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Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, Xenia Zeiler

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JOURNALISM AND THE RISE OF HINDU EXTREMISM

Reporting religion in a post-truth era

Pradip Thomas

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the relationship between journalism, the rise of Hindu extremism and reporting in a post-truth era. By post-truth, I mean a general devaluation of traditional journalism’s commitment to objective reporting and of the journalist’s vocation to hold truth to power and to make the powers accountable to their publics. This lessening of value arguably is a consequence of the decline of journalism best exemplified by the Leveson inquiry in the UK on corruption and collusion in the Murdoch press and hastened by the rapid growth of online media resulting in the further marginalization of mainstream journalism. This tradition of journalism arguably has been difficult to operationalize in India and elsewhere. There has been a steady decline in the integrity of journalism in India highlighted by scandals related to so-called paid news (news for favor) and media owners dictated editorial choices and positions, along with growing gaps between the principles of journalism and its practices. However, there are also many examples of journalism making a difference, of investigative reporting and sting operations that have exposed corruption and that have to some extent contributed to major political fallouts. For example, Abdi and Shourie’s writings in the Sunday magazine and the Indian Express on the Bhagalpur blindings in the early 1980s played its part in strengthening the space and place for investigative journalism in India. Also, the sting operation by the investigative magazine Tehelka in 2001 that recorded corruption in the purchase of defense equipment contributed to bringing down the first Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government linked to the National Democratic Alliance. The post-truth era in India has additionally been shaped by resurgent expressions of fundamentalist Hinduism, that of Hindutva (the Hindu Nation) and a dominant politics that has enabled and legitimized such expressions along with numerous obscurantist practices ostensibly directed toward validating the greatness of Hindu civilization.

The contexts of journalism in contemporary India

Today, the establishment of an all-pervasive truth, which is dictated by selected groups is fraught, and attempts to establish a singular, all-pervasive truth is contested. The rise of vernacular journalism and the expansion of engaged and argumentative mediatized publics in
post-liberal media environments across the nation has arguably facilitated the descent of this kind of truth from its pedestal. This ranges from its elite moorings in an upper-middle-class/caste Anglo-sphere to a situation where competing truths, expressed and mediated through multiple media, offline and online, now command sizeable audiences. In other words, truths propagated by elite sources are now weighed by multiple, mediated publics who are in a position to accept, deride or discard. While there have been numerous pieces on the role of the media and journalism in conflict in India in online portals such as The Wire, The Hoot and Scroll and magazines such as Communalism Combat, Frontline and The Caravan, academic writings tend to be scattered although there has been a rise in writings on the growth of cyber nationalisms in India. Social media’s role in exacerbating inter-religious conflict, most recently that of the use of WhatsApp in mobilizations and circulations of graphic footage of the lynchings of mainly Muslim and nomadic herdsmen, has reinforced the view that there is a post-truth scaffolding and enabling environments that facilitate exclusive mobilizations and the persecution of often vulnerable minorities (see Chaudhuri 2018, Joshi 2018). Moreover, the rather blatant complicity of the ruling party and some news media in these crimes has resulted in a situation in which hate crimes against minorities and rationalists are justified and multiple signifiers circulated thus obfuscating the evidence for murders, ignoring the rule of law and replacing truths with multiple, manufactured discourses (see, for example, the outputs from Republic TV and India Upfront). George’s (2017) monograph on hate speech offers a cogent account of media complicity in the rise of Hindu nationalism. Mann’s (2016) article on the representation of the Sikh community in the context of the crisis in Punjab in the early 1980s in the Times of India explores issues related to media framing – media framing that led to the manufacture of stereotypes that labelled all Sikhs as violent and pre-modern. Thus, it contributed to justifying state violence against this community. Chakrabarti’s (2014) account of the ways in which television soap operas naturalize Hindu nationalist ideologies highlights the circulation of nationalist popular culture in everyday life. Udupa’s (2015a) article on archiving as history making explores the ways in which alternative histories of India are being curated online by Hindutva supporters. Journalist Varadarajan (1999) offers a historical and contemporary account of the role played by journalism in exacerbating communalism in India.

