

## Nationalism in the Digital Age: Fun as a Metapractice of Extreme Speech

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Critical assessments of the recent resurgence of right-wing nationalism have rightly highlighted the role of social media in these troubling times, yet they are constrained by an overemphasis on celebrity leaders defined as populists. This article departs from a leader-centric analysis and the liberal frame that still largely informs assessment of political action, to foreground “fun” as a salient aspect of right-wing mobilization. Building on ethnographic fieldwork among the Hindu nationalists in India, I argue that fun is a metapractice that shapes the interlinked practices of fact-checking, abuse, assembly, and aggression among online volunteers for the right-wing movement. Furthermore, fun remains crucial for an experience of absolute autonomy among online users in ideological battles. Providing the daily drip feed for exclusion, fun as a metapractice bears a formal similarity to objectivity in its performative effects of distance and deniability.

*Keywords: online nationalism, fun, media practice, Hindu nationalism, India, extreme speech*

“I am there with all my identity, I am original,” declares Rakesh,<sup>3</sup> as he prepares to impress on us that his ideological battle cannot be compared with anonymous muckrakers online. As a top national media convener for the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarti Parishad (ABVP, All India Student Association), the student wing of the right-wing Hindu nationalist organization in India,<sup>4</sup> Rakesh finds digital social media “sine qua non”

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Date submitted: 2018–03–12

<sup>1</sup> This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme [grant agreement number 714285].

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Matti Pohjonen for the network visualization, and to Gazala Fareedi for careful fieldwork in New Delhi.

<sup>3</sup> All real-world names are pseudonymized to protect anonymity.

<sup>4</sup> ABVP had 3.2 million members in 2016. See <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/jnu-protests-jnusu-behind-abvp-confidence-govt-and-growth-rohith-vemula/>. A student organization that was started in 1949, ABVP declares its status as “above partisan politics” (<https://www.abvp.org/history-2>). However, it is widely known and recognized by its own members as the student wing of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevaka Sangha (RSS, Association of National Volunteers), a conservative right-wing political

of political life and a critical means to disseminate the right-wing ideology he has come to embrace. As a key figure in the youth mobilization of the Hindu nationalist ideology in contemporary India, Rakesh sees himself fighting a battle of ideological positions on online media against what he scathingly terms as "certain communists" and "pseudoliberals." His narration gains the tenor of a serious patriotic mission as we throw more questions on his online political activities, but he adds how he is "spiritual and traditional" but not "conservative in the Western sense of the term," and that he "enjoys life to the fullest," including dance and music. Enjoyment of life gains a purpose on online media, he indicates, since some of his online activities and advocacy have yielded tangible political results. "We [ABVP] have speeded up the passing of the Juvenile Justice Bill," he says, citing it as an example for the satisfaction of meeting a political goal with online mobilization that relies on no resources other than online networking and mobilization.

The short description of our conversation with a top Hindu nationalist youth leader brings out several points that this study seeks to sketch and analyze: the work of online social networking sites in drawing a large number of the digitally savvy generation toward Hindu nationalism; in familiarizing and reproducing the ideology of Hindu nationalism as a composite, yet distinct sensibility of Hindu-first India and majoritarian belligerence; and offering a force field where such an exclusivist ideology is rendered acceptable and enjoyable. The article will especially elaborate on the last point, since ideological enthusiasm on social media is still largely understood in the liberal frame of political action, with far less attention to the visceral aspects of fun and enjoyment that constitute right-wing mobilization. In drawing out "fun" as an indelible feature of online right-wing affiliation, I delineate its four distinct, yet overlapping aspects:

- being "funny" as a tactical way to enter and rise to prominence within online debates and, by extension, the broader public domain;
- deriving fun from the sheer freshness of colloquialism in political debates, which stands in contrast to the serious tone of political deliberation and official centrality, and by mainstreaming the witty political campaign styles as an everyday form of political communication;
- fun as satisfaction of achieving a goal by working with one's own resources, and in finding tangible results such as hashtag trending, virality, and perceived "real world" changes; and
- as group identification and collective (if at times anonymous) celebration of aggression.

The key argument is that fun is a metapractice—practice of practices—that frames the distinct online activities of fact-checking, argumentative confrontations, assembly, and aggression, which are prominent among right-wing volunteers in digital India. Furthermore, fun as a metapractice remains crucial for an experience of absolute autonomy among online users in the ideological battles. Bringing to closer scrutiny the visceral aspects of fun, autonomy, and aggression in online political discourse, the article asks how these features enable ideological voluntary work as an everyday drip feed for exclusion, composing the online work for nationalist regimes.

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movement with several organizations working for the cause of Hindu nationalism through a variety of social voluntary work, political patronage, and vigilante activism.

