Hindu Majoritarianism and Authoritarian Shifts in the Age of Informational Capitalism in India

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Introduction

The ascendency of Hindu majoritarianism in India, under the authoritarian leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, coincides with a particular moment in the history of informational capitalism in the country. The term informational capitalism refers to the shift from industrial capitalism to conditions of production and accumulation that increasingly rely on datafication, platformization, and algorithmic ways of extracting profit (Cohen 2019). While it would be simplistic to attribute the emergence of a competitive authoritarian regime in India (Manor 2021) to the shifts caused by informational capitalism, to understand the manner in which they strengthen Hindu majoritarian subject formations that enabled and continues to sustain the current regime under Modi, such shifts need to be mapped. This chapter will argue that the term *bhakt* (devotee), which in contemporary India is often employed to characterize ardent supporters of Modi and Hindu majoritarianism, can be used to understand such subject formations.[1] What role do social media platforms and the broader configurations of informational capitalism play in enabling the production of bhakts? How does a Hindu majoritarian ecosystem of hate that uses misinformation, extreme speech (Udupa and Pohjonen), and violence, utilize digital platforms in the process of this production? How do these attempts strengthen the current authoritarian turn in India and what could the future implications of this authoritarian turn be? I will argue that it is possible to attempt to answer these questions by acknowledging the role of the process of circulation in producing meaning and subject positions. The following sections of this chapter will expand on this argument by relying on Sara Ahmed's (2014) contention that various affects, including hate, manifest in the process of circulation. Linking this argument with the broader history of Hindu majoritarianism in India will help us to understand the transformation of the circulatory networks of this form of

1 The term *bhakt* which can be translated as 'devotee' has different connotations. In this chapter, I am referring to its use within discussions on Hindu majoritarianism in India.

majoritarianism with the arrival of informational capitalism and the significance of such transformation in the enabling of authoritarianism. The conceptualization around circulation that this chapter deploys is part of an effort to map the changes caused by informational capitalism in specific contexts, as part of a larger trajectory of links between communication practices and socio-political processes. As other scholars have argued, the 'online' is formed by political and historical experiences that are also always 'offline' (Banaji and Buckingham 2013). Therefore, in order to ascertain how digital platforms and the broader terrain of informational capitalism contributed to the emergence of an authoritarian regime in India, there is a need to first understand the role of Hindu majoritarianism and its ecosystem of hate in enabling this regime.

Situating the Role of Hindu Majoritarianism within the Authoritarian Turn in India

The Hindutva ideology, which came into being in colonial India, holds together a diverse set of actors who contribute to the consolidation of Hindu majoritarianism in contemporary India. This right-wing ideology has significant links with Italian Fascism and Nazism (Leidig 2020). It situates Hindus as those who regard India as their 'holy land' on account of them being the followers of religions which originated in India: this logic places Muslims and Christians in the country as outgroups. Definitions of Hindutva range from formulations that treat it as a political ideology that is exclusivist (Kanungo 2016) to arguments that link it with ethnonationalism (Zia 2020) or political religion (Frykenberg 2008). This chapter relies on a framework that approaches Hindutva as a variant of right-wing extremism (Leidig 2020). While Hindu religious tropes remain central within Hindutva mobilizations, rather than any theological commitment to religion, these tropes have more to do with efforts to form an ethnonationalist "Hindutva based Hindu identity" (Nizaruddin 2020) which locates the Brahmanical upper caste way of life as the only permissible way of being in India (Basu 2021). There are scholars (Aloysius 1994) who argue that the Hindutva mobilizations and the practices around them are part of an effort by the powerful minority of upper castes to narrate a majoritarian 'Hindu' identity that aims to restrict struggles against the severe caste-based inequalities and divisions within what is perceived as the Hindu community. In these mobilizations, Muslims emerge as the chief outgroups; the history of the partition of colonial India into Hindu and Muslim majority nation states and the colossal tragedy of violent riots around this partition play an important role in this framing of Muslims as outgroups.[2]