Truths – enshrined in the Indian Constitution from secularism to the rights of minorities to practice their religion – have come under attack from the proponents of muscular Hinduisms. The latter, under BJP rule, are involved in rewriting history, editing out the contributions made by minority communities to the history of the nation and creating Indian identity that is solely within the parameters of Hindu identity (while much has been written on this project, one of the more interesting articles on this issue has been written by Visweswaran et al. (2009)). There has been a rich and textured debate and discussions on the place of secularism in a resolutely religious country such as India in the media, while academic debates have pitted post-colonial scholars such as the redoubtable Nandy (2001) and Madan (1997) against secularists. Both are more sympathetic to tradition and what they see as fundamentalist forms of the secular, against the philosopher of science Nanda, whose writings include a fulsome critique of the political economy of reinvented tradition that she describes as the state-temple-market nexus. In his monograph Disenchanting India Quack (2012) explores the world of organized rationalism in India and the culture wars that this has ignited. Nanda has openly castigated the tendency for post-colonial scholars to celebrate indigeneity at all costs since the project of indigeneity, as they see it, has suffered under the onslaught of Western modernity, science and the rational. In Nanda’s way of thinking, enchanting India meaning the attempts to imbue a religious dimension to all things Indian
has become a massive arena for a Hindutva, in which commercialized television plays an important role. Post-colonial scholars such as Nandy et al. (1997) highlighted the secular ideology of humanists such as the first Prime Minister of Independent India, Nehru, as a form of cultural arrogance since it did not acknowledge the lives of the vast majority of ordinary Indians whose lives were rooted in religion. To these people, religion was their framework for life. As they saw it, secularism and science questioned this security and certainty and left people with nothing to hold on to. Nanda however questions the inability of post-colonial theorists such as Nandy to see the cultural and material basis for dominant Hinduism within neo-liberal India and the role played by a politicized and commercialized Hinduism in extending support for traditions of incredulity in the name of religion.

**Split publics, religion and journalism**

The cultural scholar Rajagopal (2009) has described the contested nature of religious nationalism in India in terms of its bearings on two distinct publics – what he has termed *split publics*, namely the English media consuming publics, on the one hand, and the publics involved in consuming vernacular media, on the other hand. The English media used a specific type of reasoning, and secularism as their basis for contesting the rise of Hindu nationalism that culminated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in the late 1990s and that remains a focal point for Hindu nationalists. In contrast to that, the vernacular, Hindi media articulated a range of frameworks and references that were heterogeneous and that reflected a variety of positional bearings that overlapped with many publics supportive of Hindu resurgence (see Charu and Sharma 1990, Ahmad 1993, Charu and Sharma 1996, Davis 1996, Nandy et al. 1997, Deshpande 1998, Kauser 2007, Ahmad 2010). One can use the term *split publics* to understand the rise of new publics in different parts of our world who are supportive of the politics of Trump, Farage and Le Pen. Hauser highlights the rhetorical conditions that underlie publics and the fact that these conditions contribute to the “quality of arguments reached in a public sphere” (Hauser 1999, 275). He and others have argued that there are indeed multiple forms of rationality that are based on a variety of understandings of reasonableness and in which *critical rationality* is one form of reasonableness. While Rajagopal’s concept of *split publics* certainly has value, I think it is important to highlight the fact that at least in the case of Hindu nationalism in contemporary India, and despite pre-existing traditions of anti-Islamism in India, the vernacular public as an oppositional political movement was to an extent manufactured through the mediations, interventions and legitimacy provided by Hindu nationalism. This legitimacy was used to attack Muslims and Muslim institutions, and as such, it was by no means a spontaneous, autochthonous uprising of Hindus against Muslims. In this sense, one can argue that publics can be shaped, even manufactured. This background is important because it has impacted the traditions of journalism in India.

