutalities rooted in the intensified importance of communal identities within the subcontinent were reasons why there was a desperate need for secular, civic nationalism. The growing dominance of Hindu nationalistic ideals and groups as talks for an independent India gained ground, led to increased fear within the Muslim population and leaders about the subjugation of their rights under Hindu majority rule. This birthed the idea of Pakistan, furthering deep set enmity, animosity, and jealousy²⁰. The INC in recognising the dangers of ethno-nationalism in promoting a pseudo civil war ensured that India did not sway from its civic nationalist stance even when pressured by other political agendas. From this we see that the emergence of any nationalist sentiment, be it religious, ethnic, or even constitutional, follows a path of resistance and barbarity, especially in a country with multi-polarised identities. In curbing the prolonged violence between different ideological groups, the INC legalised its brand of secular, civic nationalism making anti-violent, tolerant democracy a part of Indian identity.

From communal distrust, intermittent skirmishes, persistent India vs Pakistan sentiments (playing substitute for the apparent Hindu vs Muslim sentiments), to even boiling rage over Muslims having ‘too much of a say’ in a Hindu dominant country, are all realities that have existed from day one of India's inception. Even during moments of strong liberalism and democratic values under the tenure of secular nationalistic governance, an underlying fear and hate for minorities, their spaces, their cultures, and the subsequent distribution of power existed within Indian society. As stated above, the constitutional nationalism introduced by the INC was so well entrenched, that the institutional order protected the populace from public manifestations of such hate without legal, democratic

²⁰ One might not expect jealousy to be a driving force for Hindu nationalism, but the fact that “the Muslims” were to get their own state (though on paper a secular democracy too, Pakistan is well known as a pseudo theocratic state) whilst “the Hindus” had to live in a secular, non majoritarian state that apparently “did not prioritise their wishes”, makes the want to be like the other a very present feeling. It is from this, the call for all Muslims to go to Pakistan if they are not happy with Hindu nationalism as the ruling ideology comes from.

repercussions. Indian inclusive nationalism and its safeguarding of democratic procedures ensured that hate and disregard for life and rights were not allowed a free rampage in the country. However, with Hindutva now being the new radical definition of nationalism as well as Modi's propagation of ethno-nationalism and the subsequent shift in identity due to it, violence and innate hatred cultivated over the years has unleashed itself in full force. Like dormant lava bubbling under the surface, anger, resentment, and deep intolerance towards minority communities stemming from pre-independence generational trauma has now been released through the volcano of BJP's Hindu national rule. While the violence and aggression is not new, the blasé manner in which they are occurring as well as the unregulated, unpunished, unchecked nature of their existence is deeply concerning. The BJP has made it acceptable to deny minority rights, jeopardise free speech, and even call for communal infighting. The permeation of Hindu right wing nationalist ideals regarding the formation of a "true people" and the brutality that comes with creating such definition within the democratic structures of the country is what is leading to severe socio-political and democratic decline.

Conclusion

In a country as diverse, polarised, and as dead set in religious, ethnic, and cultural value systems as India, the need for civic nationalism as a uniting force is extremely high. Trying to define its citizenry based on only one identity of ethno-nationalist Hindutva, the political fabric of the country and its very own identity changes, which in turn reshapes its democratic foundations. Indian democracy is no longer understood through its secular, liberal values and its protection of free speech, dissent, information, and right to faith and personal identity. Moreover, its democracy lies in the bare bones nature of having multiple parties, conducting elections, and being party to neoliberal capitalist economics. In changing nationalistic rhetoric, the BJP has been able to shift democratic rhetoric too.

In creating a "new Indian people" the BJP has moved beyond traditional campaign and marketing strategies to now utilising social media and AI technology. Realising the potential to connect deeply with audiences without third party interference through a digital presence, Modi and his team have spent tons of time, money, and effort into building their online persona. The BJP has ensured that their ideology and branding occupies the biggest space on most prominent social media sites, from Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, Telegram, and even Discord. Sharma in her research analysing Modi's tweets from the 2014 and 2019 elections found that his campaigning strategy mainly focused on attracting people through social media and emphasised nationalism, traditionalism, and economic growth through inward looking neoliberalism. His strategy with regards to generating discourse on social media revolved around self-promotion, attacks on opposition, policy promotion, voter connection, engagement with mainstream media, religious visits, nation building, tributes and homages, and his image abroad (Sharma 2023, 192-200). While there has always been a substantial amount of traditionalistic, ethno-nationalist tones to his (and subsequently his party and party workers') social media presence and language, Modi shifted his stance from a futuristic vision through Hindutva policy for the country to a personalistic, self aggrandising, Hindu rights advocate, making the nature of Hindu nationalism in the country more potent and identity based (Sharma 2023, 197-200). We already see that nationalism and its many types have severe impacts on democracy and democratic society and through the pertinent use of

social media, we know that the BJP has utilised this digital space as a haven for nationalistic discourse and conscious building which in turn has shaped Indian democracy. One then needs to get to the root of how such media is utilised and manipulated to ensure that nationalism thrives on social media and can be weaponized to become a force against liberal democracy.

Indian democracy finds itself at a critical tipping point, with nationalism and its current transitory nature playing a big part in shifting the scales. From stable secular civic nationalism institutionalised by the INC to ensure liberal democratic proceedings within the country to a complete redefinition of populace under the BJP's Hindutva project leading to authoritarian leanings, the country is seeing big shifts in identity formation and protection of its peoples' civic and civil rights. The physical hostility that has also become openly apparent in Modi's India is deeply concerning not only for the strength of democracy but also for the national identity and persona it is creating within the masses. With social media becoming an important method of propagating Hindu nationalism and reimagining Indian society and value systems, it becomes necessary to study these spaces critically. Therefore, the next chapter will look into how different parties are utilising social media and why it is that the BJP is finding great success in imparting their right wing messaging as opposed to other parties and their varying ideologies. This study will then allow us to understand the implications nationalistic discourse on social media has on personal identity and collective national identity formation.

Chapter 2

Parties, Social Media and Nationalism: a self-sustaining relationship

The media has always played a huge role in party politics and campaigning ever since the inception of Indian democracy. Just as print capitalism is thought to be the creator of nationalistic sentiments across Europe, it was rudimentary media outlets that galvanised support for Indian independence²¹. Traditional media also brought together different factions of societies and reigns across the subcontinent to imagine a single Indian national identity founded upon civic principles.

Building on this tradition, the Indian National Congress (INC) then unlocked the potential of the media to spread the ideals of liberal democracy. By increasing avenue of public debate and engagement, acting as a 'watchdog' for abuses of power, redistributing political influence and power²², and ensuring a space where democracy can be embodied, traditional media was able to champion liberal democracy through principles embedded in secular nationalism, something that had become synonymous with India and Indian nationalism for people²³ (Rai 2015, 437-438). Success in institutionalising democracy through appeals to India's civic nationalism can be seen from the resilience of Indian democracy since the country's founding in 1947. Even in the face of events like the Emergency, the unlawful demolition of Babri Masjid, the 1984 Sikh riots, the 1992 Bombay riots, and the 2002 Gujarat riots, not only was descent into authoritarianism avoided, but also absent were divisive nationalistic pandering often seen in ethnically divided countries. In each of these instances, any threats to Indian democracy were combated through public vigour and commitment to maintaining institutional liberal democracy and constitutional safeguarding. And underlying this was the media, which helped to sustain the collective narrative of India as a civic nation-state, defined by its commitment to democratic institutions and processes.

Herein lies the crux of the issue between pre and post 2014 India. Due to the simultaneous shift in Indian nationalism and avenues of media, the rhetoric forming the Indian identity has drastically changed. This in turn is desecrating India's liberal democratic tradition. As seen in the last chapter, the kind of nationalism adopted by a country is key to understanding the regime type and regime values the nation state attaches itself to. India, seeing a 180 tilt from inclusive nationalism to one that enshrines itself in ethno-identification, is thus also seeing an alteration in the kind and strength of its democracy. This change emerged with Modi's campaign for central governance, wherein he branded himself as a cultural populist with aspirations to represent "the people." Key to Modi being a populist is his need to feel as connected with this constituency as possible. The BJP, and Modi himself, realised the importance of social media and digital media spaces in building this personalised connection. By relying on platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube, the BJP was therefore able to reach sections of Indian society with limited access to traditional media as well as those far removed from the spectacle of traditional campaigning events.

²¹ Vernacular papers and satirical infographics or pamphlets going back to the 1820s are credited with fanning the spirit of "Poorna Swaraj" (History of Indian media). Poorna Swaraj is the call for Full Independence within the Indian subcontinent.

²² While early content creation power and engagement with media laid with the elite, it did distribute said power within various factions of elites or social elites who held more sway with varying sections of Indian society, thus enabling more "democratic processes".

²³ The creation of India as a secular, civic state as opposed to theocratic Pakistan helped solidify such sentiment too.

The previous chapter laid out how social media became Modi's main avenue to pursue ethnic nationalism as a form of party promotion. In this chapter, we develop this argument further by examining how political parties themselves have understood this dynamic. How has the BJP rationalised its own social media campaign? How have its political competitors, like the INC and AAP, responded to BJP's rhetoric and actions? By answering these questions, we are able to locate trends in their social media usage and notice that the digital arena has become a haven for right wing ethno-nationalistic discourse and identity building, in turn posing a threat to Indian democracy. The second objective of this chapter is to understand why the BJP has had such success in utilising social media compared to its opponents. We highlight three main factors: the inherent nature of social media and its algorithms, the manipulation of governmental power to boost its rhetoric, and its large financial funding. From this we can conclude that ethno-nationalist, religious content that can often be polarising when funded and backed by legal systems, becomes very difficult to combat or delegitimize. The changing definition of Indian nationalism happening in real time on social media due to the misguided use of political elites puts Indian democracy and the very foundation of an Indian identity in peril.

The Puzzle of Social Media and its usage by Competing Parties

With social media taking over the political arena and redefining the ways governments, parties, leaders, and affiliated volunteers interact with their electorate, it becomes imperative to see how different parties understand and make avail of the digital platforms. Through the interviews conducted with leaders of the BJP, INC, and AAP, certain trends, objectives, and strategies regarding their conduct on and thoughts about social media were clearly seen. Aside from their differing perspectives regarding what nationalism entails and how social media has influenced/spread nationalism (with BJP leaders praising social media for helping spread the "true nationalism"—i.e., Hindutva—and the INC and AAP leaders raising caution to the perverted nature of nationalism and social media's role in fanning its spread), the ruling party and the opposition parties think about the state of Indian democracy very differently. The BJP leaders find Indian democracy to be thriving and maintaining its strength especially in the wake of social media whereas INC and AAP think Indian democracy has taken a hit and the severe decline in liberal-democratic values is in part an effect of social media.

For the BJP:

In talking with a local Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) for the Mulund area and the Intellectual Cell President (ICP) for Thane district, we learnt that the BJP highly prioritises the use of social media and thinks of it as its primary mode of communication with constituents. As Parikshit Dhume (ICP) states, "One of the biggest reasons why Modi won in 2014 was because of social media but we didn't need it as much in 2019 because his branding was already enough but still our use even in 2019 was sufficient." The leaders believe that social media is working well for their party and in their promotion of party goals, in disseminating information about the policies and efforts being put in by the party, in talking about their morals, in showing how they are doing better than opposition parties (mainly INC) and in hearing back from their followers.

Mihir Kotecha (MLA) finds that it is not algorithms that helps them succeed but the content BJP is able to generate because they are able to "collect data through linking Aadhar cards²⁴ that details what people want and provides them with targeted financial schemes" that enables them to use social media to democracy's benefit. It is important to note here that in 2023 BJP launched a new app called 'Sangathan Reporting and Analysis' or 'SARAL'

²⁴ Aadhaar is the world's largest biometric and demographic system that provides every Indian resident a unique 12 digit identity number. It has received great criticism on the basis of data and security breaches, exclusion of certain citizens, and its overlap with the National Citizen's Registry.

that the national head of their information technology and social media wing Amit Malviya refers to as “an election winning machine” (Dixit 2023). Created to connect on-ground party cadres with national level leaders as well as facilitate the sharing of party programmes, plans, activities, etc. be easily shared down the chain, the app allows for “top party leaders to inquire about information and background of particular office bearers at booth, block and mandal level” (Dixit 2023). It also allows for booth officials to communicate between each other and centralise information about activities happening within the electorate. This app now plays a huge part in collecting voter information and engagement details. The newness of this app has led to very little information being available about it and its implications for the electoral system and party campaigns. But preliminary studies suggest that this granular level data assists the ruling party to create patronage systems that utilise caste, religion, region, etc, as basis for swaying voter turnouts and votes (Jaswal 2024).

In addition to collecting data, Kotecha also calls on BJP's content quality as a key reason behind their success. Comparing their success to two Indian films, he argued that only the film that had actual content as opposed to just “star value”, did well at the box office and that the same principle applies to their content vs their opponents. According to Kotecha, “It is better to talk about relevant things. If it's irrelevant your reach is less and no one cares. Only talk about what your audience wants, that's all.” That is, he finds that the BJP is able to identify and connect with their target audiences, because they think about demographics, language, and what appeals to certain demographics more so than other parties. Elaborating further, Kotecha presented the following characterisation of BJP's campaign material found on social media:

Caste, religion, class, are not things found in BJP content. Rather they focus on things that matter to our country, to our culture. Like the Ram Mandir²⁵. The Mandir has nothing to do with religion or caste. It has to do with our culture and identity as Indians.

A similar argument was expressed by Dhume:

We just talk about schemes and development. Not usually on religion, caste, nationalism all that. That just happens naturally. India is so diverse, you can't really micro-target. We just talk about the problem or the issue that was fixed and if it applies to a Muslim or a Dalit or a Brahmin or a farmer, whoever, then that's how they are targeted.

These party leaders contend that since the hegemony of information has been broken with the advent of social media and with horizontal flows of communication, people are finally able to pick and choose the content they want to engage in. The fact of the matter is that it is their presentation, their slogans, their way of ‘truth telling and myth busting about the INC’ that has engaged people. They claim that their content is why the BJP is doing well and not because they have a specific social media strategy.

Both the BJP leaders believed that Indian democracy is thriving and social media has helped create a space for “true democracy” and for people to actually “see change happen live.” Dhume thinks that social media has allowed for equality in the voices heard in political discourse. An important part of this is that nationalistic discourse is now more convenient to access. He says that “earlier there was only talk of secularism, secularism, secularism. Nationalism was never spoken of. This is because all media was controlled by the leftists. Now finally there is two way communication between left and right and nationalism has a voice.” Both leaders find nationalism to be a deep love for the country wherein the country

²⁵ In 1992, the VHP and allied members of the Sangh Parivar demolished the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya with claims that a historic temple for Lord Rama existed in its place before the Mughal era mosque. One of the biggest agendas for the BJP ever since its inception has been to construct the new Ram Temple which has now become reality in 2024. For further information please read <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/22/babri-mosque-to-ram-temple-a-timeline-from-1528-to-2024>

and its development comes first. Kotecha finds nationalism to be hampered by “western ideology and culture”, and Dhume takes this a step further and identifies “secularism” as the ideology that reduces nationalist and Indian democratic sentiments. These leaders, speaking as representatives of the entire party, argue that social media has been a boon to Indian democracy and to the party’s success by providing a space for nationalism, Indian culture, and equality of voices to exist.

For the INC:

In talking to the INDIA alliance²⁶ General Secretary (GS) for Mulund area and the Vice President (VP) for Mumbai city, we learnt that the INC and its current coalition have only started thinking about social media and its impact on Indian society. This contrasts to the BJP that already had a social media campaign during the 2014 election. While they were able to start their own “social media research teams” and make use of its widespread reach, it is only now in recent years (2022-2023) that they are seeing actual impacts of their social media messaging on Indian society. Charan Singh Sapra, the VP, finds that social media has allowed for messages to percolate all the way to rural areas. This has made the idea of “for the people, by the people”, that is so entrenched within democracies, a reality. The leaders believe that their social media presence has been working well for them in terms of reaching their target electorates and in countering BJP’s ethno-nationalistic rhetoric with one that puts secularism and inclusivity at the forefront. According to Sapra:

Creativity has been really important to their social media game. Earlier we did not have a big team but now we have a very efficient team of content writers, creative designers, influencers, social media developers, etc. This is helping us publicise our events and ideas well and with creative videos and styles that are reaching people.

Bharat Soni (GS), when talking about their media strategy, also points to the fact that the INC social media team keeps going back to the idea of inclusivity and secular Indian identity. They use the tricolours a lot more in their content and they do not believe in the saffronisation²⁷ project carried on by the BJP. Finally, their social media game is also helping redefine the INC and its top leader Rahul Gandhi by showing live information about the work he is doing, the policies the INC are championing, and the party’s well functioning nature, so as to oppose BJP’s narrative of it being a “Pappu”²⁸ led, nepotistic, corrupt party.

