Introduction

We must never, never forget our own history—both our proud martial tradition of defending ourselves against external aggression as also our sad tradition of excessive pacifism . . . Indian sages and philosophers never suggested that cowards and weaklings . . . can be the torch bearers of India’s great tradition of suraksha [good defense] . . . None but the valiant can achieve salvation.

(Advani 1997, 47)

This text, an excerpt from former party president Lal Kishan Advani’s speech to the political party Bharatiya Janata Party (or BJP) on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of India’s independence, is located within a narrative glorifying past Hindu warriors. The ‘we’ of this speech is unequivocally Hindu and embedded in a Hindu nationalist ideology that claims that India is a Hindu country and minorities are welcome to reside in India as long as they accept the cultural dominance of the tenets of Hinduism. The ‘we’ is also animated by a particular story of gender and nation—that of muscular nationalism (Banerjee 2012). Briefly put, muscular nationalism is an intersection of a specific vision of masculinity with the political doctrine of nationalism. This chapter presents a particular reading of muscular nationalism that fuses the concept of a Hindu India with armed masculinity.

Ever since the BJP asserted its national electoral presence in the general elections of 1996, their political mobilization has been marked by the use of a particularly aggressive and martial interpretation of manhood, which, although not entirely unprecedented in Indian politics, is unique in the degree of popular support it has garnered. This chapter will delineate the vision of a manhood linked with aggression and Hinduism that has resonated so successfully among the Indian polity. Muscular Hindu nationalism is not a recent component of the Indian polity but has been imagined and politicized in an organized manner since 1925 when the RSS (or Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) was founded. However, this political popularity is new and linked to the changing political landscape shaped by a disenchanted with the Congress Party, which has dominated Indian politics since 1947, and economic growth due to India opening up its economy to international capital since 1991.
In contemporary India, a plethora of organizations—the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the RSS, the political party Shiv Sena, the Bajrang Dal, and several other small regional cultural associations—are the voices of Hindu nationalism. Although there can be minor policy and political differences among them, one cultural imagery is shared by all: armed Hindu masculinity embodied commonly by a muscular Shivaji (1627–1680, a Maratha king who reigned over a section of the present-day state of Maharashtra), cast as a Hindu warrior who stood up against the Islamic conquerors of India or the divine Ram (the hero of the Hindu epic Ramayana) imagined as a martial masculine presence defeating the enemies of Hinduism. It is interesting to note that in popular discourse the enemy of Hindu nationalism is not the white British who ruled India for 400 years and saw Indian men as effeminate because they were conquered and conquered because they were effeminate, but the predatory Muslim male. This chapter cannot take on this issue, but this focus on the brown body of the Muslim as the enemy rather than the white colonizer reflects a provocative racialized hierarchy.

A popular slogan used by proponents of Hindu nationalism succinctly summarizes this ideology, ‘Jo Hindu hit ki baat karega, wohi desh pe raj karega’ [Those who speak of Hindu rights, shall take the throne of might]. This idea of Hindu nation or Hindutva is animated by an idea of manhood associated with martial prowess, muscular strength, and toughness. The present prime minister of India, Narendra Modi, in campaigning for the 2014 Indian general election that brought the BJP a landslide victory, emphasized manliness by projecting himself as a muscular protector of ‘Mother India’, in contrast to the effete, effeminate, and weak Manmohan Singh, the incumbent he was challenging. The campaign also emphasized his muscular body, referencing his 56-inch chest many times (Srivastava 2015). Further, he won again in the 2019 elections, with an increased share of the popular vote, despite a slowing Indian economy and several failed economic policies; for example, the demonetization that wiped out the savings of millions of Indian farmers and small business people. Despite this, the electorate responded to his message of muscular Hindu nationalism focused on retrieving Hindu pride and strength.

The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party was founded in 1980. In the 1984 general election, this party won only two seats in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of the Indian parliament). In the recent 2019 parliamentary elections, they won 303 of the 543 seats with 45% of the popular vote (Indian General Election, 2019, and Hindustan Times). Scholars, such as (Basu 2015), have debated the causes of the rise of this version of Hindu politics in India; however, one cultural component facilitating its rise seems unassailable: the vision of an armed Hindu masculinity expressing a vigorous national manhood. The allure of this national manhood has become enhanced by India’s entry into the global economy in 1991 leading to decades of economic growth and the creation of a global upper class who claim that India needs to become a powerful (read: muscular) global player.