While the cultures of mainstream journalism in India continue to play an important role in bringing truth to power, there is a need to reckon with the fact that multiple sensibilities and sensitivities now accompany journalism practice in India. Since the early 1990s and the liberalization of the media sphere, the media ecology has changed and this has led to an expansive increase in all types of journalism across multiple media channels, formats and delivery modes. India is one of the largest media markets in the world, with more than 850 satellite television channels, out of which there are more than 50 dedicated news channels and thousands of registered newspapers and magazines in numerous languages spread across the nation. This diversity and the diversity of formats and possibilities for citizen journalism, phone ins, participation in talk shows, Reality television and the like has enabled talk and
Conversation on multiple topics and the making of public spaces in which both text and context is now accounted for. In other words, journalism in India today caters to extraordinarily diverse audiences who are now involved in multiple public spheres through their many engagements with many media (see Mehta 2008, Punathambekar and Kumar 2014). This media diversity simply cannot be expected to uphold a singular truth on matters both mundane and serious. I am not arguing in favor of ethical relativism although within the current political circumstances in India and what would seem to be studied silence from the prime minister’s office on matters related to inter-faith conflict, there are opportunities for Hindu religious extremists to publically state ethically relativist explanations for the causes and consequences of majority-minority violence. Such silences in turn can be seen as both a type of political opportunism and as a form of tacit support for the fringe groups that contribute to the cause of Hindu nationalism, although it also exposes the fault lines between modernity and tradition on matters related to ethics. Journalism ethics in India is difficult to operationalize because of the existence of complex moralities that are not easy to reconcile with the universal truths that undergird the endeavors of mainstream journalism. Western universalities and Eastern rationalities do not always mesh and the present political climate in India offers possibilities for the reinforcements of split publics. Occasions when truths embedded in the Indian Constitution trump tradition, such as Supreme Court judgments in favor of the right of India’s to eat beef against the wishes of Hindu extremists, merely highlight the fact that the institutions of modernity such as the judiciary and journalism can and do play an important role in keeping democracy on track although there is always the potential for this project to be derailed, slowed down, obstructed by agendas of a religious-nationalist kind. Arguably, therefore, the moniker often used to describe India as the world’s largest democracy only accounts for the fact that periodic elections are held in India, and the military does not interfere with the business of statecraft or national politics. Democracy however remains a partial truth because it refers to institutions, institutional processes and values undergirding modernity that continue to be negotiated and that are yet to become the basis for a fundamental contract between every citizen and the state in India. Not all Indians are born into a context and circumstances that offer life chances strictly within the modernist paradigm.

The preceding information on the contexts of journalism are important because they point to the complexities that need to be factored into understanding the practices of journalism in India. Udupa (2015b, 19) in her ethnographic study of news making in Bengaluru within the Times of India Group highlights the fact that some English language journalists as well as those writing in Kannada exhibited what she has termed a bhasha sensibility, meaning attitudes nurtured by the “sentiments and discursive activities shaped by flexible market segmentations and cultural logics of regional language and caste, and how journalists interpret them as they interface a changing city and experience changes unfolding in their own professional field”. She adds that these sensibilities included various political subjectivities including “right-wing Hindutva, regional chauvinism and caste dominance to progressive pro-farmer and pro-poor positions” (Udupa 2015b, 204). Arguably, the existence of such sensibilities along with the nature of dominant politics in India that is pro-Hindu and majoritarian makes for a very conflictual and contentious environment for journalism in contemporary India.

The rest of this chapter will highlight the contentious nature of the relationship between media and religion in the context of the rise of right-wing Hindu sensibilities and attempts to mainstream such sensibilities. It is important to point out that despite multiple attempts to mainstream Hindu nationalism, such sensibilities and attempted actions are contested both in journalism and outside of it.
Contested religion and assaults on journalism

On September 7, 2017, the Kannada/English language journalist Gauri Lankesh and editor of the *Gauri Lankesh Patrike* was shot dead in her hometown Bengaluru. Her crime? She had fearlessly and courageously critiqued the complicities of Hindu nationalists in their many projects directed toward coercing minorities and shaping the imaginary and identity of a nation within the framework of a belligerent Hindu nationalism. While the media were quick to condemn this murder, her assailants have only recently been apprehended and the media have moved on to report other issues and realities. Borpujari (2017) in an online piece in *The Diplomat* on this murder has commented on the repercussions of this event for journalists involved in writing anything critical about the ruling party or on the activities of the many quasi-political groups that support the cause of extreme Hinduism.

Fittingly, her murder has made journalists in the mainstream media uncomfortable. Soon after her murder, some journalists received threats that they would face similar fate if they continued to challenge Prime Minister Modi, the BJP or the RSS, or if they were “traitors like Muslims.” One such journalist is the popular TV journalist Ravish Kumar of the Hindi news channel NDTV 24×7, and he recently penned an open letter addressed to Modi, asking if he should also fear for his life. An investigation by Alt News revealed that one of the persons attacking Kumar online is followed on Twitter by Modi’s official Twitter account.