2 Hindutva groups participated in these violent riots, see: Leidig 2020 and Gupta 2007.

The Sangh Parivar or Sangh family of organizations have been the most significant proponents of the Hindutva ideology in independent India; Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the key organization within this 'family' has several parallels and historical links with Italian Fascism.[3] Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which currently holds an absolute majority in the lower house of the Indian parliament is the electoral face of Sangh Parivar. It can be argued that the current electoral success of BJP is a result of a careful consolidation of a so-called Hindu vote bank with the help of a Hindutva ecosystem of hate that targets Muslims. This consolidation has a long history and it was only in the 1990s that a Hindu majoritarian party—in this case the BJP—gained enough votes to emerge as the single largest party in the election and formed the central government.[4] Circulations from the Hindutva ecosystem of hate that constantly reiterate the distinctions between Hindus and Muslims were integral to the rise of BJP. Along with misinformation, hate speech and extreme speech, violence is also a central part of these circulations. These circulations and the ease of mobility that they have under the Modi government, can be used to differentiate the current authoritarian situation in India from the earlier 'emergency period' when civil liberties were suspended.[5] Scholars like Balmurli Natrajan have argued that Hindutva politics is "inherently authoritarian since it makes continual demands on citizenry backed by threats and punitive actions" (Natrajan 2022, 304). The current situation in India, where the space for opposing the Hindutva politics is very limited, points to the validity of this argument (Banaji 2018). So, it is not surprising that, under a Hindutva leader like Modi who enjoys an electoral mandate that no other BJP prime minister has seen before, India is witnessing an authoritarian shift. This shift is also characterized by the emergence of a Hindu majoritarian state that locates Muslims as the chief outgroups in the country (Gudavarthy 2019). The subject position of the Hindutva and/or Modi bhakt that emerges from the sites of engagements around the Hindutva ecosystem of hate in contemporary India, plays an important role in this majoritarian turn and its authoritarian manifestations. In the next section, I will delineate some of the key features of this ecosystem of

3 The term Sangh Parivar is used to denote the 'family' of Hindutva organizations that are at the centre of Hindu majoritarian politics in contemporary India. RSS, the central organization within this family, can be characterized as a "Hindu nationalist paramilitary organization", see: Roy 2021. The constituents of this 'family' range from the trade union Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) to Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) or the World Hindu Council. VHP played a major role in the mobilizations in the 1980s and 1990s that led to the demolition of the mosque Babri Masjid, see: Leidig 2020.

4 This was a coalition government.

5 The official 'emergency' period in India during the 1970s, when democratic rights were suspended, was declared by the-then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who belonged to the Congress party which is perceived as a centrist party in the Indian context.

hate and track its transformation under the conditions provided by the ascent of informational capitalism when social media and online platforms emerged as important players in defining the contours of the communication landscape in India.

Consolidation of the Hindutva Ecosystem of Hate

Hate has been a central affect within Hindutva mobilizations since the colonial times. The locus of Hindutva politics lies in the definition of the Muslim as the 'enemy' (Natrajan 2022) and the carving out of a Hindu majority in opposition to this 'enemy'. Within the scheme of this politics, as Gyan Prakash points out, the project is not to create a theocratic Hindu state but to "expunge the minorities altogether from national life" (Prakash 2007, 178). So, circulation of various narratives of hate and violence that target Muslims who are defined as the principal outgroups have been an integral part of this project. Some of the central themes of these narratives include accounts about a mythical 'Hindu past' before the arrival of Muslim rulers (Karner 2005), the 'danger' of a 'Muslim take over' of contemporary India through the 'population growth' of Muslims and conversions (Singh 2021), the 'dangerous virility' of Muslim men which is perceived as a threat to Hindu women (Tyagi and Sen 2020), and the positioning of Muslims as the killers of the cow, which is considered as a sacred animal by a large section of Hindus (Mukherjee 2020). After India's independence, the territorial dispute between India and Pakistan over the region of Kashmir, as well as the alleged loyalty of Indian Muslims towards the 'enemy state' of Pakistan, and discourses that link Muslims with terrorism have been important motifs within the Hindutva ecosystem of hate (Prakash 2007; Omar 2021). Most of these narratives have their roots in existing schisms and mistrust between communities in a very diverse country which has witnessed a colossal scale of violence between Hindus and Muslims during the partition of colonial India into the nation states of India and Pakistan. The actors within the Hindutva ecosystem of hate, which in independent India consists mainly of those with varying amounts of affiliations to the Sangh Parivar group of organizations, have consistently worked to deepen such existing divisions and mistrust (Brass 2003). Circulatory networks that used various forms of communication including print, video, audio-cassettes, processions, marches, speeches, as well as embodied travel, political mobilizations, and violence were crucial for this ecosystem of hate (Nizaruddin 2020). The strong grassroots presence of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the central organization that is at the heart of the Sangh Parivar group of organizations, has played an