While both the leaders see merit in the use of social media, for their party as well as for the state of Indian democracy, they are sceptical about its unchecked and manipulated nature to think it to be a truly democratic and inclusive platform. They allude to the fact that social media seems to be especially manipulated by the BJP and its allies. Calling social media “a double edged sword”, Sapra points to the fact that while this medium does have the power to strengthen democracy, it does have many inherent flaws. The flagrant nature of the medium as well as its potential to be misused by people with personal agendas and propagandas, has the power to spark flames of divisiveness and hatred, changing the very nature of India's political fabric.

In the same vein of dealing with countering perspectives online, especially with regards to their effect on Indian democracy, the leaders are quick to note that such democratic backsliding is persistent because of the changing understanding of nationalism. For Soni, “nationalism is the upholding of the constitution. No discrimination based on

²⁶ The Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, commonly known by its backronym I.N.D.I.A., is an opposition front announced by the leaders of 28 parties to contest the 2024 Lok Sabha elections with the INC being one of the most prominent member parties.

²⁷ Saffronisation or the Saffron wave is considered to be the seeping of right wing Hindu nationalistic policy and agenda within Indian socio-political, educational, entertainment, general lifestyle sectors since saffron has been adopted as the colour of the Hindus.

²⁸ Pappu became the name to mock Rahul Gandhi in the run up to 2014 Lok Sabha elections and this has stuck. Pappu here means a dumb person (Dutta).

religion, caste, class, etc. The doctrine of freedom and inclusion and love for the country should be at the forefront.” Sapra too finds nationalism to be something “intrinsic to all Indians. It is love for the country and for its people. ALL people.” A sense of loss of such nationalism and fear for its new avatar were evident within both interviews. Talking about how majoritarianism is prevalent on social media and that digital platforms have led to great amounts of harassment, misinformation, and bias, the leaders think that while India is most definitely a democracy, it is seeing democratic backsliding and is not a true liberal democracy

For the AAP:

In talking to the Ghatkopar area President (P) and the Joint Secretary (JS) for the Mumbai wing, we learnt that social media has been well received by the party in dispelling disinformation about the work they are doing and what they stand for. The “correct use” of social media is beneficial for the party but it is not the only platform they use since they realise that while connectivity is a big part of social media, action isn’t. They therefore believe in supplementing content with “Facebook or Instagram lives”, “longer videos on youtube”, that showcase organisers and leaders of AAP actually working in the slums, interacting with people in person, and even solving local problems in real time. For AAP the humanistic touch in their hybrid style of campaigning is important to their success. However, they believe their social media platforms are still underdeveloped and not as well equipped as the BJP’s to connect with voters, because they work through a network of volunteers and not paid IT cells. Gandhi (P) explained that:

AAP uses yellow and blue as their staple colours, and so when people see these colours on social media they know it is rooted in our messaging, our values, and what we signify. BJP uses social media like a business and copies big political gestures from around the world to make their party look very celebrated. However, we believe that politics is more like a service and so by making our values pervasive through our branding we are able to learn more about our polity and provide them solutions.

Aditya Paul (JS) finds that social media in general requires a lot of “recall value” and this is something AAP is still working on. Recall value here is a branding or marketing strategy that utilises various performative and advertising techniques to ensure the consumer remembers the product and keeps coming back to it- something the BJP has mastered. They have started branding themselves better through the repeated use of colour, slogans, and images, but can do a lot more to increase their reach. Both Paul and Gandhi state that political “trump cards” or themes like religion, caste, and class are very prevalent on social media today and are being used without any hesitation due to their power in swaying public opinion. However, they claim that AAP, while having found a regional niche in Delhi, have not been able to expand nationally by championing the same causes they did in the city, but have also not been interested in creating a party identity nationally if it means using these divisive topics. So while they have “failed”, they are content with not using undemocratic means in order to gain “success.”

Paul is moreover weary of the effect social media is having on Indian democracy. He points to studies conducted by different agencies (source unknown) that find that social media has permeated within mass society and even within the oppressed class. While this is a win in some ways for democracy, these studies also do show that social media really highlights inequality within India’s stratified society. It is still the privileged and the educated people who have access to the internet and therefore, have a greater say in political dialogues that happen virtually. Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are usually passive consumers of political debate in the media. Gandhi is wary of the sole use of social media for this reason and is glad that “AAP still believes in direct contact with polity through door-to-door outreach.” Both leaders also emphasised the idea that social media has been severely misused. It has “blurred the lines of what is palatable and acceptable”, and is leading

to a wave of “hypernationalism”, which in turn is impacting Indian democracy in a negative way. Representing party sentiment, Paul states that nationalism should be:

Love for your country and people, not for the government, even though that is currently being conflated by new definitions of nationalism presented by the ruling party. Nationalism is supporting the constitution and not just policies one thinks is good. It is nationalistic and patriotic to question your government if it is beneficial for the country, but we are seeing a warped version of nationalism now.

While these leaders are also hesitant in saying that India is no longer a democracy, they clearly allude to the fact that they are seeing democratic backsliding within the country. The flawed use of social media and the subsequent shift in nationalistic rhetoric emboldened by ethno-religious politics is certainly not helping.

Looking at how these different party members view social media’s impact on their political campaigns and on the state of Indian democracy, we see a clear difference in their perceptions. One could then argue that while democracy is still a pillar of Indian society, its form and strength seems to have shifted. However, it is only opposition parties that are seeing such flaws in Indian democracy and finding harm in the unregulated use of social media. The BJP operates under the belief that Indian democracy is thriving and is doing better than what it historically has since there is space for “new voices” to be heard. The BJP finds social media to be an avenue for maintaining and even promoting democracy. These sentiments are not shared by members of the INC and AAP, who spoke of how social media is poisoning the political discourse and harming liberal rights that are supposed to be upheld by India’s democratic constitution. This begs the question, why is it that the current state of social media in India is so conducive to BJP’s messaging and its idea of democracy as opposed to those of other parties.

The Problems of Social Media

The BJP has found immense success on social media with high voter turnouts, large scale engagement with digital campaigns and mass volunteership to join digital cadre ranks. The same cannot be said for opposition parties which, though enjoying some viewership following, fall severely short of BJP numbers. One of the main causes of this discrepancy is the inherent functioning of social media. Its reliance on algorithms to curate feeds leads to the creation of echo chambers as well as the promotion of divisive content. Another reason is BJP’s manipulation of power and the creation of a digital monopoly that allows the party to broadcast its messages louder and wider. And lastly, the business-like nature of social media amplifies BJP’s financial advantage by allowing it to spend immense amounts of money into making sure their presence and content is felt and imbibed by larger audiences than that of their competitors. This section will dive deeper into these three reasons.

The Nature of Social Media

One of the biggest factors behind the prevalence of ethno-nationalism on social media and thus, its impact on society and democracy, is the inherent quality of social media itself. Social media and its content derive legitimacy from the engagement they receive. All platforms work on the premise of ‘larger the engagement, the wider it spreads, in turn generating more engagement’, making this a continuous cycle of consumption and dispersion. The algorithms these platforms work on not only curate individualised feeds based on what a person has previously liked or engaged with, but also ensure that certain narratives or kinds of contents are privileged by making them more accessible through ‘more like this’ features on such apps. Content that spark conversation, reactions, affinities, or even curiosity (be it positive or negative), garner mass attention, and so platforms like Instagram, Facebook, X, YouTube, push them even more onto peoples’ feeds so as to multiply reach

(Metzler and Garcia 2023). The issue then lies in the fact that content that is inherently personalistic, identity based, rooted in polarising or divisive topics, is what garners the most traction, and so gets promoted even further.

In narrowing the kind of discourses available and promoting politically murky content that increase viewership, social media reduces an individual's autonomy over their desired feed or digital environment. With social media predicting user reaction and curating interaction and feed styles based on gathered data, personal choice is almost negligible. This then ensures that audiences are bombarded with the same kind of content, trapping them into an echo chamber, regardless of whether they have consciously chosen so or not (Jungherr et al 2020, 85-87). AAP Mumbai Joint Secretary, Aditya Paul, when talking about the divisive nature of social media echoed these findings:

Opinions considered fringe have become normalised because of how social media is structured in echo chambers which is so different from normal social structures where you have to interact with broader perspectives and people outside your community. Social media narrows mind-sets.

With people becoming entrapped within their own narratives and their beliefs, avenues for true democratic conversation and challenging of such bubbles are limited. This helps further polarise society and diminish chances of intercommunal or inter-ideological harmony.

Jungherr et al find that polarisation and in group/out group signalling often occurs on specific topics. In the US, these topics often range from abortion rights, gun control, healthcare, and immigration which show that division usually occurs on the basis of identity and individual rights (Jungherr et al 2020, 121). In India topics like religion, caste, region, nationalism, linguistics, gender, sex, are highly debated and thus, become points of great contention and thus engagement. Vice President of INC Mumbai, Charan Singh Sapra also points to this in saying:

One negative part is that on social/electronic media, any topic of polarisation is watched more, gets more traction and unfortunately this happens more because of our diversity. Issues which create divisiveness, hindu-muslim, upper caste-lower caste are watched more and the BJP takes advantage of that.

In giving communalism and exclusive identity formation more 'screen time', social media ensures that BJP's strategy of redefining 'the people' and who are 'othered' in the process, gives them success and widespread reach. Content on inclusivity or secularism or even on general policy application that the opposing parties are trying to champion do not gain as much engagement and not put up strong competition in the digital realm. In sum, social media inadvertently contributes to the siloing of information, making it easier for extremist views to spread within online communities. By fostering personalised and divisive online environments, social media becomes fertile ground for ethno-nationalistic discourse to prevail, outcompeting civic nationalistic conversation or even liberal democratic inclusive ideologies.

Power, Law, and Social Media

Another reason behind the success of BJP on social media is that the BJP has ensured a prioritising of its own messaging through the manipulation of laws and rights as the ruling party. The BJP in realising the potential of tapping into this vastly untouched digital electorate market as early as 2010 was able to solidify its roots on various social media platforms, thus enabling a strong digital footprint. As previous BJP IT Cell Head Arvind Gupta puts it, "Everyone talks only about the Internet but its mobile phones that have been the game changer in the Modi campaign." It is through the use of social media that the

current government is able to not only conduct deep and wide spread outreach but also collect as much data as possible about citizens and their political preferences (Abbas and Singh 2014, slide 10). As stated before, BJP's SARAL app has allowed for great amounts of voter data collection which has shaped their campaign strategy mainly for the 2024 elections. In addition to its door to door campaigns to promote this app, BJP now promotes SARAL through its government outreach initiatives as well as Modi's monthly state broadcasted radio show '*Mann Ki Baat*' which helps advertise it greatly (Jaswal 2024). Furthermore, small clips of Modi promoting SARAL and other citizen data collection schemes circulates on social media, further legitimising their presence within electoral politics. Prashant Bhushan, a Public Interest Attorney in the Indian supreme court, states:

This gives the ruling party an unfair advantage. Only the prime minister's office can use the national broadcaster for his talk show, certainly with much more visibility and advantages. As incumbents they use government resources as part of election strategy. (Jaswal 2024)

Through the power of being in government, the BJP has ensured that they have unbound access to "the people" and have spotlighted their messaging to the best of their abilities. With the BJP being the first to realise social media's potential in winning the electoral battlefield and using it like a neoliberal political business, the party has seen more screen time on various social media platforms just due to the longevity of their usage as opposed to other parties that followed in their wake. Additionally, through their repeated and large-scale use of various traditional media outlets to promote and reinforce their social media rhetoric, the party has been able to solidify their digital presence. This helps BJP content creators to better manipulate algorithms, cater to audiences and their likes and dislikes, make informed decisions about what topics to prod, as well as gain knowledge about where their electorate is channelling time and money (Soni 2017).

In addition to the length of their time on social media, the fact that the BJP are the ruling government has made it easier for them to privilege their own messaging. This has mainly happened through the creation, subjugation, or manipulation of laws, as well as by undermining free speech and technology acts embedded within the working of social media companies like Meta, and X²⁹. The BJP has escalated censorship and has pushed for tech giants to comply with Indian IT rules that paint Modi and his fellow leaders in good light. Fearing employee safety and profit margins, companies like X, YouTube, and Meta, have been erasing posts critical of the BJP to ensure they have the loudest and most unchallenged voice in the digital realm of Indian politics. As Mehrotra and Menn find, "Twitter's transparency reports show that 77 accounts were suspended in the country in 2020. In 2021, there were nearly 1,400" (Mehrotra and Menn 2023). Presumably the situation got so bad that X stopped releasing transparency reports starting 2022. Account suspensions mainly involve non-profits, activists, opposition leaders, and political dissenters. The BJP has also been successful in banning documentaries and movies like the BBC film about the 2002 Gujarat riots that is critical of Modi. They have also done this by cutting communication lines on certain websites, platforms, or by even creating Internet blackouts (Kashmir and Manipur are states that have recently seen some of the longest Internet cutoffs in the country's history). Truly the BJP government and its puppeteered social media giants have been able to do it all (Mehrotra and Menn 2023).

As INC leader Bharat Soni puts it:

Sometimes social media is biased, sometimes they reduce the following of one particular political leader, they won't give him a "blue tick". There are often radical

²⁹ All social media companies are bound by principles of protected speech and freedom of expression. While they do not need to comply with the first amendment and can moderate content, they are bound to be unbiased in their moderation, which is not seen in the case of India, with only liberal, left wing speech being censored.

politically motivated posts but social media will sometimes not allow the correct message to flow to the people it is meant for

Leader Charan Singh Sapra too adds:

This is the unfortunate thing, people in power have started controlling the media which is the 4th pillar of democracy, it is a very unfortunate thing. Unfortunate for the democratic system, for the country, especially for our country that is the “biggest democracy”. It is scary. Earlier it was not, earlier governments didn't try to control social media giants. Social media giants have a larger responsibility now especially in India. They have obviously influenced elections in the US but with a sensitive country like India they need to be more responsible and need to work independently.

The leaders also pointed to the fact that Amit Shah, the Home Minister of Affairs in India, has threatened employees and leaders of X in a very direct manner. In creating the hostage provision, the BJP has made possible a situation of complete submission by social media companies, which in turn has made BJP's messaging and positioning on social media untouchable (Mehrotra and Menn 2023).

Under BJP rule, the country's IT law regulations have changed drastically. This has been done so as to not raise alarms regarding how the party has incorporated AI as an important tool for their electoral campaigning. The Freedom on the Net report by Freedom House has raised concerns over the vast use of AI to censor and spread misinformation by the Indian government, thus lowering India's digital freedom rankings. The report states:

Modi and his party have incorporated censorship, including the use of automated systems, into the country's legal framework. The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules require large social media platforms to use AI-based moderation tools for broadly defined types of content – such as speech that could undermine public order, decency, morality, or the country's sovereignty, integrity, and security, or content that officials had previously ordered removed. Of the five censorship methods – Internet connectivity restrictions, blocks on social media platforms, blocks on political, social, religious websites, blocks on VPNs, and forced removal of content, India engaged in all of them except one (*Modi Govt's censorship regime creating uneven playing field ahead of 2024 election: Freedom House*).

Furthermore, what the BJP has very cleverly also done is made themselves synonymous with India and Indian nationalism itself, therefore making any criticism of the party or government an attack on the country itself. Under new draconian UAPA law that books people on terror precedents for attacks against the country, journalists, activists, students, and nonprofits, have been arrested or shut down, citing social media criticism or “anti-national activity” (*India: Arrests, raids target critics of Government*). More than just social media, the BJP has laid siege on all media platforms, ensuring there is very little avenue for other perspectives and other forms of nationalism to live. From radio, tv, newspapers, social media, internet websites, etc, all areas of information, connectivity, and conversation have been usurped by the BJP eliminating any space for competition. This had led to the Modi government's brand of nationalism to thrive.

Finances and Social Media

A third reason behind why social media is ideal ground for BJP's Hindutva propagation, is its capitalist business model. Interestingly, social media is one of the most cost effective ways of disseminating information, since anybody, sitting anywhere, can contribute to discourse politically or socially. However, it is private funding and paid

sponsorships that make certain content more visible, more pronounced, and more “legitimate.” Social media platforms gain their revenue through ads and content boosting payment methods, which ensure that the organisations/peoples paying more have their voice heard more. The higher a page’s sponsorship, the greater its reach and audience interaction, which further spreads the content due to social media’s personalised algorithms. This is important, since the BJP is one of the top spenders on political ads in digital spaces with an input of over 200 million INR (Chaturvedi 2019). The BJP has garnered great backing from the economic elite within the country by playing clientelist games with the rich. Building ties with the Adani group, and the Reliance group, the Modi government has been able to make itself one of the richest parties in contemporary Indian history, and this rise in finances is not without barter. The BJP has actively protected Adani from scam charges in the Hindenburg report, given his company contracts for all new airports to be built in the country, contracted him for mining and electrical deals all the way from SriLanka to Australia, and more. The Reliance group has been contracted for all digitisation deals that Modi has promoted. This had led to the Adani’s and the Ambani’s not only being amongst the economic 1 percent in the world, but also being staunch Modi supporters who funnel immense money in his campaigns and social media presence. In 2022, The Reporters Collective in analysing political ads on social media found that a lot of false news reports and ads, standing in support of the BJP were being funded by a company called NEWJ, whose parent company turned out to be Jio Reliance inc. Facebook, while cracking down on these surrogate ads, heavily condemned and erased opposition led campaigns but left companies like NEWJ alone (Sambhav and Ranganathan 2022). This shows how economic strength translates into social media strength and high visibility. It also shows that money trumps fact or truth. Since the highest bidder is able to make their content more accessible without any verification, severe misinformation and lies are easily spread. In having the rich political parties control social media, there are little to no checks and balances to the kind of content and speech they endorse, which in itself has severe implications for democracy.