(Borpujari 2017)

While reporting on religion remains a sensitive issue for journalists in India, other issues as well, such as corruption in high places and conflicts of interest between politicians and business leaders such as between the MNC groups owned by the Adanis reported in the *Indian Express* and the *Economic and Political Weekly*, have also led to law suits and defamation charges filed against specific journalists. Nielsen (2017) on the threats facing journalists in India cites five salient concerns:

1. Attacks on journalists by politicians often belonging to the ruling party using demeaning, portmanteau descriptors such as *presstitutes*
2. Private pressure by politicians and the bureaucracy such as the threat of income tax raids
3. The trolling of journalists by right-wing trolls often tacitly or otherwise supported by the government in power
4. Commercial pressures from advertisers, media owners on the media to report on safe issues
5. The threat of defamation that is now routinely used by politicians and business persons against journalists

The fact that the *Hindustan Times* was forced to retract its *Hate Tracker* (Niha 2017) that helped “track acts of violence, threats of violence, and incitements to violence based on religion, caste, race, ethnicity, region of origin, gender identity and sexual orientation” (The Wire Staff 2017), across India after the stepping down of its editor in chief Bobby Ghosh in 2017 is another example of the media playing safe in a climate in which the economic and political consequences of dissent have become risks that most media outlets are not willing to take.
Lankesh’s murder however was not an aberrant case but illustrates the rise of pre-meditated murders of secular journalists and rationalists and death threats against academics, such as the historian Romila Thapar who has been a strident critique of the attempts to rewrite and mainstream an alternate Hindu history of India, and artists such as India’s best known painter M. H. Hussein who was forced to go into exile to Dubai for painting Hindu Gods in the nude. In fact, in September 2017 alone, 3 journalists were murdered in India and the Committee for the Protection of Journalists has observed that 27 journalists have been murdered in India between 1992 and 2016 although the International Federation of Journalists claim that 70 journalists have been murdered in India since 2005 (Committee to Protect Journalists n.d.).

On August 20, 2013, the noted rationalist Narendra Dabholkar was murdered in Pune, a city in the state of Maharashtra. His crime – he had founded a rationalist association and had spent a good part of his adult life exposing God men debunking superstition and the trickeries associated with popular religion, particularly Hinduism, and critiquing the relationship between politicians and an array of religious charlatans. An equally well-known rationalist and President of the Indian Rationalist Association, Sanal Edamaruku, challenged a self-declared Tantric, Pandit Surendra Sharma, on a television panel to demonstrate his powers on him by killing him using only magic. The Tantric chanted mantras and performed a ceremony to kill Sanal Edamaruku on live television. Another attempt was made later that same night – this time under the night sky. The television channel India TV that telecast this event received a large boost in ratings. After his attempts failed, the Tantric reported that Edamaruku must be under the protection of a powerful god, to which Edamaruku responded that he is an atheist (Rationalists 2010). Edamaruku has also taken on the Catholic Church. In 2012, Edamaruku investigated what was being called a miracle: a crucifix dripping water at Our Lady of Velankanni Church in Mumbai. He quickly discovered the dripping was actually caused by water seeping through the wall onto the crucifix. Edamaruku reported his results on TV-9 and criticized the Catholic Church for creating the so-called miracle and being anti-science (Rationalists 2012). In response, the church demanded an apology and its supporters filed official complaints against Edamaruku. He was charged with violating 295(a) of the Indian Penal Code, also known as the blasphemy law, which prohibits deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings or any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs. His lawyers argued that the law infringes on free speech and they requested the courts declare the law unconstitutional. Meanwhile, he was refused bail and fled to Europe.

(Shaffer 2013)