important role in sustaining and expanding these circulatory networks. RSS aims to situate India as a Hindu *rashtra* or nation (RSS undated; Nizaruddin 2022).[6]

The most important mobilization leading to the current expansion of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate was the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation. This agitation, aimed at demolishing the 16th century mosque Babri Masjid in order to build a temple to the Hindu god Ram, was spearheaded by the Sangh Parivar group of organizations.[7] By using the trope of *yatra* which in the South Asian context signifies pilgrimage or journey, these organizations were able to transform the lifeworld of the nation by forming various interactive sites that allowed the circulation of hate that targeted Muslims, portraying them as so-called aggressors. The rath yatra (chariot journey) undertaken by BJP leader L. K. Advani, in a van that was fashioned as a chariot in 1990, was a key part of the mobilization that transformed BJP's electoral chances by deepening the existing fault lines between Hindu and Muslim communities.[8] This form of embodied travel across various states of India was a public performance that expanded the circulatory networks of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate by allowing the flow of narratives, media forms, and bodies that targeted the so-called Muslim 'other'. The wave of riots across India in the 1990s, that took place around the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation and the circuit of the rath yatra in which many people were killed, substantiates the argument that Sangh Parivar groups use violence as a form of communication (Banaji 2018).

So, in the early 1990s or even the late 1980s, before the logic of informational capitalism began to have a significant impact on everyday interactions in India, an information order was already in place that allowed Hindutva groups and especially BJP and other Sangh Parivar organizations to create a framework within which even those who opposed these groups articulated their viewpoints (Panikkar 1993; Basu 2021). In other words, even such oppositional articulations used the framework of the Hindu-Muslim divide that the Hindutva groups relied on to consolidate the Hindu majority in their favour. We need to analyse the post-2014 expansion of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate and the role of informational capitalism in this expansion against this background.

6 The organization conducts around 57,185 daily meetings in 36,729 places (RSS undated).

7 The claim was that the mosque was built in the exact birthplace of the Hindu God Ram. The mosque was demolished by agitators mobilized by Sangh Parivar in 1992.

8 For a detailed analysis of the significance of yatra in Indian politics and the many yatras mobilized by Sangh Parivar including the ones undertaken by Advani, see: Jaffrelot, 2009.

Transformation of the Hindutva Ecosystem of Hate under Informational Capitalism and a Majoritarian State

The use of online platforms by actors within the Hindutva ecosystem of hate was widespread before 2014. The term 'internet Hindus' was used by journalists and scholars to signify actors who targeted secular liberals and anyone they framed as the enemies of Hindus and/or Muslim sympathizers (Mohan 2015). In terms of political parties, BJP has consistently been more advanced than others at using online media in the process of building a support base in their favour. However, there was a noticeable expansion of this use of online media as well as the Hindutva ecosystem of hate under Modi's reign. As Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarasingam point out, events in the daily news cycle became a locus from which to spread anti-Muslim hatred (Desai and Amarasingam 2020). One of the most important examples of this was the circulation of the narrative of 'CoronaJihad' during the first phase of the COVID-19 lockdown in India. During this period, an incident of a COVID-19 outbreak in a Muslim organization's mosque and headquarters became the focal point around which to build a narrative of CoronaJihad, which accused Muslims of waging a war against the country by spreading the COVID-19 virus. Along with Hindutva actors on social media platforms, a section of the mainstream media, as well as BJP leaders and those associated with the Hindutva ecosystem of hate, contributed to a rapid circulation of this narrative across the country which led to the boycott of Muslim vendors in some areas (Nizaruddin 2021). While the circulations of hate that targeted Muslims around the narrative of CoronaJihad received widespread attention internationally, this was just one instance within a continuum of such targeting under the rule of Modi. In fact, hate has become a central affect within the nation's lifeworld and anything ranging from an advertisement that shows a Hindu woman with her Muslim mother-in-law (Kapur and Mohsina 2020) to the attack on an Indian military convey in the disputed territory of Kashmir could become the focal point for such circulations of hate (Desai and Amarasingam 2020).