In this chapter, I delineate the evolution of the ideology of muscular Hindu nationalism by discussing the ideas of one of the most revered thinkers of this ideology, V.D. Savarkar, and then moving on to trace the genealogy of this ideology as it unfolds in a globalizing modern India. My discussion will be guided by the idea of masculinity and its central role in Hindu nationalism. While there is a large body of scholarship on Hindu nationalism (Bhatt 2001; Basu et al. 1993; Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 1996; Pandey 1993; Sarkar 2001, to name but a few), this chapter’s focus on the location of manhood within its vision of nation is unique. This chapter draws on interviews conducted in India and archival work in India and Britain spanning two decades (1991–2011).
Manhood and nation

Like other forms of identity, masculinity is historically, politically, and culturally constituted. However, one form becomes dominant or hegemonic in setting the norms for male action (Connell 1995). In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, an emergent global hegemonic masculinity (shaped by the influence of American popular culture) is defined by physical strength, aggression, action, strategic use of violence, courage, and martial prowess (Beasely 2008; Connell 2005; Hooper 2001). These traits congeal in a muscular male body (Mosse 1996). The concept of hegemonic masculinity informs this analysis of gender in Hindu nationalism. I have demonstrated elsewhere that British colonialization injected traits of hegemonic masculinity into the Indian political landscape, which then was incorporated into certain Hindu nationalist responses to British colonialism (Banerjee 2005, 2012). In recent years, cultural globalization following in the wake of India’s entry into the global political economy has further strengthened the salience of this vision of manhood in the Indian polity (Banerjee 2016 and Banerjee & Williams 2019). Armed masculinity (an interpretation of hegemonic manhood that conflates masculinity and martial prowess) is central to muscular nationalism, and this vision of nation, like many others, needs an image against which it can define itself. Outsiders become part of such an image and, more often than not, become effeminized, that is, constructed with qualities opposite to those of this vision of manhood (not strong, not martial etc.). The location of the outsider within an armed masculine discourse intersects nicely with the political doctrine of nationalism which usually constructs an ‘Other’ who is used to reinforce ties uniting the nation. Frequently, the Other is effeminate and unable to withstand the militant martial prowess of the muscular national Self. The simple dichotomy of Self/Other and its link to masculine/feminine is quite malleable and enables men and women to negotiate a political terrain in complicated ways.

In the Hindutva articulation of muscular nationalism, ideas of manhood are animated not so much in reference to an effeminate Other but rather a fear of a hypermasculine enemy which necessitates the recovery of a lost manhood to resist the erosion of Hindu political presence, even dominance, in India. Put another way, Hindutva ideologues repeatedly link the decline of Hindu glory to a decaying martial spirit (Banerjee 2005 and Bhatt 2001). According to this perspective, Hindus were conquered first by Muslim rulers and then the British—both articulated variously as mighty warriors and/or sexual predators—because of the erosion of manhood (defined as muscular strength and military might). Hindu nationalists go on to argue that because of a series of conquests by foreign invaders (from Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran, and then Britain), Hindus have become weak and passive, in other words effeminate. Consequently, it is time for Hindu society to push back by unleashing an anger mediated through male bodies representing aggression and martial prowess.

V.D. Savarkar

As mentioned earlier, V.D. Savarkar, a figure revered by members of the RSS, BJP, VHP, and Shiv Sena, released certain Hindu-tinged images of muscular nationalism into the Indian cultural milieu, and some of these norms still inform modern Hindutva. Therefore, in an attempt to resist perceived humiliation over time, Hindutva ideology centres the retrieval of manhood. Savarkar, neither the first nor perhaps the most articulate voice delineating ideas of Hindu nationalism, was certainly one of the most political and hence played an influential role in the expression of Hindu nationalism. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was born on May 28, 1883, in the western Indian state of Maharashtra. In 1899, he formed, along with his brother, a
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secret revolutionary society—the Abhinava Bharat Society (Young India Society)—dedicated to reviving Hindu pride and overthrowing British rule. In 1910, Savarkar was arrested, while visiting Europe, because of an alleged involvement in a conspiracy against the British government and was deported to India. There he was tried and sentenced to a term of 50 years in the Andaman Islands, home to a maximum-security British penitentiary. Savarkar was released in 1924, subject to the condition that he not leave the district of Ratnagiri in Maharashtra (Grover 1990, xi). This ban was lifted in 1937, when he then became president of the Hindu Maha Sabha, an organization bent on the political mobilization of Hindus and Hinduism (Anderson & Damle 1987, 36).