Religion and media: factoring in commodification

What do these examples of religion and media tell us? From being treated by the media as an epi-phenomenon in post-independent India that was avowedly founded on secular values, religion has moved from being of periphery interest to the media, at best illustrated by a brief discourse on Hinduism on the last page of The Hindu newspaper, to the coverage of key religious events by the state broadcaster Doordarshan. It became of key media interest, a contentious issue and a commodity. In a post-neo-liberal, deregulated media environment there are out of the 850 cable and satellite channels available close to 50 that are explicitly religious – mainly Hindu, along with Christian, Islamic, Buddhist and Jain channels. For the most part, these channels are owned by religious figures such as the so-called God men and women, financed by their supporters and to a lesser extent by transnational and local media corporations.
Many of the Hindu-Hindi cable and satellite channels now offer 24-hour mediations and re-mediations of devotional songs, mythological serials, rituals or discourses in Sanskrit Hindi, thus creating an aura of authenticity between public Hinduism and its technology mediated and remediated versions. One of the interesting dimensions of this new version of public, nationalist Hinduism is that it is being shaped by the consumption of so-called authentic traditions associated with Hinduism, inclusive of Yoga and Ayurveda. Both old and new media platforms are being used to expand the footprint of a resolutely material Hinduism that is presented as indigenous, local and anti-multinational. A case in point is the production of a 90-minute biopic on the God man Baba Ramdev (a multi-millionaire God man who incidentally owns one of the most popular religious channels in India, Aastha TV) by Sony Entertainment Television in 2016. It featured both a story of his life as well as an extensive publicity for Ayurveda and yoga products popularized by his highly successful company Patanjali Ayurveda Ltd. and its many products that include shampoos, toothpaste, biscuits, noodles, juices, rice, wheat, honey and ghee (clarified butter). The key point of this program is to expand publicity for the promotion of pure products that are based on Ayurveda, give a competitive edge to Patanjali products and key multinationals involved in the packaged goods market a run for their money.

Analysts see Patanjali as a potential challenger to established packaged goods companies such as Hindustan Unilever Ltd (HUL), Colgate-Palmolive (India) Ltd and Nestlé India Ltd that compete in India’s Rs.3.2 trillion-a-year consumer packaged goods market. (Mitra and Ahluwalia 2016)

Arguably, what we are seeing is the commoditization of certain traditions inclusive of the Vedic sciences, numerology, etc., that have become normalized and an everyday aspect of public Hinduism.

**Reporting religion in the context of religious extremism**

This public growth of religion has not been accompanied by investments in religion sensitive journalism. While journalists involved in religious broadcasting and the religious press are involved for the most part in propagating religion, the religion beat is not the norm in mainstream media. The result is that most reporting on religion is carried out by journalists who do not generally have the aptitude, knowledge or commitment to providing background information on contested religion. Examples are the protectors of the cow (gau rakshaks) who have killed Muslim traders allegedly for smuggling beef, those who belong to the numerous fringe Hindu right wings groups protecting Hindu women against love jihadis or on the many investments by extreme Hindu groups to recreate public discourse in India on the terms of Hindu discourse. A conflictual legal situation in India that has led to often intractable inter-religious conflicts is the constitutional support for the freedom of religion, on the one hand, and the lack of blasphemy laws, on the other hand. This paradox has contributed to a legal grey area and to the facilitation of legal rulings that uphold the rights of those communities whose religious sensitivities have been hurt by media reporting or other types of infringements against religion. This conundrum and potential opportunities for defamation charges against journalists has led to self-censorship on the part of journalists who tend to opt for anodyne basic descriptions of a religious event but who do not include analysis or critique for fear of risking the ire of incensed members of a community. The controversy over the Bollywood film *Padmaavat* that reputedly portrays the Rajput community in a bad
light is just one example of an issue that both constant, pervasive and affects most if not all religious communities in India. In this case, a politician belonging to the BJP in the North Indian state of Haryana, Suraj Pal Amu, has issued threats against key actors including the Bollywood star Deepika Padukone and against the director of the film Sanjay Leela Bhansali (see DW 2017). Foreign journalists reporting on sensitive issues such as religion face the threat of deportation for their anti-national reporting and a number have been blacklisted and have been barred from entering India (see Masani 2015). The Hindu right believe that mainstream media is secular and therefore against the interests of the Hindu majority. However, that perception is not entirely backed because the vernacular, Hindi media have, for the most part, played a role as foot soldiers for the Hindu right in the context of reporting religious riots and religious projects. Examples are the building of the Ram temple on the site of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya that was destroyed by a right-wing Hindu mob in 1989.

The English media too, with some exceptions, have not been willing to report critically on organized Hindu nationalism or on the many politicians who belong to the ruling BJP party and who routinely issue extreme, highly provocative statements against minority groups in India but who are guaranteed impunity. While there are some exceptions such as The Hindu newspaper and magazines such as Frontline and Caravan, the most innovative attempts to counter the right of extreme religion and politics are online initiatives such as The Wire (see Bhatia 2017), Scroll, The Quint and media reporting and watchdog portals such as NewsLaundry and The Hoot (see Khan 2015).