Another key difference between the BJP and parties like the INC and AAP are in that the BJP with its immense funding is able to pay people to act as content creators, as followers who engage with content to increase spread, and even as social media agitators who act as doxxers, or trad junkies on the net (Shih 2023). With their budget, the BJP is able to have IT Cells even at the municipality level let alone city, state, and national levels (Arnimesh 2020). The BJP is also able to hire or “collaborate” with social media influencers who already have large followings on social media. These influencers either agree to interview BJP leaders, make content about the development they see because of BJP policy, make jokes about Rahul Gandhi or Arvind Kejriwal (opposition leaders who have now become memes due to BJP content creation), etc, and all of this is done since the BJP has enough financial backing to “buy loyalty” on the internet (Kaur 2023). On the other hand, we see opposition parties struggle to keep up with the high influx of content being generated by BJP workers since the INC and AAP work mainly on volunteer services or just a few centralised IT departments. Aditya Paul of the AAP says, “AAP has one of the best teams of volunteers but BJP IT work is not voluntary and so they have more of a chokehold.” Bharat Soni of the INC says:

In India, Congress is broadcasting its message through social media. All the messages are truthful. It’s not spreading fake news and ‘what-about-ries.’ We are not into that. The BJP, and its IT wing, have paid followers whereas Congress is not able to pay its followers. Their IT cell is paid, and they have paid subscribers. On salary they have youngsters working in their IT cell- even if they don’t know if news is fake or true. They are spreading such fakery. This is why the common man is confused. The BJP has gotten a big following because of this but Congress is unable to pay subscribers or pay influencers.

By making political campaigning a professional business that is quite costly, the BJP has ensured that it carpets over all effort by opposing parties, making its voice and presence on social media the loudest and most pronounced. Social media has shown itself to not be a democratic force but more so a plutocracy, and the BJP has taken advantage of this very fact to boost its ethno-nationalistic campaign.

Conclusion

The very anatomy of Indian politics and society has transformed drastically since the evolution of media and its usage. The BJP has renewed the fervour for Hindu nationalism within the country and made the creation of a Hindu nation as a major part of its political agenda as the ruling party. Its use of social media has only enhanced this agenda and its success. From the trends seen within social media usage of the 3 different political parties and the ways the BJP has manipulated social media to prioritise its cause, we see that social media, though considered a democratising force by some, has instead become an avenue of autocratic ideology and ethno-nationalist identity building, thus jeopardising Indian liberal democratic values.

The BJP has been able to outshine all other parties with its online presence through their language and rhetoric that sustains itself on social media, their governmental hegemony, as well as their massive endowment. Even though opposition parties have tried to act as forces of accountability for the ruling party and have even built their own brand on digital media, they have been overshadowed by the mass engagement BJP receives. It is incredibly hard to combat social media discourse when its divisive content is being funded and when the government is censoring any critical voices. The misuse of social media by political elites has only intensified this decline in democracy. They have done this by relentlessly flooding people's social media with the overriding idea of prioritising and equating religious nationalism with Indian nationalism, thus changing the way people view their national identity.

Social media has played a major role in furthering nationalistic discourse within India and thus, its implications on society and democratic culture must be studied in greater detail. In order to understand the reason behind certain messaging (herein BJP's ethno-nationalistic, divisive content) finding immense success with regards to engagement and influence, we must examine social media content through a theatrical lens. The performance or spectacle of nationalism on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, X, and WhatsApp have made it more conducive, attractive, and accessible for masses to buy into and build their Indian identity around. A theatrical lens allows us to dig deeper into the reasons why certain political claims (usually involving Hindu nationalism) gain legitimacy and deeper audience participation. It also provides us an opportunity to look into the notions of emotionality, culture, and personalism that impact societal behaviour greatly but are often overlooked in political study. Therefore, the next chapters will look into how nationalism is being "performed" on social media to understand its implications on identity and on "being Indian".

Chapter 3

The Theatrics of Nationalism on Social Media

Theatre and theatrics have historically played a great role in politics and political workings around the world, with spectacle and the creation of an 'act' being integral to regime performance and conduct, both domestically and internationally. While political theatre in the form of forum theatre, interactive theatre, street theatre, and even non-fictional theatre, have been studied for their role in shaping political outcome and their societal influence, theatrical politics as a field has not fully been embraced and dissected. Pioneers in the field of performative politics, like Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, and more, find that the intersection of identity and action is where power lies and it is in the semantics of power that politics and governance is orchestrated (Disch 1999). If power is inherently a cultural enactment and if politics at its root is an interplay of said power, we can assume that all politics is theatrical. The way political actors exude power and their expectations behind how their projection of power is received stem from a place of performance and performance theory. Political actors are immensely conscious of how they look, how they are perceived, how they increase their radius of influence, as well as how they interact with other actors. This creation and protection of self image is like getting into character and putting on a theatrical performance. There is a fictional facade or garb that is drawn to ensure that their politics is not only well received but hungrily devoured by the audience they are catering to. A study of performativity and theatricality is therefore essential to the study of politics if one is to analyse the mechanism behind the making and imbibing of political claims.

While all governance has elements of theatricality and 'showmanship', it is often authoritarian or semi authoritarian regimes that rely heavily on fiction making to make their political presence more palatable not only for their 'subjects' but also for the international arena. Theorists have often found that performances within politics are used to either convince, discipline, or encourage ambivalence within their audiences. Political actors do this mainly through symbols, rituals, focalised spectacles, and ceremonial "habitus", with each form of performance leading to a different aforementioned result within their subjects (Koch 2018, Bourdieu 1977). From the theatre state in pre-colonial Bali, the Japanese monarchy in the Meiji era, Nazi run Germany, communist Soviet bloc, to current day Trump's USA, Putin's Russia and Jinping's China, all major autocratic or autocratic leaning regimes have utilised the principles of theatre as part of their governance styles (Maliauskaya 2022).

Regardless of the regime type, in addition to creating a fictional account of their values, their strength, and their credibility as a 'good' government, performance is also used by states to get their citizenry to either agree to, be passive to, or even just play along, adding a whole new dimension to the theatre. Lisa Wedeen in analysing ex Syrian president Hafez al-Assad finds that not only does he put on a performance of fine governance, but his "cult" or his citizenry play along- living in the performative zone of "as if"- as if truly revering him, as if believing him, as if liking him (Wedeen 2015). This participation in the theatre by the audience acts as both a sign of ambivalence and submission to the existing power dynamic but also as a sign of approval and willing compliance by certain sections of said audience. In a similar vein, Drixler and Matsuzaki study audience participation in Meiji Japan through the lens of facade fiction, with the citizenry and the government collaborating to preserve

democratic status and government influence within the populace whilst also ensuring cultural autonomy of their citizens (Drixler and Matsuzaki). Through all of this we see that performance lies as a conversation within most political systems with the state and its subjects influencing each other through a dramatisation of their reality.

A major reason why performance becomes the main language of political communication between state and citizen is the ease with which it allows for meaning making without explicit explanation. Shirin Rai finds that theatre allows for great specificity in meaning making through its socio-political contexts; either challenging or amplifying dominant narrative (Rai 2015, 1180). It “bridges public and private life” and this ensures that the separation between metaphorized ‘church and state’ so often fantasised about, is nothing but delusional. It creates political traction that makes the personal *political*. Jeffrey Alexander too, in his years of work studying performance and politics as an avenue of cultural sociology, finds that as a human society we are still highly concerned with the idea of meaning and hence theatre and social drama remains at the centre of our socio-political experience (Alexander 2012). Acting allows for the creation of feeling which in turn enables audiences to find meaning in said emotion. This cycle highlights the importance of theatre in meaning making objectives for the state. In accordance with so, this thesis hopes to use the very premise of theatre as a creative tool that affects emotion in order to envision political change. Political change in the context of India seeing a change in the way nationalism is understood and felt by the people and their relationship to their Indian identity. These next chapters will argue that political claims rooted in culture and personalistic themes enable greater emotionality, thus legitimising themselves and becoming responsible for the shift in individual identity-extrapolating to national identity. The best way to understand the way these claims are put forth, is through theatrical and performative lenses.

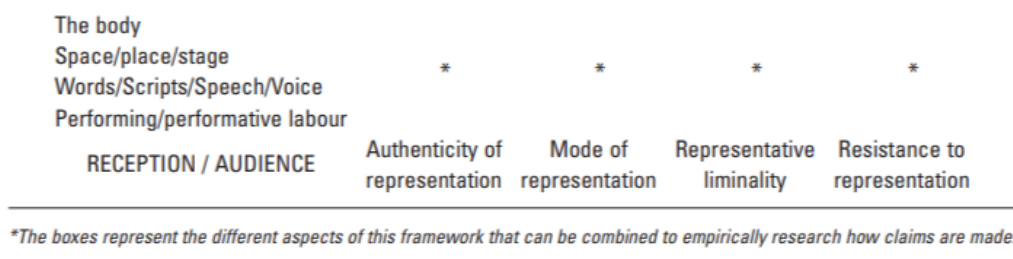
The past chapters have shown how heavily reliant the BJP and its affiliate organisations are on social media to carry forward their ethno-nationalistic messaging and ideations. Political performance up until now has been studied in the three dimensional world, with processions, rituals, ceremonies, spectacles taking up space in the real world. What the BJP has been able to hone in on is the creation of facade and performativity in the digital realm. The widespread and instantaneous reach of social media has enabled the furtherance of their political performance and has also penetrated masses that would not ordinarily be part of the in person performance. By virtue of its user interface and design, social cyber spaces ride on images, short and long videos, colour pallets, short snappy text or catchy text, music, and even audience interaction to sell content. Algorithms pick up on repeated words, colours, audios, faces, and emojis to selectively amplify that which not only ensures they are noticed by audiences but also become significant as political and social rhetoric. Through this we see that the digital realm mainly comprises of well curated messaging that often depend on art and performance to give them meaning and logic. With BJP’s increased use of social media and the platforms’ ability to make the messaging and content personal to heighten its dramatic effect, the need to study social media as a case of political theatre is imperative.

What social media has also given rise to is the phenomenon of underground messaging to counteract surface level official messaging-allowing for two realities to exist simultaneously. The BJP has played into this very niche with their branding existing on two planes; one an official campaign that drives their outward rhetoric of a peoples’ party, and an

unofficial radical wing that drives their subliminal ideology of a right wing ethno-nationalist party. Through a loose use of Rai's Political Performance Framework (PPF) with additions from the general field of theatre and theoretical dramaturgy, this chapter will analyse this very phenomenon by looking at the possible meanings and theatrical symbolisms that exist within BJPs new campaign song released before the 2024 Lok Sabha elections³⁰ and how they contrast with the hidden transcript of their values brought forth in a randomly selected assortment of memes, songs, message chains, group chats, opinion posts, and more by affiliate organisations, members of the party, and even paid social media actors.

The Political Performance Framework 2.0

As a pioneer of the performative politics field, Shirin Rai lays ground for a new way of analysing performance and the ways it aids in claim making and receiving for the actors and audiences respectively. The PPF works on two axes to determine effectiveness- one that studies the elements of performance and the other that looks into the reception of said performance. On axis A, Rai highlights the importance of studying 'the bodies in/on view', 'the staging', and the 'auditory power of words/scripts/speech/voice', and the 'performative labour' put in. On axis B, Rai brings up concepts like 'authenticity of representation', 'mode of representation', 'representative liminality', and 'resistance to representation' to analyse the way axis A impacts the audience and this then determines the effectivity of the full performance (See fig 0.5) (Rai 2015, 1189). Political performances that are thought to be effective in turn gain legitimacy as political claims. Rai uses each element individually to test against axis B to highlight the meanings being made for the audience to respond to (Rai 2015). It is then on the audience to determine if the meaning they generated from the performance was worth imbibing as a political claim that motivates loyalty or not. Instead of using the framework as intended via the graphing, this thesis chapter will look further into the theatre behind the elements of 'language', 'body', and 'stage' and how they in combination play on the audience's perception of things. Specifically the question being asked is "what styles of dramaturgy are being employed by the BJP to create a sense of authenticity and representation via theatrical components like directing, acting, writing, and scenic designing?"



(Fig 0.5: Rai's model of Performative Claim making in Democratic Systems)³¹

For this thesis, one identifies three theatrical components that are then further broken down according to the theatrical department (eg. directing, playwriting, stage managing, etc) they lie in.

³⁰ The song was first presented to the public on X via a tweet and then was simultaneously uploaded on all media platforms like Youtube, Instagram, and Facebook. Multiple news channels reported on the release of this campaign video and published the song in their online articles too making it highly public and well advertised.

³¹ Table 1 in Rai's paper, pg 1189

1. The Language: Herein one looks at any and all verbiage either spoken or written. That can be all texts, speeches, voice overs, music lyrics, and even graphs. Words are incredibly important to understanding the intention of the political actor. In addition to learning about the direct and on surface meaning of the word, here we also look at other contextual usage of language, and what it means to different people. Another aspect of language is the way it is communicated. Aside from the medium, which in itself gives us more information into the performance, the inflections that occur, the words that are stressed, the pauses that are taken, the accent/dialect used, as well as the tonality of the text (this is not just for auditory based texts but tonality is also present within written pieces through the use of italics, bolding, use of text formats and styles, and more), are all important markers.
2. The Body: This component looks mainly at the who, how, what, of the theatrical process. Studying who is in the performance (person or thing), what are they doing (the act), and how are they doing it (this is not the symbolic *how* but more so the quality of the act). The shape, size, race, class, caste, height, physical ability, sex, sexuality, and costume of the body in performance is crucial to understanding the said performance and its implications on reception. We also study gestures, expressions, bloopers, the use or presence of inanimate objects, and even movement or stillness (walking, driving, sitting, standing, flying, and more), to delve deeper into how the performance is embodied. Each actor and their portrayal of self indicate vastly different narratives and therefore, the specificity of person and their chosen personality is important to the way audiences receive and understand political messages and claims.
3. The Stage: Rai points out that a body does not perform in a vacuum but does so in a particular space during a particular time (Rai 2015, 1183). It is surrounded by either a fictionalised or existing world used as a grounding factor. Studying the stage focuses on the where, when, and the how (here the *how* is specific to the world or environment created for the performance to exist in) of the theatre. Location and time of the staging as well as of the performance opening/release (with regards to social media, which platform was the performance put out on, in which format, and on what date/time) gives us insight into the meanings being articulated through the drama and what potential impacts it can have on different audiences. With analysing the stage we also look at the decor of the world the performance lives in- the colours, the set design, the spacing, the use of lights, the aesthetics and more, to know more about the context or circumstances of the performance in order to understand its core meaning. Staging also is highly dependent on the crew and work processes backstage. People and activities that create said environment of the performance, ought to be studied not only because they play an important role in the creation of theatre but also because they remain invisible yet have a large say in the messaging conveyed via the performance.

Rai's work predominantly focuses on in person political performances. The advent of social media and the increased dependence on digital presences to campaign for political power makes it an important avenue to study through such a theatrical focus. The way performance is created and understood online is vastly different to on-ground realities since

political rhetoric is not only created by the elite or those in power but also by the people. Anyone, sitting anywhere can add to political discourse online and that then adds another dynamic to the performance being presented. The BJP uses this to its advantage with recruiting lakhs of people to either generate new content that acts like a subset to their campaign, showcasing radical performances rooted in BJP affiliate ideologies under pseudonyms, or even just boosting reach of said performance. Theatre on social cyber spaces often is more malignant, durable, difficult to track down, and even more convincing due to its personalised nature. This will be further explored in the next chapter. For now, one must focus on the varied narratives the BJP is able to perform on digital platforms and what possible meanings arise from them.