What specifically is the role of informational capitalism in bringing about this scenario? With the arrival of digital platforms, the operations within the Hindutva ecosystem of hate have changed significantly. It is possible to locate such changes by using the lens of remediation. The term remediation signifies the way in which old and new media forms influence each other; when a new media form arrives, an older media often transforms itself rather than becoming extinct (Bolter 2007). The newer media form can also draw from the existing tropes of older media forms. In the case of circulatory processes within the Hindutva ecosystem of hate, they have undergone considerable transformation because of the widespread availability of smartphones in India after 2013 (Banaji et al. 2019). Circulation of misinformation and spectrums of extreme speech, including what can be classified as hate speech,

has been a central activity within this ecosystem of hate. With the arrival of platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, such platforms have become key sites for these circulations. The use of these and other digital platforms by Hindutva groups needs to be situated within the context of the existing misinformation ecology in contemporary India.

In popular parlance in India, the term 'WhatsApp University' is used to denote the avalanche of misinformation that circulates through WhatsApp, the most popular mobile instant messaging platform in India which has over 400 million users (Roy 2018). For example, it is possible to enquire jokingly to a friend or a colleague who gives a new piece of misinformation whether they learnt it from WhatsApp University. While it is certainly true that content flows across diverse digital platforms in the current conditions of informational capitalism, the popularity as well as particular affordances of WhatsApp make it a significant platform within the misinformation ecology in India. The circulations of the so-called WhatsApp University in India are very varied and they are not limited to Hindutva circulations. However, actors from the Hindutva ecosystem of hate contribute to a significant portion of such circulations (Sharma 2020). Though WhatsApp is an important platform for the circulation of misinformation and extreme speech for Hindutva groups, actors from such groups have a considerable presence in several other digital platforms as well (Mohan 2015). In fact, the digital capacities of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate are so formidable that they can be compared to a distribution engine that works with precision (Sundaram 2020). The precision of this distribution engine has certainly increased the circulatory capacities of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate.

A brief outline of some of the key actors who contribute to such capacities can help to create understanding about how this ecosystem of hate has transformed under the conditions provided by the arrival of informational capitalism. Currently, such actors can be divided into the following categories: (1) a section of BJP workers and leaders; (2) actors belonging to the various Sangh Parivar organizations including RSS; (3) fringe Hindutva groups who may or may not have links with the Sangh Parivar group of organizations including BJP; (4) Hindutva sympathizers; (5) Hindutva 'entrepreneurs' (Udupa 2018); (6) paid trolls with links to the BJP Information Technology wing (Chaturvedi 2016); (7) corporate or IT firms who are alleged to have been involved in the spread of misinformation to consolidate a Hindu vote bank in favour of BJP; (8) cyber troops (Campbell-Smith and Bradshaw 2019); (9) aspiring and established 'hate stars' (Sundaram 2020); (10) small content producers who can be hired by anyone who aspires to be an influencer including those who aspire to

be Hindutva hate stars (Nizaruddin 2021); and (11) online Hindutva platforms such as OpIndia (Kritika 2020).[9]

The first four categories have traditionally been active within the Hindutva ecosystem of hate. Their use of online platforms can be situated as an extension or even remediation of their already existing activities. The later categories have emerged within the landscape provided by informational capitalism. The rise of hate stars needs to be placed in the context of the emergence of the majoritarian state as well. In contemporary India, the targeting of Muslims through acts of hate speech or violence is an easy way to become prominent within the ranks of Hindutva groups and sympathizers. Arjun Appadurai (2019) has termed this syndrome aspirational hatred. For aspiring as well as established hate stars, online media is an important means to build a support base and popularity. Some of these hate stars or groups affiliated with them also participate in acts of violence, they often film and circulate recordings of such acts of violence through digital platforms (Mukherjee 2020).