**Journalism in the time of trolls and Twitter**

This expansion of religion in mainstream media has been accompanied by a massive presence of religion online. If televised serials (Rajagopal 2009) were among the first means that enabled a meshing of interests between diasporic longings and nascent Hindu nationalist mobilizations in India, the advent of the Internet has exponentially increased the potential for such correspondences. Sundaram in an article on cyber publics in India describes the

…creation of a naturalised space of “India” on the web – initiated largely by Indians in the Diaspora. Dominated by expatriate Indians sympathetic to Hindu nationalism, these web sites pose Hindu identity as isomorphic with India: a space purged of ambivalence…

In the virtual space of ‘India’ on these web sites ‘Hindu’ identity becomes an artifact – a contestable process is replaced by a reified boundary…Here the web sites act as markers of homogenised spiritual space, with rigid cultural borders, where “India” functions as a virtual museum for those whom Hinduism can fulfil the great unfulfilled dream of legislative reason – a world without ambivalence.

(Sundaram 1996, 16)

The present government (BJP) in India is both net savvy and explicitly Hindu nationalist in its orientation. It belongs to what is called the Sangh Parivar, a family of Hindu right-wing groups, and the present PM of India himself is a member of the RSS, an India-wide, cadre-based Hindu supremacist organization. Their enemy are minorities, especially Muslim, secular India, the Congress Party and the Left. Their aim is to bring back the glory of Hindu civilization, rewrite the history of India and strengthen Hindu India. They use both political mobilizations and new media advocacy to nullify any opposition – especially academics, capture institutions of higher learning and in their absence of being unable to control the mainstream media – expand their presence on the Internet. There are a number
of explicitly Hindu nationalist websites, major investments in social media by the BJP, an intentional effort to remake the PM’s image through social media and his Twitter following, investment in an army of trolls who are quick to contest content seen to be inimical or critical of the ideology and interests of the present government. In other words, a variety of platforms are committed to control the terms of the debate on numerous issues related to the identity of India and its cultural and social future through creating *moral panics* at the slightest excuse, using the reason of *national security* and *hurting the feelings of the majority community* to shut down debate by harassing any opposition both off and online.

There is a strong feeling from both those on the Right of the political spectrum that mainstream media has been captured by enemies and vice versa by the Left. In the case of Hindu nationalists, there have been major investments in using social media as the basis for connecting to the Indian population and in particular through revamping the image of the PM Narendra Modi and using social media platforms and Twitter to expand his base. There is a strong belief that using SM to take the lead on stories will inevitably lead to the media having no choice but to follow – and the BJP to control the agenda. It is fascinating that the PM invited 150 prominent social networkers to his residence in conjunction with the launch of the *Digital India* initiative – including many prominent trolls committed to the cause of Hindu Nationalism and Modi (see The Quint 2015). Their role, along with many countless others, is to monitor both online and offline conversations in the media, harass journalists and others whose reporting is deemed to be anti-Modi through mobilizing those on the Hindu Right to act as a digital mob effectively to threaten, abuse, harass and silence those whose opinions differ. Bhushan’s (2015) article on the Power of Social Media, in which he explored the reality and practices of right wing trolls, was tweeted by the well-known Indian journalist Siddharth Varadarajan but was immediately contested by Deepak Jain, a Twitter troll, “@svaradarajan while ignoring the anti-BJP venom spewed by ‘liberal’ tweeters all the time! This is not balanced reporting” (see Varadarajan 2015). Bhushan has this to say on right wing trolls

The internet is no stranger to trolls—users who post inflammatory, threatening or disruptive messages—with Twitter itself having admitted to not having proper policies in place to protect its users from harassment. The Indian Twitter troll, however, is an oddly specific creature. This troll belongs to a motley digital mob comprised of Hindutva converts, misogynists, minorities, Congress baiters and “sickular”—a pejorative portmanteau coined for those perceived as having a secular point of view—haters, all united by their atavistic chest-thumping bhakti—devotion—for Prime Minister Narendra Modi. (Bhushan 2015)