Implementing PPF 2.0 on cases

This section will dive deeper into ways the BJP uses theatre to create different rhetorics about their objectives and ideologies on social cyber spaces. Using the outline of PPF 2.0, we look at how language, body, and stage, as performative elements, are used in radically varied ways in BJP's official and unofficial digital presences that are made available for the audience in tandem. This is done so as to create an illusion of a strong democracy whilst embedding the country further into right wing Hindutva paradigms. To examine the official rhetoric of nationalism and party ideology, we use BJP's newly released 2024 campaign song video "Phir Aayega Modi" or "Modi Will Return" (linked in the media appendix). This will be compared to BJP unofficial rhetoric through music produced in the Hindutva Pop genre with one key song being "Har Ghar Bhagva Chhayega" or "Every House will be painted Saffron" by Laxmi Dubey, a self proclaimed Hindutva Vaadi, Hindu rights champion, and massive supporter of the BJP³². This will also be supplemented by other found content either endorsed by the BJP or created by affiliated groups on digital social spaces to see if the performance and the meanings they incite are similar or divergent. Showing the party's official and unofficial narratives side by side allows for a greater understanding of how they work in tandem to create a holistic image of themselves. This close study of performance rhetoric and ways of meaning making will allow for a bigger understanding of political processes and changes in mass national sentiment.

Setting the Stage (in reality and in content):

On the 28th of December, 2023, the official BJP handle on X (@BJP4India) posted a tweet with the music video (linked to YouTube) to the new campaign song along with a caption that recited the lyrics of the first 4 sentences of the song. This tweet comes a few days before the 2024 Lok Sabha (House of Commons) elections as well as the inauguration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya³³. It then slowly appeared on all their other official "blue tick" pages on Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram. With this being their first major campaign release of the 2024 election season, it was also picked up by all major news channels to broadcast on their websites as well as prime time TV shows as a new headline. The video has over 12K

³² This song was played at multiple BJP election rallies, at events led by BJP ministers and members, and was also promoted during the many festivities that were taking place prior to and during the inauguration of the Ram Temple in early 2024.

³³ The Ram Temple inauguration was a highly contested event, due to its violent and anti-Muslim history. The VHP and RSS in affiliation with the BJP demolished the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya under claims that a Ram Temple used to exist in its place before the Mughal rule. The unlawful breaking of religious property and the subsequent communal riots that emerged due to it make the site an important source of contention within the Hindu and Muslim populations. The BJP promised the creation of the Ram Temple as their commitment to the "Indian people" in their 2014 election mandate and finally were able to get it built and have it inaugurated on the 22nd of Jan, 2024 with the day being celebrated as a national holiday.

views in less than three months only on YouTube, and that has not even been their primary mode of advertisement. When thinking about the timeline of the staging, the BJP is able to play on people's emotions to create symbolic meaning and significance. By combining a highlight reel of achievements to campaign for a 3rd term in office alongside the celebrations and 'happening' of one of the achievements, makes the audience believe in the BJP's power to make all their promises a reality. It not only positions them as a well prepared, broadly casted organisation but also a goal oriented one, with a high success rate. The BJP also plays into its well established control over media platforms and its prowess with tackling multiple digital avenues simultaneously; which in turn not only allows them to have an incredibly broad reach but also makes their use of media an act that needs to be well documented and reported on, further giving their tweets and their campaigns legitimacy.

Within, the video places itself in the present moment India is experiencing, with sets ranging from temples, schools, hospitals, villages, major transport hubs, airports, conferences, farms, campaign rallies, to even the parliament. There is a coming together of domestic and international sets, rural and urban sets, art and tech sets, educational, employment, and religious sets, as well as north/south/east/west regional sets. While the video is not set in one place, the use of multiple shots from varied settings that are all key to the BJP's 2023 portfolio as a national party and a ruling one at that, makes a statement when thought of as important backdrops the party thought necessary to highlight. With their sets seeing such quick change and such diversity, one can assume they are trying to prove the vastness of BJP's network and range. By staging the video in locations that are either diametrically opposite or that exemplify India's multifacetedness, the BJP is able to act like an uniting force for the country. It presents itself as representative for *all* of India, that they work for *all* of India. Their use of sets that are familiar to groups of dissimilar status be it class, caste, region, and more, points to their penetration of Indian society beyond the usual parameters and also makes them seem conscientious of the audiences they are catering to. By seeing a glimpse of their reality or of stages most present in their lives, the BJP is able to incentivise larger audiences to feel connected and affiliated with them.

When one breaks down the many sets used in the music video, one notices that most if not all sets are based on policies and investments made in the last 10 years' all the things that the BJP has established and that they consider "successes." Staging the video at ISRO, at international conferences, at new highways and train tracks, near high tech medical facilities, international sporting events, and even well reputed educational institutes, the BJP points to ideas of progress, forwardness, and futurity. Their showcase of Modi and the BJP residing at these stages helps equate the party to ideas of economic and social development. When the set is dedicated to highlighting 'wins', we understand it to be synonymous to improvement, to advancement, to welfare, to excellence- in areas that range from religion, technology, defence, culture, art, international status and even social cohesion. BJP through the staging of the video presents itself as an avenue of opportunity and hope for 'the people', incentivising their vote.

The designs for the sets see a repetition of the colour orange as well as of crowds in different locations, which makes an association between orange and popularity. Orange then becomes the colour of the people. With orange very publicly being BJP's main party colour

and also being a colour used to personify Hindu Bhakti³⁴ and Hindutva Vaadi³⁵ ideals, its use in conjunction with public masses symbolises an acceptance of Hindutva as a national belief and as something that is celebrated by many. It solidifies the assumption that Indians are Hindutva Vaadis that champion BJP as their true leaders.

Another important aspect of the staging of the 'Phir Aayega Modi' video is the amalgamation of the shots used to create the performance. From live clips of events, filmed sets, to animations, the video uses different methods of staging to show real time tangible moments from BJP's electoral term, effects of intangible policies, and 'effective' branding of their promoted schemes. Not only does the use of multimodal staging reinforce their messaging through aesthetic and visual appeal but it also points to the idea that the BJP can satisfy citizen needs through multitude of ways as well as highlight their digital campaigning strength to be able to achieve this feat. Additionally, the creation of a 10min plus video with a well crafted song relies on many members of the BJP IT cell. Leading an uncredited crew, Premananda, a singer/songwriter and composer from Odisha, is able to make a cohesive statement that brings song and video into an holistics performance. The multiplicity of shots, the diversity of locations, as well as the length of the video in addition to its use of music, beat, and entertainment value, shines light on the fact that this is the work of a big team. The grandiosity of BJP's performance through such a video allows viewers to think that the party's campaign is not only a big deal but is also something that many people believe in and work to make a reality. The larger the performance, the larger the crew, and thus, larger the personification of loyalty towards the BJP.

Loyalty is a bedrock within the BJP's unofficial messaging with regards to its creation and the adoration it receives. "Bhakti"³⁶ from all over the country have been taking to social media to produce pro-Modi content that not only champions him as their leader but also ensures that the government's subliminal messaging of making India a Hindu Rashtra is not left unseen or unnoticed. The rise of Hindutva pop has been part of this very phenomenon. With music becoming one of BJP's biggest tools to grab audience attention, affiliated persons who have dedicated their lives to championing the party have now started releasing songs that make clear Hindutva agenda, showing the real underbelly of BJP's Hindu nationalism. The analysis of such unofficial rhetoric paves way for a better understanding of how democracy is deteriorating and national identity is shifting under BJP performativity.

Taking to YouTube, former local reporter turned God fearing, BJP loving woman, Laxmi Dube released her hit single "Har Ghar Bhagva Chhayega" in 2018. This song has become immensely popular both online and offline, with over 75 Mil views in 5 years. The song came right before the BJP ran for a second term in 2019, with Hindutva Pop being a big avenue for non official party promotion and ideology spreading. The song came at an important time, not just because it ran as the party's unofficial 2019 election campaign song but also because it helped highlight the BJP's supposed plus points for a Hindu audience. Modi was hoping to divert audience attention from disaster that was the 2016 demonetisation effort, by harping on the promises of repealing Article 370 and building the Ram Temple, whilst also subliminally ensuring audiences know of his commitment to making India a Hindu state that turns a blind eye towards the rise in hate crime numbers in

³⁴ A devotion to Hinduism

³⁵ A Hindu nationalist

³⁶ Devotee

the country. While the BJP could not promote the subliminal messages outwardly without losing credibility as a democratic party domestically and nationally, it ensures its central ideology and messaging is spread through unauthorised channels of affiliates and loyal members of the ingroup. Dube aids the dispersion of Modi's underlying rhetoric through catchy tunes that serve as a reminder of the true ideology citizens would be voting for if they brought Modi back for a second term. The song held great relevance as a performance then and continues to do so. Dube and her team knew exactly when to release a song that praises Modi in ways that show audiences his true nature of right wing Hindutva fanaticism and thus, they play into this act as a coercive technique for audiences. The willingness with which such performance is created and consumed shows that the unofficial rhetoric of the BJP is often why it is reelected, presenting a great cause of concern for Indian identity and democracy.

Intrinsically, the video has no identifiable content or set. It tries to create a picture that represents a day in any city within the country. However, the use of massive crowds, rallies, hundreds of thousands of saffron flags, cultural dancing troops, temples, and religious processions provides insight into the kind of India they ("Bhakts") are wanting to see. Animated images of Hindu Gods and floating Sanskrit/Devanagari lettering are also brought in to paint a holistic image of the imagined or wanted reality existing within BJP loyalists. The overwhelming use of saffron to decorate the set implies the saffronisation of society and the penetrative nature of the BJP Hindutva agenda. As opposed to success exemplified in the official campaign video, success here is defined by the large saffron crowds present on the streets. The popular rhetoric is declared to be "Bhagva". This mass saffronisation project also indicates that there is no space for any other agenda, any other opinion or identity that is not aligned within the Hindu sphere within the country. With the unofficial messaging being dramatised there is no subtlety. The use of religion, upper caste Hindu connotations and colours, stills of Kashmir through saffronized lenses, saffron flags at the Siachen glaciers, and even saffron on animated battlefields, allows for audiences to think about the power of the "Bhagva Dhvaj"³⁷, and performs as a backdrop for what is assumed to be India renewed and cleansed. To symbolise India as a Hindu state, all the video does is make the connection between saffron, BJP, and the desire for the party's continued rule.

Sets are also used in memes, cartoons, broadcasted messages, and other forms of quick sharing media content. In fig 6, WhatsApp works as the stage. That already tells us that the performance is not only unverifiable but also that no one can be held accountable for it. Additionally with such staging, the messaging of the performance becomes inherently personal and more effective since people are consuming the drama on their own devices, and it is personally shared with them. There is a connection that is created between the audience member and the performance. On top of this bigger set that is generated, the message itself has a stage with a modified map of South Asia, that further intensifies the Indo-Pak divide through falsified information. The yellow vs green use for India and Pakistan respectively also adds to the religious division that is being enhanced through this staging. Even by studying the theatre of the staging by itself, we see that the message of religion and the anger over Pakistan being a "Muslim state" while India became a "secular state" is crucial to understanding the BJP's appeal and larger rhetoric.

³⁷ Saffron flag

In further playing into the anti-Islam rhetoric the BJP pushes in its unofficial programming, the regime has been drawing parallels to the October 7th, 2023 Hamas attack in Israel to imagined attacks on Hindu identity due to growing Muslim populations. Modi is seen befriending Netanyahu, sending arms into Israel, and sending labourers to the country. His support for Israel is being read as a collaboration between Hindutva and Zionist projects, with intrinsic Islamophobic narratives. The set created in the WhatsApp broadcast message in fig 5 becomes another pertinent message for the audience within the context of the current “war on Gaza” by Israel³⁸. By presenting the theatre from the Israeli perspective with the audience seeing the inside of an Israeli household’s living room, makes the viewer more empathetic to their plight. With the stage being a current familial home in Israel feeds into the BJP’s idea of trying to get Indians (especially Hindus) to identify with “war inflicted Israelis”. The last year has seen the BJP actively stay neutral or stand in support of Netanyahu’s government and their actions in Palestine (which is vastly different from the historical stance that India took under INC rule towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict wherein India recognised Palestine as a state and condemned Israel). Therefore, such staging shows the audience that the BJP not only is actively changing national stances on human rights issues but is also playing into Islamophobic narratives. The distaste for Muslims stemming from Hindutva ideology becomes breeding ground for affiliation and empathy with Zionism. Such theatre sheds light on the BJP’s inherent religious, ethno-nationalist foundations and desire to homogenise India as a Hindu state.

Crafting the Words:

Once we have the stage ready for the performance, it is important to build in language to inform the content of said theatre. The BJP’s 2024 campaign rides heavily on the ‘Phir Aayega Modi’ song, and most of their communication is through the lyrics. Before diving deeper into dissecting the lyrics to study the verbally declared intentions behind the theatre, it is important to notice the kind of language used as well as the style it is being used in. With lyrics in Shudh³⁹ Hindi, the song is sung by a male vocalist, with exceptionally catchy beats and a prominent use of rhyme, repetition, as well as a blend of classical vocals and rap-like sections. The use of formal, pure Hindi, in addition to promoting the BJP x Hindi belt hegemony (usually associated with North India which historically see right wing/pro BJP leanings) also hints at casteist associations with old, formal Hindi thought to be used by Brahmins. The BJP thus presents itself as an upper caste, pious, male dominated party, that is key to their performance as a Hindu peoples party. The use of trendy beats and musical styles ensures that the performance has a larger audience as well as a longer shelf life with people consuming it more due to its snappy, easy to repost, and quick to learn nature.

Interestingly enough, the BJP does not try to play into several hidden messages with their lyrics but instead plays into their populist national presence. There is clear demarcation of who is the popular leader, who are the “corrupt elite”, who are the “insider group or the people”, and who are declared as “the outsiders or boundary group.” Throughout the song the BJP is referred to as the “Modi Sarkaar”⁴⁰ and the word Modi is repeated over 70 times in less than 10 minutes. The chorus consists entirely of a Modi chant. Lyrics like “Modi is not

³⁸ This thesis uses the criteria presented by the ICJ to understand Israel’s “war on Gaza” as premeditated genocide rooted in settler colonialism. It also understands the ongoing genocide as part of a larger universal Islamophobic, racist narrative.

³⁹ Pure

⁴⁰ Government

just a human but is the pride of India, he represents the aspirations of over 140 crore Indians” making it apparent that the BJP’s entire campaign strategy is promoting Modi as the ideal populist, the ideal leader of the Indian people. Modi becomes integral to the BJP rhetoric and thus, by presenting through their performance that the BJP is the driver of development for the country, they put forth the subliminal message that Modi is development. On the other hand, language like “thieves”, “enemies”, “liars”, “egoists”, “arrogant”, and “ill with nepotism and dynastic politics”, is used to describe opposition party leaders (especially the INC and members of the I.N.D.I.A bloc). The violent and personalistic nature of their description of opposition parties enhances the gravity of the accusations thrown at them. The opposition is painted as enemies of the people and not just the BJP. By repeatedly mentioning the opposition party with derogatory speech, the BJP not only widens the gap between who they think should be associated with good governance and who with incompetence, but also delegitimises the I.N.D.I.A bloc’s strength and power as a national party. The brazen manner in which well established politicians and leaders are spoken about indicates a sense of disrespect and callousness that is made acceptable not only for all BJP leaders but also for the masses.

Language surrounding “the people” is a little more tricky within the song, with it having an overarching official narrative of any and every body being included in the category. This is clearly not true when read in conjunction with the subliminal message in the unofficial narrative we look at later in the conversation . The song talks about the 140 crore people who have hope in Modi, and these include “Maa Behen Beti Mahila”, “Kisaan”, “Gareeb”, “Bacho”, “Sena”, “Vaigyanik”, “Yuva”, “Gramin”, “Dalits”, “Adivasis”, and “people from the North East”⁴¹. By name-dropping communities that are underrepresented and often marginalised in the country, Modi is able to highlight that his government is actively working with these communities and consider them as part of the bigger society instead of leaving them on the periphery of Indian society as they historically have been. Words like “sabh”, “Har ghar/har pal/har kaam” (“har” being key here), “pura desh”, and “puri janta”, play into the BJP’s main point of promotion of being the people’s party. Through this performance they identify the entire citizenry to be part of the populace they represent/hope to represent. What is interesting in this messaging is that, though the performance places emphasis on a unification of the country with claims of an “ek Bharat” that involves all stratas and members of Indian society, the repeated call backs to the Ram Mandir and Lord Ram and the mentions of the Kaashi and Mahakaal religious corridors⁴², points the audience towards a deeper connection between the BJP and Hindu practices. There is a clear correlation seen between the BJP and Hindu-ness which allows for an assumption that at the very centre of their defined “people” lie Hindus and Hindutva Vaadis.

BJP’s performance as the true Indian party, though with a well established overarching sense of inclusivity seen in who they validate as part of their main audience, enables the creation of “the other” too, in their populist rhetoric. The song includes lyrics celebrating the abrogation of Article 370 (protecting Kashmir’s status as an autonomous territory), claiming ending all terrorism, and even rejoicing the removal of “teen talaq” or triple talaq laws under Sharia law. However, when looking at these in conjunction with the

⁴¹ Translation: Mother Sister Daughter Women, Farmers, Poor people, Kids, the Army (defence forces), Scientists, the Youth, Villagers, Dalits, Adivasis, Northeast Indian People.