Violence has been an important component of the Hindutva circulations since the colonial era. With the emergence of a majoritarian state under Modi, this violence has escalated and the ability of perpetrators to act with impunity has increased. The lynching of Muslim men across several states in India, especially in the context of so-called 'cow protection', is an example of this. So-called cow protection groups target Muslims and Dalits who are accused of transporting cows for slaughter. In fact, in the context of the lynchings of Muslim men including the ones around cow protection, scholars have argued that Muslim men have become the *homo sacer* in India, meaning it is possible to attack, perpetrate hate crimes, or even kill them without serious legal consequences (Ahmad and van der Veer 2022). Certain social media platforms, especially WhatsApp, are used to co-ordinate acts of violence that target Muslims (Nizaruddin 2022).

The digital distribution engine of Hindutva groups and the broader Hindutva ecosystem of hate provide sites of engagement that contribute to the production of the subject position of the bhakt, that is integral to the functioning of the authoritarian regime of Modi. As mentioned earlier, the term bhakt, which can be translated as devotee, describes a category of blind supporters of Modi and the Hindutva narratives. Nisha Mathew has argued that under Modi, India is transforming into a bhakt nation. Mathew suggests that this transformation draws on certain aspects of the traditions of 'bhakti' devotionalism in medieval South Asia (Mathew 2021). In the case of this emerging bhakt nation, "followers are redefining their identities around Modi as their guru, leader and 'deity'" (ibid., 5). Within the configurations of Hindutva, bhakts are not a uniform category and they can

9 This is not an exhaustive categorization. More empirical work is needed to expand these categories.

range from upper middle-class people residing in gated communities in cities to underemployed lower middle-class youth for whom forwarding Hindutva WhatsApp messages is a way to earn extra money (Mukherjee 2020). They play a major role in circulating Hindutva narratives across various platforms. The ubiquity of these narratives in the lifeworld of the country works performatively to solidify the perceived consensus around the authoritarian trend under Modi.

The ubiquitous iterations from the Hindutva ecosystem of hate limit the scope of permissible articulations in India. Those who oppose the authoritarian measures of the government are termed anti-nationals or Muslim sympathizers. Within online spaces, those who attempt to articulate such opposition face severe backlash, ranging from trolling to deplatforming. The lacunae in moderation practices that are created by the working practices of information capitalism (Cohen 2019) help to configure such a backlash. For example, within these moderation processes, the labour of the users is crucial. The digital distribution engine of Hindutva groups, who are able to use the labour of a critical mass of users, finds it easier to target those who are perceived as the so-called enemies of the nation.[10] This limiting of permissible articulations is also achieved through the use of the state's law and order apparatus, as well as vigilante violence perpetrated by Hindutva groups. For example, those who oppose the Modi regime, ranging from academics and activists to ordinary people, can find themselves at the receiving end of violence or legal action that results in imprisonment (Goyal 2021). Altogether, as mentioned earlier, the limiting of iterations that oppose the logic of Hindutva and the proliferation of narratives from the Hindutva ecosystem of hate, translates into a perceived consensus in favour of authoritarian transformations under Modi within the lifeworld in India.[11] Against the framework of this argument that links the expansion of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate with current authoritarianism in India, it will be useful to delineate some of the specific socio-political processes that facilitate this expansion under the conditions provided by informational capitalism. In this context, Sara Ahmed's proposition becomes relevant that, like other affects, hate is also "an effect of the circulation between objects and signs" (Ahmed 2014, 45). This proposition about the affective economy of hate contends that "hate is economic, and it does not reside positively in a sign or body" (Ahmed 2014, 59). So, if hate manifests itself in circulation, then in the Indian context, conditions for such circulation have

10 Here Farman's argument becomes important, regarding how—with the increased popularity of digital networks and especially smartphones—the embodied spaces that we inhabit are produced by material as well as virtual means, see: Farman 2012.