Savarkar wrote profusely, both in and out of jail, but among his works The Indian War of Independence (1909), Hindutva (1923), Hindu Pat-Padashahi or a Review of the Hindu Empire of Maharashtra (1925), and Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History (1963) were the most influential in developing and framing ideas of modern Hindu muscular nationalism. His annual addresses to the Hindu Mahasabha during his term as president also facilitated the politicization of the Hindu nation.

An exploration of India’s weak martial spirit—demonstrated, in Savarkar’s mind, by the subjugation of millions of Indians by about 150,000 Englishmen—formed the thematic framework of almost all of his work. Savarkar rejected the British solution—that is, the effeminate nature of Indian men—to this conundrum. He posited instead that the British victory could be explained by the degeneration of a once powerful and mature muscular Hinduism, one that had reached its zenith during the rule of the Marathas under Shivaji and sparked briefly during the War of 1857. The latter was identified by him as the first war of Indian independence. As Savarkar outlined his configuration of muscular nationalism, it becomes clear that Hindu Swaraj (Hindu nation) animated the warrior’s patriotic fervour. However, in most of Savarkar’s work, the Other of the Hindu nation is not the British but the Muslims (Savarkar 1942 and 1985).

Savarkar’s view of masculinity includes martial prowess, courage, muscular strength, as well as the ability to be organized and efficient. Although his image of masculinity centred on male bodies, it is clear that extraordinary women could also embody these traits of masculine Hinduism. One example is Lakshmibai, the Rani (Queen) of Jhansi who, according to Savarkar, defiantly declared, ‘Give up my Jhansi? I will not. Let him try who dares!’(Savarkar 1960, 147). However, the rani could claim this warrior status only by erasing all visible markers of herself as a woman. Savarkar’s discussion of the Rani as well as Jijabai (the mother of Hindu marital icon Shivaji) reveal muscular Hindu nationalism’s provocative treatment of women in this story of warriors. Although this chapter is not able to consider in detail this story of femininity here, I have discussed it elsewhere (Banerjee 2005, 2012).

The brave warriors of Savarkar’s story strove to protect a powerful nation, worthy of their loyalty. In his influential Indian War of Independence (1960), Savarkar described his ideal nation, the primary trait of which was martial strength deriving from unity, which would be achieved by ‘removing internecine warfare to establish the rule of the United States of India which would, thus, take its rightful place in the council of the free nations of the world’ (30). In later works (for example, Hindutwa 1949), Savarkar narrated a martial Hindu nation with a long imperial history. Hindutwa elaborated on this warrior culture and the environmental factors that led to its demise. It also advocates the construction of an exclusionary, strong, warlike, and unified nation clearly separated from the Other. In Hindutwa, Savarkar sketched the national boundaries he envisioned by distinguishing between Sindhustan—the land between the River Indus and the Indian Ocean—and Mlechhastan, representing the domicile land of foreigners outside these geographical boundaries. The Aryans, noble Hindu warriors, inhabited
Sindustan, which later became distorted (by the tongues of foreign conquerors) to Hindu-stan. Invaders from Mlechhastan—Huns, Shakhas, Afghans, Persians—conquered Hindustan repeatedly. However, although brave, warriors born of this land could not resist the onslaughts. Savarkar faults Buddhism as a cause. The fanatic embrace of non-violence by Buddhism ‘had no argument that could efficiently meet this strange bible [creed] of Fire and Steel’ (Savarkar 1960, 18) and ‘nations and civilizations fell in heaps before the sword of Islam of Peace’ (35). Mlechhastan, configured as Islamic, conquered the Hindu homeland.

Although Marathas and Rajputs all fought valiantly to re-establish the martial empire of the Aryans, in Savarkar’s eyes, when Ashoka converted to Buddhism, the ‘martial prowess [that] mainly guided the administration of the magnificent empire of Chandragupta’ (Savarkar 1985, 51) lost its vitality and Hindu India did not recover its manhood for centuries.1 By his continual emphasis on the non-violent or non-martial spirit of Buddhism and its role in the destruction of Hindu India’s manliness or martial energy, Savarkar revealed his almost obsessive valorization of armed masculinity as the basis for a strong nation. The focus on Buddhism also enabled a narrative wherein the masculine Hindu spirit has temporarily retreated to the background, only waiting to be resurrected rather than being absolutely and inevitably absent, as the colonial authorities contended. Indeed, Hindu martial valour had been weakened by ideas of tolerance, kindness, chivalry, and forgiveness. Savarkar does not demean these values absolutely but argues that if one is to resist the ‘sword of Islam’, a celebration of such ideas weakens (effeminizes) Hinduism and makes a nation vulnerable.