⁴² Lord Ram is a Hindu God that is often made to be the symbol of the BJP’s Hindu-ness. In their reign, the BJP has not only built the contested Ram Temple in Ayodhya, but also invested millions of dollars in religious projects like the Kaashi and Mahakaal corridors which connect major Hindu temples with neighbouring cities in order to promote tourism and make “Hindu lives easier”.

history of the BJP and its purposeful exclusion of Muslims (and other religious minorities) when naming their ingroup, we see the subtle outgroup they are presenting. Additionally, there exists a deep polarisation between voters with regards to affiliating with the BJP or the INC, with the INC seeing more diverse groups as their demographic and the BJP seeing a strong Hindu upper and middle class pull. Muslims form a big percentage of INC voters which creates a double whammy for their identification as “the outsiders”. The song lyrics point clearly towards BJP’s hatred and disgust for the “enemy party” and its affiliates which pushes non BJP voters in the “other” category. By publicising policies and actions that have caused harm to specific communities and caused controversy within the country, as “successes”, the BJP is putting forth a very direct message that shows disregard for Muslims and individuals that do not actively go out of their way to support or vote for the Modi Sarkaar.

Finally, through their official campaign strategy we also see BJP perform a redefining of India and Indian identity through language used and understood in present political realities. Throughout the song, the country is referred to as “Bharat” multiple times, and all visual text seen on placards or name tags at international conference settings, reinforces this rebranding. Bharat, while the Hindi name for the country, to take centre stage in all promotion of the country is telling of a complete remodelling of the country’s demographics and values. In 2023, the BJP tried to call for an official renaming of the country but saw great backlash since the use of the word Bharat not only steps the country further into a Hindu nationalist identity but also purposefully eliminates the secular, inclusive nationalist imagination with which the country was founded. The repetition and ‘in your face’ nature of the use of the term Bharat in a song that is catchy and keeps you humming the tune for a while, is a great strategic performance to ease audiences into using the term and naturally reimagining the country for themselves. Theatrical language is BJP’s greatest tool in swaying public opinion and presenting a new reality for the country.

Unofficially, we see BJP rhetoric being outright racist, Islamophobic, and casteist, with Laxmi Dube’s “Har Ghar Bhagva Chhayega” getting straight to the point. Her raspy voice in conjunction with Hindu classical musical beats mixed electronically, makes for a very catchy and assertive song. She uses a call and response method, wherein after every line or declarative sentence she ‘sings’, a chorus of male voices (unseen) affirm her statements and add supplementary information about the said declaration. This makes the performance seem more inviting, with the chorus acting like the voice of the audience. Such inclusion within the performance becomes concerning when one looks at the symbolism and metaphors used in the language of the song. From the very title, the song brings up painting every house saffron which is not only the official colour of the BJP but also symbolic of Brahminical Hinduism. The song not only calls for “Ram Rajya⁴³” but also declares that the very identity of India and its people is “*Bhagva*”. Dube’s lyrics clearly state “Hind Hinduon ka hoga, bas bhagva hi chaa jayega” (India is only for Hindus and there is only room for saffron), which acts as direct messaging for audiences to learn intention and desired impact of said performance. Performative language here clearly points to the idea that Hindus and Hindutva Vaadis are the only true people of this country. The boundaries of who “the people” are becomes smaller in the BJP’s unofficial messaging.

⁴³ The reign of Lord Ram, or just a lifestyle dedicated to Ram and Hinduism.

Language here is used to form “an enemy”. Using references to swords and tridents, the lyrics also point to not underestimating the Hindu people and that “enemies should beware”. Without a theatrical lens of emotionality and sentiment building, one would not catch the subliminal message being presented to the populace. The enemies being referred to are “the others” under BJP populist definitions, with Muslims being deemed as the biggest threat to Hindus and their Hindu identity. Lyrics like “Lalkarti Azaadi hai, abh Bhagva hui Kashmir ki har vaadi hai” which roughly translates to “In finding freedom finally all mountain peaks in Kashmir are painted saffron”, provides insight into the Hindu-fication process of Muslim majority communities and areas, as well as the desire to rid Kashmir of all autonomy. The association of freedom with the erasure of Muslim identity within the lyrics shows that the BJP and its followers find India to not be its true self in the present, and are looking to create a new reality wherein India as Hindu land reigns triumphant as the sole protector of rights and democratic freedoms. The performance also points to this subliminal message that only after Hindus “take back” Kashmir will they ever find true freedom, and so the BJP’s abrogation of Article 370 is in the interest of peoples rights. The territory of Jammu and Kashmir has seen major conflict ever since Indian and Pakistani independence in 1947, however, under BJP rule this majority muslim state has seen worsening conditions in terms of policing, anti-muslim violence, and access to fair and just proceedings under rule of law. With lyrics that call for the spread of Hindutva in the Kashmir valley we see a personification of BJP’s mission to make J&K part of the mainland with non Muslim populations earning, buying land, engaging in tourism, and more as part of the colonial project. The song also clearly states that “if you want to live in Hindustan, you have to chant Lord Ram’s name and learn to stay in your lane”. This performs as an active cautionary call to Muslims and other minorities, with a certain authoritativeness on how they should live and behave in BJP-run India. Dube also ropes in Pakistan into the underlying message she presents, by using language like “let the neighbouring country know that they should know their place or lion like brave Hindu warriors will rain death on them”. The call to rain death or bring “Mahakaal” is also brought up when talking about “Gaddars” or “traitors” which acts like reference to Muslim converts, or even women who marry Muslims (engaging in what is considered Love Jihad). The use of language in this theatre exists to solidify the image of Muslims as enemies of the people, and therefore, must live as secondary citizens in the Hindu state of India.

Social media narratives rely heavily on short, snappy, to the point language since content that is easy to access, read, and understand is often privileged due to algorithm designs. Therefore, disguising intent behind words and speech is more difficult since creators are trying to use as few words to make sure the audience is engaging with their performance. This leads to more inflammatory language being used freely and openly. We see this exemplified in Fig 7. The post has no embodiment except the text, thus further highlighting their importance and making them seem as imperative demands from the audience. Words like “Isse pehele koi aor ladki love jihad ki shikaar ho, hume hi jaagna hoga”, and “ladki ke aas pass koi jihadi bhataкта dikhe toh usse andheka mat karo”⁴⁴, showcase the brazen nature of such performance. Not only does such drama frame Muslim men as predators and further fans the Hindu-Muslim enmity, but it also encourages violence towards Muslims and interfaith couples. The country recently has seen a significant increase in Hindu vigilantes working with law enforcement using lynching, anti-Muslim brutality, and gender violence as

⁴⁴ Translation: We have to take action before another Hindu girl is prey to love jihad. If we see a “Jihadi” (read Musalman) roam around near her, we should never look away.

ways to curb the myth of love jihad (Sharma and Khan). This shows us that unofficial rhetoric is highly influential when made into a dramatic performance. Additionally, the language also envisions Hindus as being a vulnerable population; as a dying group that needs protection from the state and its allies. Such self pity and call to safeguard Hindu populations is also seen in Fig 5, wherein “the fear on the Israeli families faces” (during the Oct 7, 2023 attacks) is equated to the “fear Kashmiri Hindus faced in 1990”. By claiming that Westerners and Indian liberal do not care about Kashmiri Hindus or think “they deserved it”, the narrative automatically shifts into self preservation and potential vengeance mode. Playing into the idea that Hindus have had a tough time in a country they are the majority in due to the Congress catering to minorities for votes that is fundamental to BJP rhetoric, this dialogue writing acts as both reassurance to Hindus in that they will now be taken care of by the BJP and that their attacks on Muslims and other minorities is justified since it stems from self defence.

The BJP has also been successful in creating radical shifts in discourse around independence and highlighting the true value of Hindutva as a founding ideology. A lot of their unofficial rhetoric stems from distaste over the fact that India chose civic, secular nationalism as opposed to the ethno-theocratic system adopted by Pakistan. The BJP founded as part of the Sangh Parivaar has tried to portray the INC in bad light; as privileging minority communities in a Hindu majority country to maintain a prominent vote bank, and that being the reason India adopted a genre of nationalism that puts Hindus “at risk”. The RSS and other affiliate organisations have continued to propagate such ideas even whilst the BJP has not made official remarks about the same due to their positionality within the country. Fig 6, uses language as a way to showcase this very phenomena by portraying Gandhi and Nehru as enemies of the Hindu people. Calling Nehru “Jihaadi Khangreesi Chacha 420” and Gandhi as “Ganduji” uses metaphors and puns as a way to present Nehru as a “Muslim loving fake trickster” (using cultural movie references) and Gandhi as an “asshole” (Gandu in Hindi slang translates to Ass and thus, there is a play of words to rework his name). The post also praises Nathuram Godse, the man who shot Gandhi, as a saviour of the Hindu people by referring to him as a Veer Pandit (Upper caste warrior and scholar). Dialogue creation in this manner allows for the performance to symbolise a reverence of Hindutva ideology and violence in the name of moralistic safeguarding of the Hindu people and their interests. Language in performances play a key role in shaping audience perspective and understanding and thus, a closer look into the kinds of narratives being presented and the meanings they exude in cultural contexts when dramatised is imperative to studying audience interaction with the same.

Embodying the message:

A lot happens in the 10 minutes of the ‘Phir Aayega Modi’ song video with the cast, their story, and their action changing every few seconds. The only constant in the performance is Modi. There is not one frame where we do not see Modi- either in a crowd, praying, talking to members of different social communities, visiting institutions, interacting with the common man, at a conference, meeting important people, or even just walking out of an aeroplane. His face and his presence is made synonymous to the BJP visual. The range of his acting plays into the idea that the BJP is an “all rounder” party that can and is doing the most a party can do. For Modi to perform Hindu rituals, wash the feet of Dalit elders, shake hands with Middle Eastern Muslim leaders, and even sit for lunch with Adivasi

communities, is an indication of the “for everyone” rhetoric the BJP is hoping to portray. The use of marginalised bodies to shed light on Modi’s respect and love for all is another way for the BJP to reject claims of prejudice and discrimination placed against them. It also plays into their personification as “the people’s” party with an overt symbolisation of their acceptance of all persons in the country. For most of the action, Modi is dressed in his standard attire of a kurta, pants, and what is now called the Modi Jacket (a new iteration of the Nehru jacket but longer and often more colourful), which creates a persona, a set character for Narendra Modi that is distinguishably him that allows for greater recognition and a sense of formal chicness. However, we occasionally also see him dressed in army attire, in flight gear, in safari suits, and even in full Pandian attire. This in addition to showcasing his commitment to Hinduism, the development of defence systems, and tourism, highlights his malleability and his ability to become what is needed for the moment. Modi as an actor tries to embody the essence of the country—he is made to personify India through his act of a cultured, dignified, lovable, respectful, benevolent, Hindu man that is rooted to his community and people but also not afraid to enter the international arena and create waves.

The BJP is also really skilled at presenting itself as a “Hindu first but also protector of all” party and they do this by immersing themselves in Hindu cultural performances and identity markers whilst interacting with other communities, avenues, and lifestyles. With priests, temples, prayer ceremonies, religious idols, and traditional Hindu costuming being staple to the video, we learn that the Modi government is rooted in its Hindu identity and has no qualms with performing it. Their use of Hindu identity as a culturally significant marker to a video that technically is about gaining governmental power over all of the country and its people is telling of their Hindutva agenda and their propagation of India being a Hindu state. In addition to this, what the BJP also does is show the acceptance of such an agenda and such ideology by minority communities and by large percentages of the citizenry. The use of smiling and happy Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim bodies supplemented by actions that are or would be considered pro Modi, ensures that the audience assumes that a vote for Modi is not only a vote for Hindus but also a vote for the happiness of all people who believe in his strength as a leader. Athletes, farmers, young people, women (especially Muslim women), are all made to perform as loyal subjects of the BJP regime, with them swaying, singing, showing a thumbs up to the camera, crying in joy, and even hugging Modi. When looked at this drama through a historical and contextual lens, one will notice that these are some of the very groups that have taken to the streets to protest BJP rule and doctrine. By overshadowing these protests with actions of friendliness, loyalty, and mutual respect, the BJP tries to absolve itself of the brutality it has imbibed onto these communities as they fight the regime multiple times since its second term in 2019.

Another distinct avenue in which the Modi government has used performative action as a tool to change national rhetoric and reimagine populist categories is in creating national enemies on moralistic and cultural grounds. The video actively uses defamation tactics by presenting Rahul Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, Arvind Kejriwal, Mamata Bannerjee, and other highly prominent opposition leaders of the I.N.D.I.A alliance in bad light and narratives. Pairing their zoomed in faces and names with lyrics that talk about liars, cheaters, thieves, egoists, dirty persons ruining the country, and more, the BJP is able to dramatise their vocal distaste for the BJP as a stance against the country itself. The use of their bodies on screen as focalised pieces on which audiences can channel hatred and anger, allows for their identities to be distorted. The BJP ensures that through such theatre, opposition leaders end up not

being presented as an alternative to their party but more so becoming a symbol of anti-progress, anti-development, and anti-Indian people. Additionally, the BJP strategically presents faces of the Gandhi family either together, or at the helm of all opposition activities which furthers their narrative around the INC and the I.N.D.I.A alliance being their pet project to ensure dynastic power. Theatre is a key resource through which the BJP distorts reality and allows for a new vision of India and its political options within the masses consuming the said theatre.

Interestingly, the BJP also plays with sentimentality and emotions very strategically through the people and activities they present in the video. Indian tricolours, army men, newborns, old people, farmers, athletes, covid centres with sick people, conflict zones, ISRO missions, and more, are events and people that historically have held tons of emotionality, fear, care, and pride within the Indian people. By shedding light on these actions and theatricalising their presence, the Modi government is able to make audiences associate the BJP with intense emotions and passions. The more people are able to identify themselves, their struggles, their aspirations within the act, the more they are willing to vote for the BJP, and the current regime has capitalised this very effectively. The BJP also makes their performance seem more real and authentic by using well recognised faces and things as corroborating agents for their messaging. Major world leaders, popular Bollywood celebrities, Olympians, important cultural and heritage sites, Siachen glacier to INS Vikrant, all are brought in as diversions that create a sense of wonderment and awe in the fact that Modi and his government have been able to reach these heights and be welcomed/have taken ownership of these places. Theatre is used as a means of creating suggestive and implicative messaging for the audience that formalises the BJP as the best option, the best way forward for the country and its people.

In contrast, “Har Ghar Bhagva Chhayega” does not use identifiable people or distinct bodies to enhance its narrative. There is not a lot going on in the music video when compared to BJP’s official video. It primarily relies on images and actions that seem familiar yet grand in their essence. The video shifts between segments of Laxmi Dube singing dressed entirely in saffron with a turban and heavy, celebratory Hindu cultural attire, and massive rallies or gatherings of people dressed again in either Hindu cultural attire or white kurtas and saffron turbans. These act as glaring Hindu identifiers ensuring that the audience know that the people they are seeing are staunch Hindutva Vadis who are proud of their identity. Being Hindu becomes a dominant trait that is inseparable from the person and their existence. People are seen to be singing, dancing, riding elephants and horses, waving saffron flags, riding on motorcycles, travelling in packs, and even staging street plays portraying stories revolving around Mughal vs Hindu dynasties in full costume with swords and weapons. Such performance makes it seem like being a conservative Hindu is part of being a larger community that is strong and powerful. It makes being a BJP loyalist into a celebration. The bodies used in the video cross gender and age lines with women, kids, grandparents, and young adults, joining the festivities. This is done to not only show that being devoted to Lord Ram and his “janmabhoomi” is a forever thing but also that it is more inclusive than “regressive religions like Islam that does not allow female participation”. The use of dance and music and theatre within this bigger performance symbolises a greater joy and regality to Hindutva culture that is both culturally inviting and aesthetically pleasing for audiences. Theatre here is used to show how one is to ritualistically and outwardly participate in Hindutva Vaadi-ness and therefore, in Indianness.

What the video also does well is personify the Hindu man as a royal warrior, as someone who can take on any enemy. With shots of big, heavy set men in saffron dhotis walking towards the camera, stills of men standing at the border with a mix of saffron and tricolour flags, animations of army men, and scenes of men in white historically Maratha fighter attire jumping in the air to perform a sword fight, the video allows for meaning to be made around the ideas of bravery, strength, defence, honour, pride, and machismo. Hindu men are made to look like protectors of the country, of the people, and of their identity. This romanticisation of chauvinistic rhetoric that centres the “true Indian man” becomes key to BJP’s inbuilt narrative of Modi and his men⁴⁵ as the perfect saviours of Hindu culture and identity. The added animations of Hindu Gods within the video give this rhetoric more symbolic legitimacy since the drama presents itself as in devotion to God(s) and “his/their teachings”.