11 Protest movements ranging from the ones against the discriminatory citizenship amendment act (Kaur and Dyuti 2020) to the farmers' movement in India continue to create fissures within this perceived consensus.

increased manifold since 2014. The following section will outline the entanglements of informational capitalism with these conditions for circulation.

Situating the Conditions for Circulation of Hate in Contemporary India

Julie Cohen's argument that "communicative spaces produced by platform-based, massively intermediated information infrastructures are not neutral spaces" can be used to understand how the current trajectory of informational capitalism contributes to the ease of circulation of Hindutva hate that targets the Muslim minority in India (Cohen 2019, 107). These communicative spaces that are optimized for engendering "cascade based diffusion, polarization and relativization" privilege crowd-based judgements in pursuit of greater profits, and in turn open up the possibility of creating powerful mobs (Cohen 2019, 88). In the Indian context, such communicative spaces enhance the circulatory capacities of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate. Several participants within this ecosystem were capable of forming polarized crowds through various means and it made the remediation of such capacities in the communication spaces created by informational capitalism an easy task for them. As I have mentioned earlier, even before the advent of digital platforms, circulations from this ecosystem were able to reach ubiquity, as the case of the mobilizations that led to the demolition of Babri Masjid show. However, the arrival of informational capitalism certainly increased the speed of such circulations. This increase could be situated in the context of the enhancement of the network-making power (Castells 2009) of Hindutva groups in a media landscape that saw major transformations under the sway of informational capitalism.

Globally, individual nation states are seen as key stakeholders in controlling the ease of circulation of hateful content within communicative spaces created by digital platforms (Nizaruddin 2022). However, the example of India demonstrates that such assumptions become irrelevant in a majoritarian state, where the ruling party has a stake in maintaining a polarized environment to consolidate a vote base of majority voters by situating a specific minority as dangerous. In such situations, digital platforms can become vital for the circulation of hate that targets such minorities. Many technology companies make statements about their intention to contain circulations that target minorities (Fung 2020). However, the current mode of functioning of informational capitalism where technology companies are able to function without any real accountability (Suzor 2019) means that companies can continue to make such statements without any matching structural changes. Companies also often align themselves with the interests of authoritarian rulers to ensure ease of operation in various countries (Cohen 2019). In the case of India, the exit of India's Facebook policy chief Ankhi Das over a controversy about favouritism towards the ruling party (Horwitz and Purnell 2020) shows the existence of such

aligning of interests. So, under the present mode of functioning of informational capitalism, the emergence of a majoritarian state can seriously enhance the circulatory capacities of actors who target minorities. In the case of India, hate could even be situated as a tool of Hindutva governmentality. This in turn makes those who oppose the government a target of such hate and they get positioned as Muslim appeasers. Thus, one of the main permissible positions available to avoid being targeted becomes that of the bhakt or devotee. As I have argued before, this seriously undermines democratic modes of functioning and contributes to an authoritarian turn.

Conclusion

The manner in which the Hindutva groups in India were able to use the conditions produced by informational capitalism to configure an authoritarian transformation in the country shows the need to confront the current logic of operation of this informational capitalism. While several socio-political factors contributed to an authoritarian transformation in India, the production of the subject position of the citizen as bhakt is integral to building a consensus around this transformation. The circulations produced by the Hindutva ecosystem of hate aim at consolidating such a subject position. The current logic of operation of informational capitalism has certainly contributed to the precision of the digital distribution engine of this ecosystem. Any reversal from the present scenario to a more democratic mode of governance will require a reordering of the current circulatory regime in the country. This will require a serious engagement with strategies that can challenge the current workings of informational capitalism that have contributed to this circulatory regime.

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