In Savarkar’s mind, Muslim machinations coupled with the Gandhian doctrine of non-violence (presumably a legacy of Buddhist influence) conspired to make Hindus vulnerable. His advocacy of this belief became most passionate during his term as president of the Hindu Mahasabha (Savarkar 1949b, 17). He publicly denounced Muslims: ‘Let us not be blind to the fact that they as a community will continue to cherish fanatical designs to establish a Moslem rule in India’ (26). In Savarkar’s eyes, Congress’s pandering to Muslims and Gandhi’s disastrous policy of non-violence had yet again destroyed the opportunity for building an Indian nation with the values of muscular Hindu nationalism. At the 22nd session of the Hindu Maha Sabha in Madras in 1937, he declared, ‘I want all Hindus to get themselves reanimated and re-born into a martial race’ (201, emphasis added).

In this speech at the Madras session, Savarkar resisted the British ‘effeminization’ of Indian men by skilfully constructing a Vedic golden age embodied by a Hindu warrior culture and narrating the degradation of this spirit. Further, by acknowledging British superiority in war tactics, he implicitly placed India on equal footing with Britain. Embedded in the language used to concede British martial prowess was the assumption that the British Empire now and the Indian Empire in the past were equally great. He recognized British military might not as a member of a weak and subjugated race but as a representative of an equal and worthy national adversary. At that moment when Britain happened to have most weakened the Indian spirit, he asserted that India would reassert itself as a strong, unified, militarized, Hindu nation. Indeed, as president of the Mahasabha, Savarkar stressed that it was the duty of young Hindu men to join the Indian army to fight for their country and to resist Islamic contamination of the Hindu army. He ended his address to the 24th session of the Mahasabha by exclaiming: ‘Hinduise all politics and Militarise Hinduism!’ (302). The message unleashed by Savarkar has been echoed by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which has been the most consistent and articulate institutional voice of Hindutva in India. The rest of chapter interprets the RSS’s vision of manhood and its legacy in a modern, especially globalizing, India.
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*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*

Founded in 1925 by Dr Hedgewar, the RSS remains a dominant advocate of this perspective, efficiently disseminating its ideology through local centres of activity known as *shakhas*. Although Hedgewar remains revered as the founding father, it was actually the second *sarsanghchalak* or supreme head of the RSS, M.S. Golwalkar, who synthesized and consolidated its ideology in various texts, the most famous being *Bunch of Thoughts* first published in 1966. This section draws on this publication, pamphlets available at the RSS bookstore in New Delhi, and interviews conducted with various activists to unpack the ideology of this organization in an attempt to reveal the location of manhood as a dominant metaphor ordering its vision of nation.

*Shakha and masculinity*

Every morning, night, or evening young men and boys gather in open spaces in rural and urban India to participate in the daily activities of the RSS shakha. There are about 40,000 shakhas scattered throughout the country. Normally the number of volunteers in each shakha, depending on location and geographical reach, can vary from 10 to 80 (McDonald 1999, 351). Golwalker’s (2000, 393) description of shakha routine reveals an almost elegiac celebration of a unified, disciplined brotherhood. The shakhas provide the public fora wherein boys and men are taught the proper ideals of manliness necessary for creation of the true patriot: discipline, martial prowess, and loyalty to the collective, in this case, the nation imagined as Mother India. In other words, being a man is integral for national glory. Manliness (Golwalker 1981, 66) indicates the nation’s resolve to overcome the internal effeminacy that remains the greatest threat to its strength and to never allow an external aggressor to subjugate its people. He admits that Hindu manhood should move beyond physical prowess and martial ability (Golwalker 2000, 43–53) to incorporate self-sacrifice, service, restraint, and discipline, but on the other hand, for example, writing during India’s confrontation with China (1962) and Pakistan (1965), he conflates masculinity and military might.