The BJP’s unofficial campaign in conjunction with boasting about itself and the grandiosity of Hindutva culture, makes it a point to over-amplify, over-animate, and even falsify the failures of the opposition parties so as to make themselves stand out. Fig 1 and 2 fall into this very pattern by showing an enlarged Modi (in trademark Saffron) with big biceps defeating a tiny, weak looking Rahul Gandhi as well as a giant Modi again in saffron, sipping tea while sitting on a seesaw that tilts in his favour even with caricatures of all the other prominent opposition members sitting on the other end, respectively. Not only do these embodiments present Modi as a powerful man in front of whom no one stands a chance, but it also makes his “victory over the opposition”, especially Gandhi and the INC, seem effortless. Modi drinking chai plays into his backstory of coming up from humble beginnings as a tea seller to becoming the PM of the country, but it also becomes a reference to the Indian idiom of something being as easy as sipping tea. Performances like these leave no doubt that Modi is central to all BJP rhetoric and national positioning. BJP gains its success from the popularity Modi holds as “the peoples” leader. Fig 1 and 2 use action and identifiable actors to enhance Modi’s image as the champion of the Indian people and as the destroyer of all elite enemies (the I.N.D.I.A alliance) who are deemed as uncaring of the Hindu population. In pushing this narrative that Modi is the only rational choice for Indians, performance has also been shaped to suggest a Modi vs Rahul Gandhi dynamic. Fig 4 depicts a cartoon Gandhi drinking beer and watching a kid’s TV show whilst people in the back seem to be working/stressing over something. The BJP has time and again tried to portray Gandhi as an immature and idiot manchild who is unfit to run the country and this dramatised embodiment is testament to that very narrative. Unofficially, the BJP goes beyond delegitimizing Gandhi’s politics, by taking personal stabs at him, his personhood, and his intellect. The humiliation project is presented as a performance to make it more convincing for the audiences and for people to view him as the butt of all Indian political jokes, thus making it harder for viewers to take him seriously. Further examples of these are seen in Fig 3 and 8. The activities done, faces made visible, colours worn, all add to the BJP’s subliminal messaging. Their Hindutva agenda sustains itself by living underground in the form of performance and theatre.

⁴⁵ the Sangh Parivaar has historically been dominated by middle class men with the RSS, VHP, and Bajrang Dal being ‘only male’ paramilitary groups

Conclusion

Over the last decade, the BJP has seen incredible success online due to their strategic use of digital platforms, playing into their economic and labour strength to overtake other creators in the market. Their IT cells, loyal followers, and allied organisations have ensured that their messaging and candidacy for both office and ideological power are pervasive both in spread of reach and in depth of imbibement. They have been able to do this not only through the inherent personalistic and divisive nature of social media, but also through the creation of performance and theatre that uses spectacle, ritual, cultural symbolism, and even context based meaning making. The BJP's use of social media has drastically impacted the kinds of performances it can present to the audiences and this has shaped itself into the creation of both an overt and an underlying transcript of BJP's rhetoric and political goals. Such a dichotomy in their use of social media allows for them to maintain a democratic, inclusive national image while appeasing right wing, ethno-nationalist audiences.

The PPF 2.0 works as a solid framework to understand and further dissect the performances they put out, overtly and covertly, and how they differ to create multiple personas of the BJP and their national agenda/manifesto. The stage, the language, and the kind of embodiment become the key to studying the drama presented by the BJP or by loyalists endorsed by the party. While the BJP's official campaign inherently performs the ideas of cultural populism, deep nationalism that is associated with Hinduism, and finding a "new Indian identity" that puts the "nation" first, it does not outright reject the tenets of a liberal democracy and of Indian secular and civic nationalism. It is in the unofficial campaigns they endorse on the side that performances of Hindutva ideologies and radical right ethno-nationalism are made clear. Theatre makes any messaging more potent and dynamic and thus, more influential for the audience. In analysing both narratives presented by the BJP, one can see the reality of their imaginings for the country and what they are hoping for the Indian audience to take away with regards to behavioural compliances, ideological agreement, cultural acceptance, and national identity building. The dramaturgical structure used by the BJP to create emotive connection with the audience through acting, scenic, directorial, and writing styles, ensures that spectators are not passive viewers but become spectACTORS, who participate in the meaning and myth making that sustains the BJP and its ethno-nationalist leaning.

In this chapter we see the way national narratives can be made through theatre and the potential symbols or meaning that can be ascribed to the performances being put on by BJP and affiliated content creators. Culture, history, present contexts, and ingroup memories are used as basis for the meanings created or the understandings generated in the drama and this enables audiences to create personal and emotional connections with the performances. But what happens once the meaning is made and the connection is sought? The performances only work when the audience is swayed by emotionality to engage in the rhetoric and sustain its public appeal. Therefore, in keeping with the hypothesis, the next chapter will look into how emotions generated from the theatre influence and occupy the audiences, thus giving the performance legitimacy and control over national identity building.

Chapter 4 Legitimising Online Hindutva Performativity

We often associate the word performance or performativity with unreality, superficiality, or a discernible fakeness. That is why when the phrase “all politics is performative” is brought up, the assumption often is that the politics we see is rooted in falsity and that viewing it is a little like choosing to sit in a theatre and consuming content knowing it is make believe. That may be true in certain cases where the act of politics is clearly staged and made up but audiences still choose to play along in the facade. This is either because they do not care/are ambivalent, are afraid of the incumbent, or gain benefit from their participation (ref. discussion about Wedeen’s analysis of late 1990’s Syria and Drixler and Matsuzaki’s study of Meiji Japan in the previous chapter). Here, the audience’s participation in the falsity is intrinsic to the performance. It completes the performance. The unreal nature of the performance allows for audiences to connect to it and determine whether to support or criticise it. There is no faith in the performance, it lies only as a bureaucratic augmentation to ensure the audience understands its role in the regime and participates in a way that allows for both party sustenance and mass appeasement. Performance here remains an illusionary platitude to ensure regime stability and for outward reputation in the global arena. However, this dichotomy of performance and authenticity or realness is not the full picture.

Often it is not that the performance is authentic but more so that authenticity in itself *is* the performance. Realism is an important aspect of theatre with the objective being a complete immersion of the actor and audience in the world created. A lot of political performances rely on the believability and the authenticity of the act for it to be considered successful or legitimate. The knowledge of there being an act or performativity does not take away from it, its content, and its intentions being considered true and palpable (Obasi). Here the audience’s participation is based on how they understand the performance and shape their worldview and behaviours around it. Audiences know they are watching a staged event, in the rallies, songs, memes, tweets, speeches, and more, they are interacting with. However, their attachment to it and their dedication to its cause are rooted in complete acceptance of the world the performance refers to or showcases. Authentic performances like these gain legitimacy with audiences interacting with it in ways that are ideologically and personalistically immersive. Audience participation, either in relishing the falsity or imbibing the performance as model reality, therefore, is key to legitimising the rhetoric prevalent in the theatre created. The performance of Hindutva in India uses these very principles, utilising authenticity of intention as its main driver of audience interaction.

When thinking about audiences viewing a performance, we see that most of their willingness to interact with it stems from the meanings they have grasped from the performance presented. The modes used for representation are important to political claim making and their validity within general society. Theatre allows for symbols, cultural narratives, language and image based rhetoric, as well as constructivist messaging that entrenches itself in nuances and multiplicity of perspectives. The last chapter gives us insight into how these modes of representation can be understood and studied further. This chapter however, looks at the ways audiences act once they have interacted with a performance. The state as a performer utilises authenticity as a tool of representation. It does this by not only being assured in the rhetoric it is performing but also by conforming to social and somatic

norms and mannerisms, and likening itself to the social context and relations it is entering. The actor creates what Rai calls “a moment of liminality” wherein the performance starts a ritual or a norm that is tailored in ways that convince the audience either of it already existing or of it being something incredibly normal and entrenched in the social system they operate in (Rai 2015, 1186). While the performance is temporary it provides the audience no option but to opt into the social ritual created since it is assumed to be the status quo. For example, while a person may view a meme only for a few minutes, the information they have received from it is thought to be an essential social norm due to the theatricality and emotive connection warranted from it. If the topic of the meme is thought to be an important part of society and social conversation, the viewer is more likely to imbibe it and soon embody it. No citizen wants to purposefully live outside the boundaries of what is thought to be the normal boundaries of social construction that ensure political stability. Due to this, audiences become involved in the normalisation and legitimising process without realising that they are enabling a new reality within their existential plane. A viewer’s commitment to finishing the ritual or norm that is performed is what gives it legitimacy.

Famous British director, Peter Brooks, rightly said that the common denominator in all theatre is the need for an audience and it is the audience that completes the production. When judging the efficacy and merits of the performance it is important to look at both the short term and long term impacts on audiences as well as the way they engage with said performance (Rai 2015, 1188). To perform political claims, the actors and the audiences need to work in tandem to ensure legitimacy. In relation to authentic performances, success is not just understood through the width of audience participation but also the depth of it. Consuming and sharing the performance which can be short term impacts are not enough. Identifying with it, changing personalistic and social behaviour and thought, equating politics and political action to the performance, and even engaging in extremism to defend it, are ways audiences engage deeply long term, thus making the performance “successful.” Additionally, performances gain legitimacy by not only getting engagement from present audiences, either in person or online through active viewership, but also through the visible impacts they have on ghost audiences. With regards to Hindutva, the performance not only gains legitimacy when Hindus or members of the ingroup consume and imbibe it but also through the ways out group members or people who are not target audiences, understand and react to it. Once absent audiences too, engage with the performance in ways that shape their reality deeply, one can officially say that the performance has become a legitimate political claim that dictates national politics.

Right wing Hindu nationalism works under the presumption that the ideology in itself is an attractive prospect to all Hindus and subsequently to all Indians. The thought of it not being an ideal presentation of Indian statehood and identity building does not exist in its very ethos. India is for the Hindu people is not considered an opinion but more so a fact. Therefore, all Hindutva performances work under the umbrella of authenticity and ardent loyalty. Hindutva as an ideology intrinsically has a very personalistic and moralistic stance with moral policing of act and faith being a key part of its propagation. This ensures that all performances of Hindutva are assumed to be morally right which leads to blind faith in the messaging. The use of online platforms, as seen through the course of this thesis, further personalises Hindutva rhetoric and promotion. With Hindutva becoming a major concept and reality within the country, we see Indian politics become a lot more rooted in ideas of honour, value, culture, and ethnic purity rather than ideas of governance, development,

security, equality, and others that are incredibly more important to liberal democracies. Therefore, audiences are playing into the emotionality and personal affiliations of the political messaging rather than the actual meaning and lived consequences of said messaging, making the theatre of the performance an important aspect to study. The BJP's use of dramatic performances to push Hindutva agendas allows for political change based on emotions and feeling.

In light of the BJP's theatrical agenda for political action, this chapter claims that the emotionality and meanings imbibed through the performance allows for audiences to engage in ways that not only legitimises the BJP's political claims of Hindutva but also has long term impacts on their person. Looking at audience interactions with pro and anti BJP content on social media as well as mass generated content, that is political in nature, gives us insight into the ways people are perceiving BJP's performances and assimilating in them. This study then can be supplemented by looking at physical, in person ways audiences engage with or "finish" the performance/ritual that the BJP has made available. The scope and the kinds of authentic engagements seen by audiences. gives us information about how legitimate BJP's performance is and how they have controlled national rhetoric building.

Audience Engagement Online

The digital space has changed the dynamics of theatrical and political engagement in various ways. The immersive as well as the vastly distributed nature of the arena makes it impossible for people to not engage in political discourse. People's reactions, understandings, criticisms, support, and even their misunderstandings of political information presented by the state and its unofficial channels are instantaneous and enthusiastic due to the accessibility of engagement opportunities. To post comments, share videos/images, create accounts, join networks, etc, are made extremely easy on social media and therefore, people do not think twice before adding onto existing discourse or presenting their opinions, furthering the theatre enacted by the state. When theatre and the creation of emotional meaning making is added onto an already highly active participatory space, we see people dig deeper into their commitment to the act and go beyond the paradigms of casual participation into obsessive loyalty and involvement.

The BJP in its reliance on social media has made the digital space as its primary avenue to attract, engage, and assimilate audiences into their messaging. Self proclaimed "Bhakts" have very clearly been participating in the Hindutva spectacle by making "Being a proud and righteous Hindu" their entire online personality, but what is interesting is the way masses digitally claiming to be rational citizens who are making political decisions based on what they think is "best for the country" are also imbibing BJP rhetoric in their daily online persona. BJP loyalists have taken to "boosting pro BJP content" by mass sharing, commenting, amplifying hashtags, mass reporting opposition party content in hopes of censoring it, changing their display pictures or profile bios to saffron or Hindu presenting imagery, as well as adding to discourse by posting pictures of themselves at BJP rallies or at locations made prominent by the party (e.g., the Ram Temple, the Vande Bharat express stations, the new parliament building, etc). Their personal accounts often look like alternative BJP pages itself due to their heavy involvement with BJP content as well as their reverence to the theatre performed. Another section of audiences we see interacting with the

BJP's online performances are the self identified "non-political" or "Ambivalent audiences"⁴⁶. Their interaction, though tamer than that of the loyalists, is telling of the BJP's reach and the impact performance has on people's psyche without them even realising. While this audience group is not entrenched in fanatic display of their understanding and commitment to Hindutva performance, they play into legitimising BJP rhetoric through the use of language, imagery, symbols, and gestures, that are straight out of performative displays put forth by the party. Audiences in this sphere are no longer passive consumers of theatre but more so active members of meaning making and dissemination.

The arts have always had the potential to influence people and shape their worldviews. This becomes pertinent when looking at audience participation based on their consumption of Hindutva performativity. A lot of the online participation from audiences is resultant of direct translations of the meanings they have imbibed from BJP's performative official and unofficial campaigns. BJP's "Hindu first", anti Muslim and minorities, as well as their vigorous degradation/delegitimization of opposition parties and other political elite, has emboldened audiences into using similar online personas to make visible their support, not only for the BJP but also for what the party represents (Singh 2024). Digital platforms have become extremely dangerous for minority communities. In their 2021 report *Experiences of Muslims in India on Digital Platforms With Anti-Muslim Hate*, CARE or the Culture-Centered Approach to Research and Evaluation found that over 60% of the people surveyed had come across anti Muslim speech and content from fellow citizens and over 40% had been called offensive names and slurs online (Roy 2022). This number has only grown in the last couple years.

Specific elements, like colours or words, seen in Hindutva performances are now presenting themselves within the ways audiences participate online. Language like "gaddars", "infiltrators", "porkies", "jihadis", and "mullahs", have been normalised as everyday vocabulary in referencing Muslim people. Other minority communities too face such online abuse with words like "rice cracker converts" being used for Christian communities and extremist slurs like "chamaar", "bhangi", and "dhobi" being used against Dalit and Adivasi community members. The BJP audiences have internalised anti minority rhetoric and made it permissible to be blatantly discriminatory since they assume the ruling party has ordered them to do so and ensured their safety as they do it. Volunteer-run digital database, Hindutva Watch, documents online hate speech against minority communities, notes that 2-4 hate events were recorded on a daily basis during the later half of 2023 (Sharma 2023). Comment sections of Muslim content creators or common individuals are filled with calls of either "go back to Pakistan" or "stay in their lane" if they are to live in India. These actions are direct reactions to the messaging put forth by the BJP through their unofficial campaigns. Audiences' participation in Hindutva rhetoric has also presented itself in the form of divisive doxxing and trolling campaigns with social media pages and apps being created to either "auction/sell Muslim women"⁴⁷, identify Muslim "jihadi" men, locate "beef eaters and cow murderers", spread misinformation and rumours about Muslims being the reason behind the spread of COVID 19, and even call for the "reduction of Muslims" in

⁴⁶ I use quotations for ambivalent audiences since this group, though not identifying as "Bhakts" or members of "right wing leaning voter class", engage in BJP's theatre in claiming Modi is a better candidate than most and feed into popular narrative of supporting BJP for the development and economic boost they provide rather than the divisive narrative they push forward. Their participation in BJP's progressivist narrative shows that they inadvertently are not neutral or rational but mask their promotion of BJP ideals as national ideals. Ambivalence also works as a facade for audiences that want to keep veiled their fascist preferences and perform instead a distaste for "modern wokeness" and overt liberalism.

⁴⁷ Ref 'Bulli Bai' and 'Sulli Deals' app scandals <https://thewire.in/communalism/indian-muslim-woman-auction-bulli-bai>

the country which translates to genuine calls of genocide and lynchings. The BJP's performance of true nationalism to be synonymous with Islamophobia and anti-minority sentiments have taken deep root within the audience's psyche with reason and rationality becoming secondary to emotional responses of patriotism, loyalty, and Hindu bhakti. Audiences have taken on the role of being online vigilantes that protect the country from what they consider "immoral" or even "radical" Islamic behaviour (Banaji 2018).