While there has been some academic work on right wing Hindu web presence (see, for example, Sahana Udupa 2015a), in recent years, both the PM’s Twitter presence and the role played by non-experts in the online archiving of pro-Hindu material and that deemed anti-Hindu have been the focus for some academic attention. Udupa (2015a) on online archiving as a political project in India makes the point that a motley crowd of *Internet Hindus* are involved in an aggressive engagement with social media platforms and using such engagements as the basis for advancing the project of Hindu nationalism. This involves the construction of narratives and digital storytelling in which fact and fiction are marshalled to create so-called authentic online versions of early and contemporary history, the historiography of mythology and the contestation of narratives that contest the values of Brahmanic Hinduism. These forms of contestation can be online as well as offline – with some websites such as *Indiafacts.org* threatening secular writers with legal writs and others
such as HinduUnity.org openly naming prominent anti-Hindutva intellectuals, journalists and commentators and encouraging acts of violence against them – very much like the strategies adopted by the anti-abortion activists in the USA. The website HinduUnity.org was blocked on orders from the government in 2006 (see Biswas 2006) although there are sites that provide information on how to access these sites (see Bhaaratham 2012). Online archiving of so-called authentic Hinduism can and does become a ready reference on a number of issues – whether it is on the all-India validity of a singular Hinduism based on uncontested Hindu scriptures or the effacing of the positive contributions made by India’s Mughal rulers. One of the latest casualty, for example, was Akbar, a renowned cultural savant who married Hindu princesses, established anti-discrimination policies specifically for Hindus, contribute greatly to the arts and to the strengthening of inter-religious dialogue. There is a trans-national dimension to this: the emergence of mainly US-based scholars dedicated to the project of larger Hinduism, a variety of local actors who often take errant writers to court ostensibly for hurting the sentiment of the majority community and at the end of this spectrum, the physical intimidation, even the murder of rationalists, beef eaters and supporters of secularism.

Conclusion

Arguably, digital repositories, databases and curation of alt facts online along with a range of blogs, microblogs, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and retweets supportive of the interests of the Hindutva project offer a much wider canvas for ordinary Indian citizens who are online and who are interested in the Hindutva twist to a range of national and international issues. The fact that the online world is only loosely regulated as opposed to the mainstream media that is highly regulated remains an issue although any attempt at regulating the cyberspace will impact on the competitive advantage that Hindutva groups online currently have. While there is little evidence to show that access to such sites has led to the migration of readers and viewers from mainstream journalism to such sites, nevertheless, the existence of such sites suggests that there are today rival spaces for news gathering, interpretation and the construction and manufacture of religious and non-religious news and views. The fact that the circulation of the press, both English and in the vernacular, have grown over the last decade would seem to indicate that the split publics in India will have opportunities to navigate both online and offline content and live and long for their own imagined India based on plural or, for that matter, majoritarian futures. If it is any consolation, the growth of fearless journalism off and online such as The Wire along with many vernacular offline and online journalistic initiatives do have the potential to contribute to the reinforcements of a plural public sphere in which private and public expressions of religion are both celebrated and validated within a resolutely multi-religious framework. The Indian polity has repeatedly demonstrated its independence from a politics that is divorced from an enabling of the livelihood needs of its citizens. While religion is essential to the everyday lives of people in India, employment, food, shelter and the business of living within the daily dialogue of life remains an equally compelling reason for voting for another politics.

Further readings


Chapter 4: India: Narendra Modi and the Harnessing of Hate, provides a succinct introduction to the nature of communal conflict in India that has been determinedly promoted by its Prime Minister, along with the party in power and the allied right wing organisations that it relates to. It deals
with hate speech, online sectarianism, political support for the re-writing of Indian history and impunity that has enabled those who propagate hate to be protected by the State.


This volume that was written against the background of major communal conflagrations in North India in particular advocacy to build a temple to Rama at the site of the Babri Masjid mosque provides insights into the mind-set of the supporters of Hinduism, delineates the history of Hindu-Muslim conflict, the realities of every-day Hindu-Muslim realtionships, and the uneasy pact with secularism in a hyper-religious country.


Udipa’s critique of right wing Hindu archiving online provides an insight into the numerous efforts online to create an alternative archive of the history of India that is based on the erasure of Mughal rule and its contributions to Indian culture. Such sites are nurtured both by individuals based in India and non-resident Hindu based in the USA.

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Journalism and the rise of Hindu extremism


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