In face of the ‘Yellow Peril’ (his term for Chinese aggression), Golwalkar urges, ‘Let all persons physically fit be ready for military service. And let their mothers bless and send forth their sons at this hour of trial’ (Golwalker 2000, 290–291). He uses a similar vocabulary to describe Indian actions during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war celebrating the brave jawans. The valiant jawans or the foot soldiers of the Indian army are glorified (Golwalker 2000, 317). Jawan also means young and muscular, and although it is not necessarily gender specific, it usually connotes a male body. In this vision, the valour of the jawans in battle erases any remaining internalized legacy of the British contempt for Indian manhood. Further, this defiant stance is buttressed by the construction of a, now familiar, Hindu martial tradition built around historic-mythic warrior figures. The phrase ‘Yellow Peril’ and the celebration of brave jawans in the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war clearly indicate the ‘enemies’ of the Indian nation: China and Pakistan. Europe and Britain also are viewed with suspicion, but again, like Savarkar, there is some ambivalence towards the British, and a reluctant admiration of their disciplined approach to war emerges. India’s loss of manhood, seen as the result of a long history of external aggression, is lamented. Indeed, Golwalkar contends that Indian humiliation on the battlefield flowed from the effeminate nature bred in them because of centuries of aggressive attacks (Golwalker 2000, 410). In this narrative, Indian manhood disintegrated in the face of vicious attacks by Islamic invaders (Golwalker 2000, 109). Never again, urges Golwalkar, should India become so weak and effeminate, ‘To remain weak is the most heinous sin in this world’ (Golwalker 2000, 271).
To sum up, muscular Hindu nationalism interpreted in terms of physical strength and martial ability is central to the image of nation underlying RSS ideology. Savarkar’s ideas and RSS ideology has shaped the unfolding of muscular Hindu nationalism in India, and present-day political voices certainly draw on this legacy. It is worth mentioning that India’s two BJP prime ministers, Atul Bihari Vajpayee (1998–1999 and 1999–2004) and Narendra Modi (2014–), were both affiliated with the RSS.

**Hindu muscular nationalism in modern India**

It is worth discussing some select events and images—which dominated press coverage of Hindu nationalist politics and also became to be popularly recognized as important signposts in the unfolding of Hindu nationalism—that underlie both the presence of armed masculinity and the implications of this gendered political narrative: the changing iconography of the Hindu God Ram, the riots in the aftermath of the destruction of the Babari mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu nationalists activists who saw in this act the assertion of Hindu manhood as they demolished the mosque which was said to have been built on the ruins of a temple dedicated to the god Ram, and the discourse surrounding the 2002 riots in Gujarat.

The BJP’s reconfiguration of Ram within its own message dramatically expresses political imagery based on muscular Hindu nationalism. Artistically, most traditional Indian statuary of Ram is androgynous and unmusclecl, displaying curves that could be considered feminine (Kapur 1993, 86). In BJP iconography, Ram has been transformed to reflect the ideals of muscular Hinduisms. This Ram, the adult male, represents the strident militarism of hyper-masculinity. In Hindutva posters covering the walls of Indian cities during the BJP’s agitation for a Ram temple in Ayodhya, the divine symbol’s muscles ripple as he towers over a Hindu temple, protecting it against aggressors (Basu et al. 1993, 62). The androgynous Ram has become a masculine warrior.

In 1992, saffron clad kar sevaks (or activists) from all Hindu nationalist organizations, including the BJP, VHP, Bajrang Dal, and Shiv Sena, arriving in Ayodhya, embodied this masculinity, by carrying weapons—tridents, swords, steel rods, wooden staffs—and shouting militant slogans—Jo hum se takrayega, choor choor ho jayega (He who takes us on will be crushed into smithereens) and Hindu ka pahchaan, Trishul ka nishan (Recognize Hindus by their tridents). These Hindu warriors energized by the spirit of national unity tore down the Babari mosque—seen as a symbol of foreign (read Muslim) dominance, as this mosque was believed to have been built by Mughal conqueror Babar on the site of a destroyed Hindu temple—to assert Hindu military might.