As we saw in the last chapter, the BJP has been successful with portraying their candidacy and their rule as a win for Hindus, the Hindu cause, and for true Indian nationalism. Chants like "Jai Shree Ram", "Har Har Mahadev", "Modi hai toh Mumkin hai", and "humara bhagva hero"⁴⁸, have become prominent hashtags that have been boosted by public usage and these are driven by the emotional connections the BJP has made between its leadership, saffronisation, and Hinduism (Christopher 2024). Nowadays in order to indicate one's political preferences online, people have turned to using red/saffron flag, temple, "Om" chanting, prayer beads, tridents, "damru", and even orange heart emojis in their bios, their comments, and in their usernames. Hindu symbols are now considered nationalist symbols within casual, everyday online discourse. This equation of the BJP with Hindu safety has led to immense online harassment of journalists, activists, student protestors, or common users who are critical of the ruling party in the name of them being "Hinduphobic".

Feeding into Modi Sarkaar's performance of being the sole protector of Indian identity and the deeming of India as a Hindu state, the use of words like "anti-nationals", "anti-patriots", "liberandus", "libtards", and even "western puppets" have become common slang on online platforms to refer to non BJP loyalists, opposition party supporters, or even people that put forth content that questions the government. Additionally, audiences have assimilated themselves into the Hindutva performance presented by looking at and performing their own identity as Indians through Hindu, cultural lenses. Saffron clothing, turbans, "teekas"⁴⁹, dhotis, and religious beads, have become peak "Indian" fashion, with people, especially women being trolled or morally policed for wearing either hijabs, non Hindu religious attire or "inappropriate western" attire. Trends like excessively posting videos and images of themselves performing Hindu ceremonies and rituals, visiting temples, celebrating the establishment of new pilgrimage sites, condemning meat eaters and obsessively promoting vegetarianism, vacationing in Kashmir, and even presenting an outpour of love for the Indian army and police forces, are all new ways individuals are making sure their Hindu identities are front and centre for people to see. This is done to ensure their loyalty to the Hindu state is clearly visible. Audience's dedication to being Hindutva Vadi's and protecting BJP's image as Hindu saviours helps solidify the party's messaging and shows us that their performance has not only been understood but has also been influentially successful.

The widespread performance of Hindutva has also ensured the normalisation of online (and offline but we will get to that later) violence, use of hateful and violent language, and even misinformation and lies, not only about minority communities and opposition elites, but also about how the state functions, the role of democracy and nationalism, and even what the BJP themselves provide to citizens. Facts are now considered "subjective" and

⁴⁸ Translations: Jai Shree Ram- All hail Lord Ram, Har Har Mahadev- All Hail Lord Shiva, Modi hai toh Mumkin hai- All is possible because of Modi, Humara Bhagva Hero- our saffron hero

⁴⁹ A tilak or a religious dot/line/design on the forehead

there is mass scale rejection of the truth in the name of “liberal propaganda” and “efforts to deface Modi’s Sarkaar”. Nazneen Mohsina writing for the Global Network on Extremism and Technology states, ‘ Social media has become a virtual playground for (Hindutva) extremist views to be reinforced and act as an expanding echo chamber’ (Mohsina 2020). With proliferation of hashtags like “Muslim Hatao, Bharat Bachao”⁵⁰, the creation of WhatsApp group chats to plan “religious wars” and “strategic battle tactics”, and repeated sharing of posts or verbage like “Musalmano ke 12 12 bacho ke vaje se Hindu khatre mei hai”⁵¹, we see the brazen nature of audience participation within Hindutva discourses without fear of impunity. It also shows us that people have completely bought into BJP’s performance and have adopted the party’s rhetoric as their own personal beliefs.

Messages present within the BJP’s theatre have overtaken well established facts as the basis of things people put their faith in. Even when confronted with the fact that Muslims still only consist of less than 14% of the Indian population, the imagery and emotions the BJP has been able to evoke through its unofficial campaigns have changed the very way people perceive their existence in the country. People’s usual filters when talking about other individuals, or even the natural self censoring one does so as to not openly present inflammatory ideas, have completely disappeared online due to masses getting emboldened and embodying the performance of ethno-religious nationalism by the BJP. Comment sections of independent news agencies that have been reporting the decline of Indian democratic standings on international databases have been filled with calls for boycott, death/rape threats to journalists, and even complete denial of existing data about democracy or the need for equal human rights. Parikshit Dhume (ICP for BJP) in his interview had stated:

Nationalism was never spoken of before. Before it was only secularism, secularism, secularism. The reason being only they (the “leftists”) had the medium of communication. Now when actually it is a two-way communication with the left and the right, nationalism also has finally got a voice. Now it is an even battle. Before because the leftist people were controlling the media, journalists only spoke of their agenda or what voices they wanted. But now because of social media if xyz is talking about secularism, abc can also talk about nationalism. So hence, national voices can also be heard because it was not the case before.

This very sentiment of nationalism, secularism, and democracy being different from one another and that the ideals of secularism are a “threat to Indian Hindu identities” is vastly present on social media. Audiences have made inclusivity as an antithesis to being a “good Indian” and therefore, any calls for liberal democracy or the safeguarding of minority rights is met with genuine hatred and online harassment for being “anti-India” or for being a “Congress mouthpiece”. The BJP has entrenched itself as being equivalent to India and Indian identity itself, and their use of theatre has ensured that audiences believe in this personification. The most prominent assumption amongst majority masses is that if the BJP has said something, then it must be right or the truth. Promises made by the party or even the claims made about India seeing development, economic progression, increase in employment opportunities especially for women, reduction in poverty, and more, under their governance are taken at face value by social media audiences (all of which have now been

⁵⁰ Translation- Remove Muslims to safeguard India

⁵¹ Translation- Due to the high reproductive rate of Muslims, Hindus are in danger

proven to be false or incomplete information) since they have accepted Modi's digital performance as a testament to his governance standards. Any criticism of him and his Sarkaar as we see earlier is either denied or met with violent language. However, another way audiences are showing their loyalty to BJP and engaging with their dramatised messaging is by diverting the conversation and counter blaming the Congress. "Par Congress yeh karte the", "Chacha 420 ne kya kiya tha", or "Pappu ka chaat mat"⁵² are phrases that have become easy ways for people to deflect criticism and also shy away from facing reality of the people/the party they so wholeheartedly revere. Independent, critical thinking has made itself moot in the era of people latching onto identification and personalistic connection with the BJP and what they represent (Bhatia 2022).

Modi and his men have utilised theatre in an unique way wherein they have ensured that all avenues of potential interaction are also dramatised and are in some way fulfilling of their performative ritual. Audience's commitment to the act and to imbibing the meaning they have gathered from online Hindutva performativity has not only led to digital legitimacy for BJP's political claims but has also permeated into in-person, physical performative engagement that has doubled the party's legitimacy. Their emotional reactions to BJP rhetorics and meanings have manifested in on ground Hindutva loyalty. The next section dives deeper into this phenomenon.

Audience Engagement In Person

India is currently seeing a large shift in the way people understand their role as active political citizens of the country. Historically this has meant conscientiously voting, joining/organising protests, signing petitions, participating in campaign rallies, and even the occasional formation of moral policing groups. However, post 2014 we see an incredible rise in people assuming their duty to their country is to be good Hindutva Vadis that commit to the protection of Hindu rights and lives, which is only possible if the BJP is in power. Based on the messaging the BJP presents in its official and unofficial dramatised rhetoric, audiences have accepted that to complete the theatrical act or even make it a reality, they need to take "matters into their own hands". This has led to masses taking the law into their hands, with trying to shape Indian society in the image of the BJP and its ethno-nationalistic imaginings.

BJP performances have had serious implications for online engagement with hate, divisiveness, and violence growing ten folds (as detailed above). This online activity has translated into on ground vigilantism and inflammatory harms. While sectarian violence has been a prevalent issue in the subcontinent due to the ingrained Hindu-Muslim divide, Mohsin finds that, 'State-sponsored IT cells, members, and supporters of the BJP (online) openly fan ethno-religious tensions, and incite and participate in violence, without any fear of police retribution' (Mohsin 2020). The BJP's messaging of Muslims being threats to Indian society, of the need for "Hindu Rakshaks", of radical Hinduism being key to Indian identity, and of equating Modi Bhakti to pure patriotism, has translated well into peoples' daily lives. In embodying these messages due to their emotional connection with them, people have taken to the streets, thus legitimising Hindu nationalist political claims. The rapid increase of such blind faith and subsequent violent action has seen international

⁵² Translations- "But Congress used to do this", "What did Chacha 420 (slur used for Nehru) do for us", and "Don't suck up to Pappu" (slur for Rahul Gandhi)

human rights and democracy championing organisations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International ring metaphorical warning bells in order to draw attention to this mass scale shift in the kinds of audience participation seen within the country. This only goes to show that the BJP's digital performance is not only seeing success in its reception but also in changing Indian society and its relationship to liberal democratic values.

Manish Saini, BJP's IT Cell Head for the state of Uttarakhand, states that 'Modi's use of social media awakens nationalism and patriotism among the youth in every corner of the country' (SBS News 2024). This perverted sense of nationalism comes to fruition through mob violence, lynchings, demolition of houses/shops/Muslim residential community spaces, boycotts and denial of important services like medicare, education, and food, as well as religious, pro-BJP rallies. Evidence of such action being directly correlated to digital content has come to light in multiple instances. February 2024 saw some intense clashes between Hindu and Muslim communities after a Madarasa in Haldwani was illegally demolished by the government (Ali 2024). When Muslims in the neighbourhood took to fighting back, with hurling stones at police officers using tear gas and batons, Hindu groups generated inflammatory posts on social media, calling "to beat the Muslims and teach them a lesson". Joining such calls to action, Hindu mobs took to the streets to beat and kill Muslims, leading to over 80 injured and 6 dead (numbers differ in each reporting). Similarly, during the 2019 anti-CAA/NRC bills protests, union minister Anurag Thakur took the mic at an election rally only to chant "desh ke gaddaro ko, goli maro saalo ko"⁵³, which very clearly is call to murder and genocide. The video of him calling on fellow Hindu nationalists was widely spread across social media platforms with further remarks stating dates and times to gather for such action. Subsequently, we saw incredible violence from both the state and public vigilantes against protestors, especially Muslim identifying persons, with thousands arrested, hundreds injured and over 25 killed. Inadvertently, multiple instances of firings at protestors were reported from the capital, with students at Jamia Millia Islamia University especially being targeted (Gettleman 2020).

Social media algorithms have allowed for performances to spread non verified information widely and unabashedly. Misinformation and lies spread on WhatsApp group chats and Facebook groups about Hindu men being murdered by Muslims or Muslims receiving special benefits from the Congress, had led to instances like the 2018 Rainpada massacre, the 2022 Jahangirpuri violence, and even instances of public flogging like the 2022 Kheda district harassment (Ganguly 2023, McLaughlin 2018, Shih 2023, Shih and Gupta 2022). Additionally, social media content claiming "corona jihad" or "bio terrorism" post the Tablighi Jamaat gathering in 2020, led to rampant discrimination against Muslims within hospital and quarantine spaces with denial of medical care and access to food. This resulted in many preventable deaths as well as hate crime incidents leaving one person dead in the 2020 Jharkhand riots. Ironically, when state sponsored Ram Janmabhoomi pujas were performed at the new Ram Temple in Ayodhya, similar rhetoric was not created and no law enforcement action was taken against Hindu groups that were mass gathering at the height of the pandemic in India (George and Inamdar 2021, Saikia 2020). Social media databases created to identify either Muslim/ Dalit men who work with cows and cattle or even Muslim men that are romantically involved with Hindu women are heavily spread and used by groups like the ABVP, Bajrang Dal, VHP or the RSS, to flag down the named individuals and either beat them with sticks and batons, sexually harass their family

⁵³ Translation: Shoot the bastard traitors of the country

members, “save” (read kidnap) their “illegitimate Hindu wife”, and sometimes even ensure their death (Banaji et al 2019). All of this in the name of preventing “love jihad” and protecting Hindu women or Hindu symbols like the cow. Through these examples, one can see how the BJP’s unofficial campaign of Hindu right wing nationalism has struck chords within audiences to ensure their emotional loyalty to their cause and rhetoric, even if it means taking radical steps to perform in the theatre themselves. Digital performances that stir great emotionality and personalise ingrained concerns/fears that exist in Indian society, allow for audiences to feel particularly compelled to be committed to their engagement with the theatre and feel strongly about legitimising the political claims.

In addition to audiences normalising violence based on the perceived messaging in the BJP’s performances, they have also taken to interacting with said theatre in ways of general religious and cultural loyalty. Masses flocking to the newly inaugurated Ram Temple to pay their respects, joining organised trips to see development projects like the Coastal Road in Mumbai or the Vande Bharat express train connecting Gujarat and Mumbai, singing religious songs in patriotic events like Independence day or Republic day functions, and even travelling to Kashmir and taking pictures with border patrol officers there, are ways audiences have been displaying their in person interaction with ideas and values presented in BJP’s campaigns. Organising religious processions, waving saffron and tricolour flags from apartment windows or even placing them in communal spaces like residential complexes, and leaning further into their caste based identity (with either telling everyone of their positionality, showing off identity markers via clothing, or even making sure they distinguish themselves from lower caste/Dalit markers) are all new trends that have paved the way for audiences to participate in Hindutva performativity. People have also taken to portraying themselves as the antithesis of “wokeness”, “liberandu” ideology, and even I.N.D.I.A bloc supporters. They do this either by verbally expressing the same, making cultural attire and values their main personality trait, or using derogatory language/“dank meme”⁵⁴ language in daily life claiming it to be for humorous intent. This allows people to make clear their political stance and ideological leanings while still claiming the facade of “non politicalness” or ambivalence. Hindutva performances and audience interactions online have created space for on ground shifts in political participation and personal identification. The way audiences have manifested the BJP’s official and unofficial rhetoric in person show us the strength of emotional meaning making through theatre and its success in legitimising even the most radical of political claims.

Conclusion

Theatre, within the political arena, has allowed for deep personal connection and emotionality rooted in cultural fears, anxieties, value systems, and adorations. Performance has led to audiences grasping on subtle/prominent meanings, ideations, worldviews presented in ways that are not only considered authentic and real but also made intrinsic to Indian identity. This ambiguity created between reality and drama has seeped into audience interaction with said authentic performance. Audience participation in political performance has been integral to the legitimising process of Hindutva rhetoric. Their repeated, committed, and enthusiastic participation allows for Modi Sarkaar’s dual rhetoric to exist and thrive without repercussions or questioning. People are able to complete the cycle of

⁵⁴ An overused meme, especially one which is overly ironic or offensive, often popular in unfavourable circles.

Hindutva identity building and political washing by buying into BJP's rhetoric and subsequently trying to convince others of the need for Hindu nationalism within the country.

With digital platforms being Modi's main avenue of performance, it is only fitting that most audience interaction and submission to said theatre happens online. The accessibility of social media has allowed for greater and rapid participation with people embodying the BJP's messaging down to a fault. Hindutva Vadiness, distaste for Muslims and Dalits, the proclamation of Hinduism and Indianism, are all ways audiences have legitimised the BJP's campaign of divisiveness and ethno-nationality building. Language, clothing, settings, used in Hindutva performances are now incorporated into people's everyday dialect and lifestyle. This goes to show their incredible loyalty to the performance and thus, to the Hindutva cause. This "Bhakti" has translated into on ground engagement with the BJP's official and unofficial campaign through violence, discrimination, and radical religious assimilation. In person audience participation in political performances are based on online ethno-nationalistic discourse and actions. We are seeing direct correlations between social media usage and its physical ramifications. This chapter has found that the causal chain is quite clear; the BJP is able to dramatise their Hindutva messaging and cause through official and unofficial channels. This inturn is leading to severe divisiveness and violence on online platforms which has had large implications for offline harms in Indian society.

Theatrical political claim making that allows for audiences to connect on a personal and emotional level sees greater legitimacy and backing than random spectacle or even non dramatised political agendas. In influencing people's behaviours, thoughts, actions, and ideologies, the BJP has been able to use identity as a key factor to shape national imaginings and rhetoric building. The concluding chapter of this thesis will discuss further the implications of the relationship built between Hindutva performativity and audience's loyal participation, especially pertaining to the ideological shift seen within masses surrounding their understanding of their Indian identity and their nationalistic affiliations. The conclusion chapter will try to answer the very question this thesis started out with, how does ethno-nationalist performance on social media shape the way Indian citizens perceive their Indianness?