Further, Hindu-Muslim riots broke out all over India in the wake of the Ayodhya events, wherein similar slogans and perspectives framed violence against Muslims. Some episodes of such sectarian violence in Mumbai were structured around a unique cultural ritual—maha-arti (literally ‘great’ arti)—constructed by the BJP with its electoral partner, the Shiv Sena. The maha-arti prompted a cultural venue for the performance of Hindu martial power. As reverent, floral tributes to the gods, artis are happenings that resonate deeply for the majority of Hindu India, who understand and participate in the rituals. Before the riots, the Shiv Sena and the BJP had organized and routed these events all around Mumbai’s temples and open streets. Huge blackboards decorated with the snarling tiger emblem of the Shiv Sena and the lotus symbol of the Bharatiya Janata Party were displayed prominently. Food was brought in and distributed from huge pots as prasad (food that has been blessed by the gods). Gathered at the sites and interspersed among the throngs of devotees and spectators were the young men of the BJP and Shiv Sena displaying saffron—the sacred colour of Hinduism—on some part of their body,
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and brandishing tridents, symbols of Shiva’s divine strength. As they shouted politico-religious slogans, the religious occasion degenerated into a scene of mob violence. Venting not only the frenzy of the moment but also the pent-up rage against the economic and social conditions in their lives as citizens of Mumbai’s slums, the crowd moved on to wreak havoc in Muslim neighbourhoods. The artis were religious spectacles the BJP and Shiv Sena choreographed for drawing Hindus together as a unified community and simultaneously separating them from the Muslims (Banerjee 2000).

The BJP and Shiv Sena harnessed the maha-artis not only as symbols of Hindu pride and activism but also as methods to counter the conspicuous, so-called intrusive Muslim prayer practice of namaaz on Mumbai’s streets. A BJP MP explains,

I will first tell you about the maha-arti episodes. On Fridays, Muslims offer namaaz (prayers facing Mecca) in the afternoon. They offer it on the roads. Traffic is held up. Even on railway stations. . . . Now in some places restrictions were put on people [the government prohibited public assemblies and demonstrations in the interest of order]. So we said if you want to restrict other activities, why are you allowing these loudspeakers on the mosque? Actually, it started as a people’s movement. If those loudspeakers are not stopped, we will also offer similar prayers on the road. Then that arti became maha-arti.

(BJP MP, Personal Interview, Mumbai, India, April 7, 1993, in Banerjee 2000, 120)

The Sena’s artis performed by Hindu men in their role of warriors became a ritualistic challenge to Muslim holy practices.

Almost 10 years after Ayodhya, muscular Hindu nationalism as represented by the figure of an Ayodhya activist—saffron clad, angry, armed ready to perpetuate in violence—again surfaced, this time in the riots engulfing the city of Ahmedabad in Gujarat (the chief minister of that state then was the present prime minister Narendra Modi). In March 2002 Hindu mobs—in the wake of an attack by Islamic militants against Hindu families—targeted Muslim homes and businesses in the Indian state of Gujarat. Whatever the approach one adopts to read the BJP, it remains clear that a nationalism centred on Hindu masculinity reads as martial and bellicose and remains easily flammable within the Indian social landscape. The main proponents of the violence were the youthful members of the Bajrang Dal (the youth wing of the VHP) who have taken on the role of soldiers protecting the motherland. A dramatic portrait of a Dal activist on the cover of the newsmagazine Outlook (March 11, 2002) captures the mode of participation undertaken by this group: a young bearded man whose very being radiates fury with a steel rod upheld in one hand and a saffron bandana tied around his forehead. When asked about his views on the atrocities committed in the riots against Muslims in the 2002 Ahmedabad riots, Hareshbhai Bhatt, the central vice president of the Bajrang Dal and a key founding member of the Dal in Gujarat replied,

There was no rioting. This was just an expression of the way the majority community [Hindus] has felt. For years, Hindus have been pushed around. There is no outcry when Amarnath pilgrims are murdered or Hindus are massacred in Kashmir . . . How is it that when innocent men, women and children are burnt alive in a train in Godhra there is no outrage but when Muslims die in riots there is such a hue and cry? . . . The Hindu samaj [society] is reacting here. . . . We have our ways. But it all revolves around Hindu anger.

(Bhusan 2002, 28)
Muscular Hindu nationalism in a globalizing India

Under Modi’s governance, the flexing of Hindu muscle continues. In 2019 the Modi government suspended Clause 370 of the Indian constitution which gave certain protections to the Muslim majority Indian state of Kashmir, and the Indian Supreme Court ‘gave’ the disputed Babri mosque land (which had been under state protection inaccessible to both Hindus and Muslims) to Hindus. Both these actions are being read by many proponents of Hindu nationalism as a muscular assertion of Hindu power in face of Muslim aggression. Hate crimes against Muslims in the name of Hindu nationalism have increased in the Modi years (Ayub 2019 and Mohsina, Izzuddin & Namreen 2019). Further, Hindu nationalism has shaped student organization as members of the BJP’s student wing, Akhil Bharatiya Vidharthi Parishad (ABVP), have targeted left-wing Hindu, Muslim, and lower-caste students in famed institutions as such as Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi as ‘anti-national’ elements. Additionally, Yogi Adityanath, an assertive proponent of muscular Hindu nationalism, has become the chief minister of India’s most populous state, Uttar Pradesh; Amit Shah, known for his advocacy of armed masculinity and voicing of anti-Muslim slurs, has been appointed the minister of home affairs—in charge of domestic security; and finally Pragya Singh Thakur, a Hindu woman ascetic vocal in her support for armed resistance (indeed she is under investigation for domestic terrorism), was elected to the Lok Sabha in the 2019 elections. It should be noted that both Adityanath and Pragya Singh garner popular support by wearing the saffron robes of Hindu ascetics and punctuating their political messages with a call for resurgence of Hindu martial power. The caste politics of the student ABVP is rooted in a valorization of Hindu Brahminical supremacy, while the casting of Pakistan as a national enemy is rooted in a desire to defend the Hindu religion.

It is worth mentioning that this unfolding of Hindu muscular nationalism has in the years since 1991 existed in an interesting tension with a particular masculinized nationalist triumphalism that has emerged in a globalizing India. The Indian political and economic landscape changed in 1991 after a series of economic reforms enabled global capital to be invested in the Indian economy, which had been until then focused inward and prioritized self-reliance. The entry of global capital created a substantial upper class which displayed an aggressive nationalism, which while not necessarily aligned with Hindutva, certainly appreciated the muscular nature of its quest for national glory.

The key turning point for globalization in India came in 1991 with a series of economic liberalization policies to implement ‘structural reforms and macrostabilization’ in response to a fiscal and balance of payment crisis (Bhaskaran 2004, 59), and India’s post-1991 trajectory of globalization is marked, in comparison to prior periods, by its neoliberal characteristics (Williams 2015). These changes sparked the growth of a consumer goods economy dominated by multinational companies (Derne 2008, 31) and a new, growing globalized urban upper/middle class. In post-1991 India, ‘the new (urban) Indian middle class becomes a central agent for the revisioning of the Indian nation in the context of globalization’ (Fernandes 2000, 90).

In India today, a taste for conspicuous cosmopolitan consumption among the new globalized upper/middle classes marks a significant shift away from the years of early independence. Then, the tenets of Gandhi and Nehru emphasized social responsibility and the notion of refinement associated with a muted material desire and restraint on consumption. These were seen as more appropriate for a postcolonial country struggling with poverty and illiteracy in the wake of independence from imperialism (Fernandes 2000). In contrast, this new elite perceives conspicuous consumption as the signifier of a new India that is no longer a marginal player in the global political economy. Earning annual salaries that are unprecedented because of the entry of international capital, they usually work for Indian subsidiaries of multinational corporations,
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educate their children in Western universities, and vacation abroad (Farrell & Beinhocker 2007). When the BJP government conducted nuclear tests in 1998, this class perceived itself and its ambitions to be on par with the developed countries, thus giving rise to an aggressive nationalist triumphalism within which the assertion of India’s manliness on the global stage is a key component (Oza 2006).

A 2007 Pew Global Attitudes Survey found that 93% of Indian respondents completely or mostly agree with the statement, ‘Our people aren’t perfect but our culture is superior to others’. This is the highest percentage of all the countries listed in the report. India’s neighbours—Bangladesh, China, and Pakistan—are not so self-confident, and the corresponding figure for the United States—perceived to have citizens with an overblown sense of their own exceptionalism—is 51%. It is interesting to note that the male body has a provocative location in the emergence of this nationalist triumphalism in India.