Conclusion

India stands poised on a precipice as it steps into some of the most pivotal elections of recent years. The 2024 elections have, for most, felt like a bigger endeavour than choosing a government. The race here is for the very spirit and soul of India, its democracy, and its identity. The BJP's masterful use of social media and theatre has led to an overwhelming sense of loyalty based audience participation that goes beyond determining who gets institutional power. Instead it drives deeper into redefining India and its people in the image of Hindutva ideologies and BJP doctrines of right wing, cultural populism. Prime Minister Modi recently turned all attention towards himself after a highly controversial electoral campaign speech in the state of Rajasthan. This vastly recorded, shared, publicised, and viewed speech that fans communal sentiments, calls Muslims "infiltrators" and "sex obsessed", and claims that the INC prioritises the Muslim community (as opposed to the Hindu majority) to such great lengths that they would be willing to sell the "mangalsutras" of "our Hindu sisters". His use of performance and social media as a support gaining tool is incredibly apparent with his speech being a spectacle for both in person and "ghost" audiences that navigate politics through online mediums. Aside from the thousands gathered to watch him speak and celebrate his dramatised fictional narrative about the plight of Hindus within the country, millions online blindly tapped into his storymaking and defended Modi's narrative without a hint of hesitation (ref figs 11-14). With many calling it (and rightfully so) hate speech and incitement for communal violence, it becomes important to study what emboldens Modi to present radical right wing and immensely hateful views in public so brazenly. Additionally, it also raises questions about what it means for a major politician to make such intense claims and gain support doing it within the context of national rhetoric making and identity building.

In trying to study the relationship between parties/governments, citizens, and the way said relationship informs collective identity, this thesis found that it is in the power of emotional connectivity and the personalised nature of meaning making that the BJP gains its legitimacy and strength, which in turn shapes identity. This is enabled through the use of theatre as a tool for political communication, especially online. Social media has made the proliferation of right wing performance more palatable for audiences, thus giving it a bigger platform to thrive in. By dominating social media through funding extremely divisive and perverted performances as part of its campaign for a Hindu state, the BJP has ensured that it has the loudest voice in the room. By using an already volatile platform in dramatic and strategic ways, the BJP has reconfigured the ways people behave and think, especially with relation to themselves and their country.

Nationalism has taken a completely new meaning within the country ever since political performance has taken root on social cyber spaces. Through its dramatised storytelling and mythmaking, that has left people in a chokehold due to the effects of symbolism on their emotions, the BJP has branded India's historically inclusive, civic nationalism as a thing to be afraid of, especially for the Hindus. In trying to make itself look greater and more representative of the Indian people, the BJP has successfully tarnished the reputation of the INC and its foundational work for the country with regards to nationalism and national spirit building. The BJP has been able to equate secularism to Islamism, and propagate that the Congress has enabled minorities and furthered caste divides by providing them reservations and benefits rather than letting merit and hard work determine the fate of

the country, in turn neglecting its “true people”; the Hindus. Their use of digital performance as a driver for loyal audience participation has ensured that masses wholeheartedly assimilate into this ideological claim and think it to be authentic, and legitimate. Voting for the INC or the I.N.D.I.A alliance is now considered anti-Hindu, anti-Bharat stance, that is not only punishable (with the BJP altering anti-terror laws and redefining anti-national activity) but also considered a shameful activity worthy of ostracization from society. Invariably pro BJP audiences are thought to be nationalists whilst the others “deshdrohis”. The BJP has succeeded in making its presence synonymous with Bharat and Pragati, and thus deeming any alternative morally wrong for a person who is “truly loyal to their country”, or for a “true patriot”. This inherent argument in their performance allows them to isolate minority communities, especially Muslims who are for the most part against BJP rule, and double down on the mythical idea that they are not “true Indians” or that they would never be devoted to Bharat Mata and her “mitti”.

Interestingly, there is a large semantic shift happening within the country with India being the symbol of secular civic nationalism, and Bharat being claimed by the Hindu ethno-nationalists. According to the BJP, to be a Bharatiya is to actually care for the country and its people. Consequently, Indian identity is seeing a radical change in meaning and sentiment. Hindutva performativity has created a space for religious anxieties to become key aspects of peoples’ personalities and relationships, with others, their communities, their state, and globally. People are understanding their national identity based upon their religious and political preferences as opposed to historic, culturally binding affinities. Social media has also made it impossible for people to escape the dichotomy of Indianness, with identity becoming a public conversation rather than personal exploration. The attractiveness of Hindutva performance has led to many blindly accepting their role as Hindutva Vadis within Indian society, creating a new reality wherein Indianness is Hindu-ness. The combination of incredible sentimentality and feeling made through theatre and the pervasiveness of social cyber spaces has aided in a gradual yet radical change in people’s language, action, thought, and even worldviews. In providing space for niche extremist ideologies and personalities to thrive and dominate popular discourse, the BJP and its Hindutva project have inadvertently created a separation within people’s acceptance of their nationality vs their nationalism. To be Indian now holds different meanings and consequences for people based on their religion, caste, class, and political ideations. The rise and subsequent legitimacy of ethno-nationalist theatre on digital platforms has therefore altered Indians’ comprehension of self and other fellow Indians. This is based on their interactions with the BJP’s content and their viewing of how other sections of Indians are interacting with the same content. People’s self created ingroup/outgrouping based on Hindutva performativity is key to the remodelling of Indian identity at a national and international level.

This thesis has used India and the rise of an ethno-nationalist, populist regime like the BJP to understand the role of performance on social media to study the way national identity is built. The four main contributions this paper has to scholarship surrounding performance, digital media, and nationalism are-

- The interaction of populism and nationalism defines the type of regime a country adopts. Democratic strength relies on the collaboration of liberal, ethical populism and civic, inclusive nationalism.

- Social cyber spaces are critical avenues of political claim making and campaigning in developing countries. To undermine social media discourse that is divisive, funded, and generated by hegemonic institutions that hold state level censorship powers is nearly impossible.
- Theatre is an important lens to analyse social media since it enables better understanding of how an audience is influenced. The PPF 2.0 that studies the elements of dramaturgy is a potential framework to do so.
- Authentic performances that allow for emotionality influence audience's to a great degree, compelling them to participate in the performance and provide legitimacy. Additionally, theatrical ethno-nationalist performances empower violence and dissent online which in turn has implications for in person abuse.

The findings and additions made through this thesis to the study of social media and performance within politics and political claim making has implications not just for the Indian case but also for the rest of the world currently seeing a surge of right wing populists and cultural nativists coming to power. The use of PPF 2.0 to study other ethno-nationalist party dynamics in this digitised world would help us understand why extremist regimes are finding phenomenal public support and involvement. Such analysis could be transferred onto Trump governed USA, Putin's Russia, Netanyahu's Israel, Erdogan's Turkey, Orban's Hungary, and many more countries that are not only facing democratic declines but also seeing ethnic definitions of nationalism redefining personal and collective identity. Semi-authoritarian/authoritarian regimes like those mentioned above are nefarious with their use of performance and spectacle as avenues for support gathering and subverting of liberal democratic norms. This thesis gives us insight into how they are successful in doing so, especially through online platforms that are now intrinsic to all socio-political rhetoric making and relationship building. Finally, a salient aspect of this paper is highlighting theatre, sociology, history, and cultural constructivism as important lenses and perspectives within the field of politics. A true, holistic political research is only possible when relativism and alternative avenues of meaning making are taken into account when dealing with the study of people and their relationship with power. Future research expanding on the relationship between democracy, and nationalism via social media must employ multiple academic disciplines to ensure nuance and complexity within argumentation.

In the tumultuous landscape of our times, humanity stands at a critical crossroad. Across the world we see forces of ethno-nationalism, religious division, and extreme polarisation threaten to unravel the very fabric of our societies. It is evident that we are not just engaged in a struggle to sustain democracy and ensure good governance but more so that we are in a battle for our very soul; our intrinsic humanity as people. The pervasive rise of ideologies fueled by fear and mistrust demands our unwavering vigilance, and thus, there is an urgent need for us, as audiences to incredible political performances, to awaken from the blindness of deep ideology. Only by confronting reality with clarity and great discernment, can we open ourselves to the complexity of our existence and humanness rooted in civic morality.

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Appendix

- In what ways do you think social media is impacting Indian democracy? Would you say it is helping promote your party's ideals or is it being a hindrance?
- What tools of social media are most beneficial to your work/your party's work?
- Are there set images, colours, words, stories, etc, you use in the digital space to ensure your party's pov is being put forth?
- Would you say social media is being misused for personal agenda rather than political action?
- What big themes surrounding politics do you see having the most impact on audiences via social media? Consider religion, region, caste, class, nationality, etc?
- Which groups or sets of online members have the most say in political change or even change in political discourse nationally?
- How do you think the vast expansion of social media has impacted the spirit of nationalism and political emotion usually seen with physical embodiment of politics- rallies, speeches, etc, or do you think it has helped enhance or dampen the physical space? What is the chain like, social media → physical embodiment of said narrative, OR physical narrative → social media promotion?
- What do you think it means to be Indian or be nationalistic? Do you think social media has changed its meaning? If yes, how? If not, why?

Media Appendix

Video 1- “Phir Aayega Modi”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPwPdR5wd8w&ab_channel=BJPGujarat

Video 2- “Har Ghar Bhagwa Chhayega”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KToZ2ruSSFo&ab_channel=BHAKTIMALA

Video 3- 'Hindutva pop': The singers producing anti-Muslim music in India, Al Jazeera Newsfeed

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HK_oWGcC-E&ab_channel=AlJazeeraEnglish

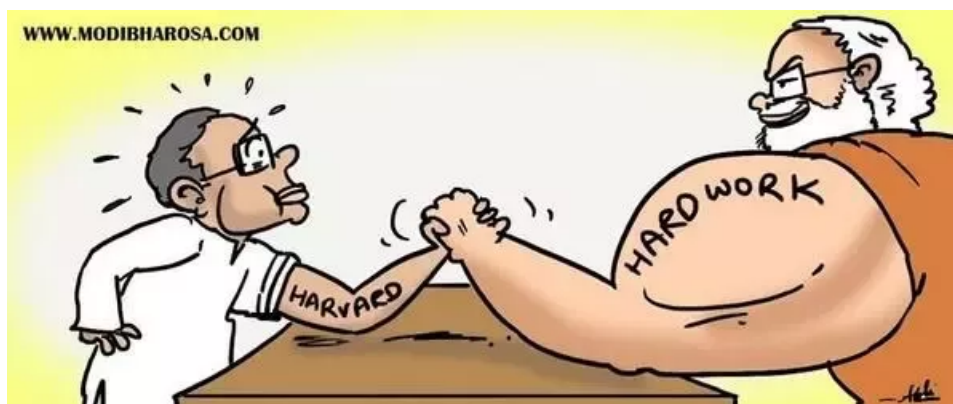


Fig 1-



Fig 2-



Fig 3-



Fig 4-

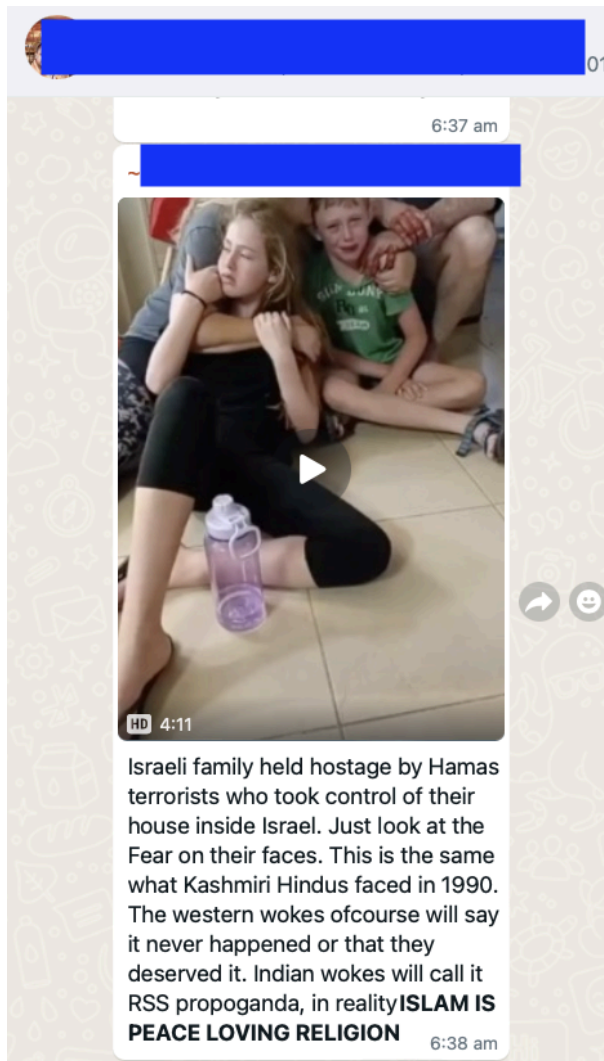


Fig 5-



Fig 6-

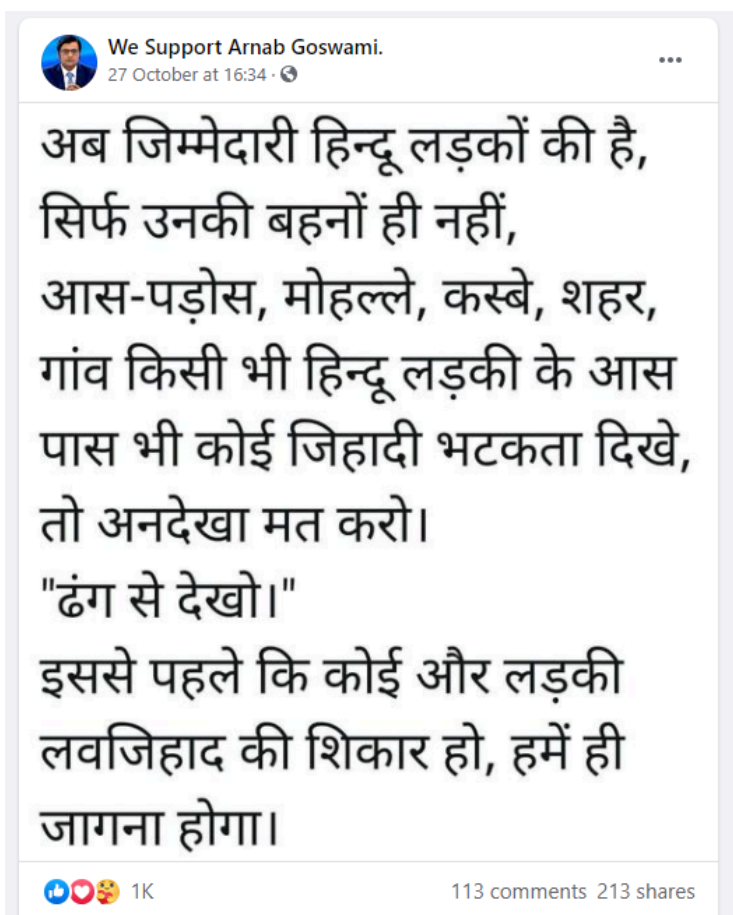


Fig 7-



Fig 8-

Fig 9-





Fig 10-



Fig 11-



Fig 12-



Fig 13-



Fig 14-

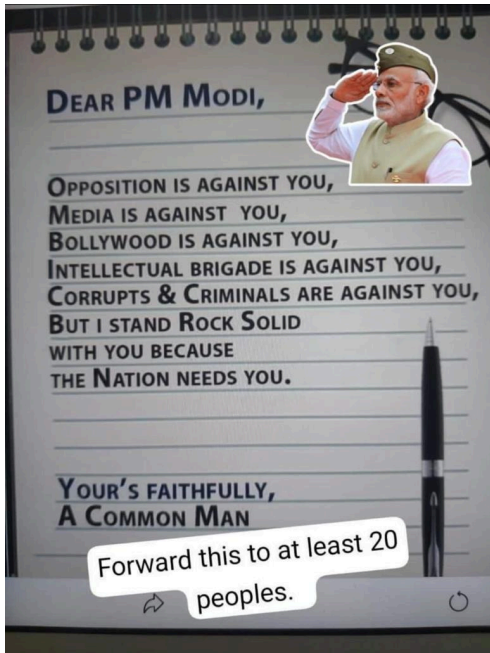


Fig 15-

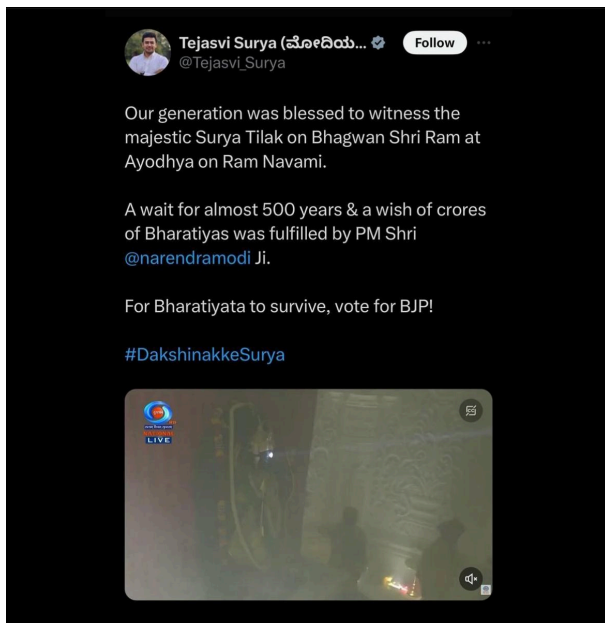


Fig 16-



Fig 17-

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