The robust scholarship on the intersection of femininity and globalization in the Indian context provides a point of departure for studying masculinity. Focusing on the global ideas of beauty that have foregrounded the slim and toned bodies of actresses and models, these studies discuss the shifts in norms of dominant feminine desirability sparked by the entry of international cultural capital via Western magazines such as *Cosmopolitan, Elle, and Glamour* into the Indian market (Munshi 2001; Oza 2006; Parameswaran 2004). The constitutive corollary to slim feminine bodies signalling the introduction of international feminine beauty ideals, I argue, is the rising dominance of muscular male bodies: thus, the embodiment of proper manhood is changing in the new Indian context along with idealized femininity. Global magazines such as *Men’s Health* (for example the cover of the July 2013 issue) offering advice on how to achieve ‘six pack abs’, as well as the exponential growth in gyms and personal trainers, track the rising dominance of a finely chiselled and fat-free male body which were not the dominant norm for proper masculinity pre-globalization (Balaji 2014 and Yardley 2012). These male bodies intersect with an unprecedented number of films in Bollywood (India’s dominant film industry) centring tales of martial prowess, military courage, and athletic glory. Given the culturally significant role film plays in India in terms of both disseminating and shaping nationalism, scholars have argued that this cultural production illuminates an elite aspiration to see India as a strong global player (expressed by muscular manhood) in the context of a nationalist triumphalism (Banerjee 2016; Banerjee & Williams 2019; Fazila-Yacoobali 2002; Khan 2011; Srivastava 2009). In sum, this particular interpretation of masculinity and the male body intersect with a contemporary national triumphalism to create a muscular nationalism that is compelling to the new Indian urban elite. In contemporary Bollywood, the muscular male body literally embodies the self-confidence of a nation poised to become a global player (Khan 2011, 99).

It is also worth mentioning that this triumphalism tends to be ‘Hindu-tinged’, not necessarily in terms of the aggressive Hindu nationalism of the Bharatiya Janata Party and Vishwa Hindu Parishad, but rather in the fact that economic globalization has increased religiosity among the Hindu majority, and Indian culture is popularly being conflated with Hinduness (Nanda 2018, 66–106). Religiosity in this sense is marked by frequent temple visits and the celebration of even obscure Hindu rituals in an increasingly more ostentatious manner. In 2007 a study undertaken by the New Delhi–based Center for Studies in Developing Societies (CSDS) found that urban, educated Indians were more religious than their rural and often illiterate counterparts. Indeed, upper caste, urban Hindus were the most religious (Kumar and Yadav). The study also found that religion for many of these Hindus was defined as a public activity, for example pilgrimages and elaborate public rituals (Kumar and Yadav). Further, the RSS has a considerable following amongst workers in the information technology industry, so much so that the RSS runs IT milans (or gatherings) (Nanda 2009, 97–100).
I mention this new trend centring on male bodies and masculinity in a globalizing India to highlight the fact that the armed manhood animating the BJP’s story of nation and this muscular triumphalism may at times converge in support for Hindu nationalism or at the very least provide a political context which welcomes and celebrates versions of Hindu-tinged muscular nationalism.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the unfolding of a political doctrine in India that fuses armed masculinity and nation to create muscular nationalism. The story of nation also emphasized the manner in which Hindu militancy has intersected this version of nationalism. Further, in a globalizing India, the emergence of dominant cultural manhood expressed by a chiselled male body in the context of nationalist triumphalism enhances the social significance of Hindu muscular nationalism. The logic of muscular nationalism with its centring of a muscular, martial male body has certain repercussions with the economic context of a consumerist India. Nationalism is conflated with aggressive action aimed at a perceived national enemy. The 2002 anti-Muslim riots in a Gujarat governed by then Chief Minister Narendra Modi’s party targeted attacks against students/faculty (at times Dalit) constructed as ‘seditious’ elements in Indian universities, vicious retaliation against Muslims who allegedly violated the ‘anti-beef’ ban and/or behaved in a perceived ‘anti-national (read Hindu)’ manner, and public shaming and harassing of women who were constructed as ‘unchaste’ (for example, the Ram Sena’s 2009 attack on women sitting in a Mangalore pub) are but a few examples of the culmination of the logic of muscular nationalism. In addition, to these incidents of targeted violence, Indian defence policy (reflecting military might as an indicator of national triumphalism) expresses some disturbing trends. According to Stockholm Peace Institute data in 2018, India was ranked fourth in the world in terms of absolute dollars ($66 billion) spent on the military; in 2004 it spent $28 billion, so in a little more than a decade it almost tripled its defence budget. When this data is juxtaposed with the fact that India, according to the CIA fact handbook, is ranked 157 out of 229 countries in terms of GDP per capita and that 22% of the world’s poor live in this country, the danger of muscular nationalism is foregrounded. As long as material and cultural conditions continue to celebrate triumphal armed masculinity, society will prioritize a defence budget, marginalizing social spending and violence will be conflated with an assertion of political and social strength.

Note

1 Ashoka (268–332 BCE) is an Indian emperor of the Maurya dynasty. He is remembered for his imperial expansion and his dramatic conversion to Buddhism. As a Buddhist, he sent monks and nuns to parts of Central Asia to spread the message of Gautama Buddha.

References

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Hindu muscular nationalism