The methodological approach draws from multi-sited Internet related ethnography (Wittel, 2000) to situate online discourses within a polymedia field (across different media forms; Madianou & Miller, 2013) as well as material, political worlds of online-offline connections using anthropology's classic emphasis on long-term on-the-ground fieldwork. In studying digital networks and exchange,

the ethnographer actively and consciously participates in the construction of spaces . . . .  
In this respect, the framing of the network for the research not only pre-structures the findings and conclusions of any ethnographic inquiry, the framing also becomes a political practice. (Wittel, 2000, p. 9)

Rooted in ongoing multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork that started in 2013 in the cities of Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore, comprising semistructured in-person interviews with politically active online users; social media campaign strategists for political parties; ethnographic observations of offline events; informal hanging out; and theoretically sampled content analysis of online exchange, this article foregrounds online activities of Hindu nationalist volunteers set in an intense climate of political patronage. The article will begin by examining this climate of organized ideological production mobilized by the social media savvy right-wing regime now in power in India. Reading it against the global rise of exclusionary nationalism, the next section reviews important approaches to online right-wing movements and highlights the value of the "media practice" framework (Postill & Brauchler, 2010; Couldry, 2010) to critically analyze key aspects of online work that comprise and sustain right-wing political cultures.

Fun as a metapractice should not be read in isolation, but in relation to a political milieu where online extreme speech acts concentrate among groups already dominant within particular historical and social conditions. The privileged position of Hindu nationalist volunteers as middle class, educated, intermediary, or upper caste groups provides the key context for domination within the online sphere, where fun perpetuates the commonsense beliefs about Hindu-first India. This underscores the need to launch a critique of "collective laughter," which takes as "its object common-sense assumptions about humor's desirability" (Billig, 2005; Haynes, 2019; Hervik, 2019). Equally, fun relates to the spread of the Hindu nationalist "common sense" and diverse contestations beyond the privileged middle class groups, as humor and fun of sharing circulate on affordable mobile Internet media accessed in recent years by a wider breadth of class groups.<sup>5</sup> The two sections on the practices of trending hashtags and creating Internet memes will ethnographically chart this phenomenon. Based on the analysis, the concluding section develops preliminary arguments for a social critique of digital fun in times of nationalism on a rise.

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<sup>5</sup> National Digital Communications Policy-2018 (NDCP-2018), announced by the Government of India, aims to "provide broadband connectivity at 50 Mbps to every citizen." See <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=183711>. However, in global comparative terms, Internet usage in India ranks among the lowest in the world: "Only one-in-four Indians . . . report using the Internet or owning a smartphone." See <http://www.pewglobal.org/2018/06/19/social-media-use-continues-to-rise-in-developing-countries-but-plateaus-across-developed-ones/>.

### Hindu Nationalism in Digital India

The 2014 electoral victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the right-wing Hindu nationalist political party, was a culmination of concerted political campaigning that infused electoral politics with a new scale of targeted appeal and spectacle enabled by digitalization. The campaign aimed foremost at transforming the public image of the party's controversial prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi into a visionary leader for digital young India. The dramatic rebranding of a leader who faced the accusation of complicity in the mass murder of Muslim minorities in the state of Gujarat in 2002<sup>6</sup> into a messiah of "New India" owed its success largely to a sharply crafted campaign spearheaded by a small team of elite digital media marketers and tech entrepreneurs, and a top international advertising agency commissioned directly by a trusted group of Modi strategists after spending "unprecedented sums of money" (Jaffrelot, 2015, p. 163; Pal, Chandra, & Vydiswaran, 2016).<sup>7</sup> Modi's team of multimedia marketers "adapted high-tech tools to a variety of low-tech outlets" including massive holograms employed for Modi's "direct address" to people (Price, 2015, p. 136). The team composed a structure that ran parallel to the party's media campaign, since Modi attempted to "short circuit the BJP apparatus," thereby sidelining several senior party leaders (Jaffrelot, 2015, p. 151). Modi's active presence on Twitter helped to circumvent the party's senior leadership as well as organized media, which were still wary about his tainted tenure as the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat. Some scholars have defined Modi's strategies to constitute a people beyond the collegial structure of the Hindu nationalist organizations and the party machinery as "populism" (Jaffrelot, 2015; Schroeder, 2018).

Although Modi's social media activities did circumvent the party's central leadership, the BJP, more than other political parties, was active in deploying social media resources for electoral gains and ideological recruitment. This built on the well-established transnational online networks of the RSS that had started cyber gatherings via dedicated websites and mailing lists as early as in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> Well before a centralized Information Technology (IT) cell became functional at the party's national headquarters in New Delhi in 2010, different regional (subnational) units of the party had started to experiment with Internet-enabled membership drives and mobilization. These experiments relied on the support of Internet-savvy volunteers who were energized by their technological knowledge and the prospect of challenging large-scale governmental corruption and state failures through social media use. The anticorruption support on social media developed a deep affinity for emerging icons of "clean leadership" such as Narendra Modi, although many of them were still hesitant about Hindu majoritarian ideas. The seeming divide between the visions of development and Hindu nationalism was itself well managed by the Modi team, to appeal to a people beyond

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<sup>6</sup> Modi was not convicted by the courts for the Gujarat violence of 2002, but his justification of the riots as resulting from "justified anger of people" sparked a resurgence of a polarized public discourse (Pal, Chandra & Vydiswaran, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> The BJP's victory in the national elections reflected a complex amalgam of factors, including a series of corruption scandals that raised a strong anti-incumbency wave against the ruling Indian National Congress Party. However, multimedia messaging remained at the center of Modi's electoral campaign.

<sup>8</sup> The North American branch of the Hindu Students Council helped the RSS to launch the Global Hindu Electronic Network in 1996 (Therwath, 2012).

the support base of Hindu nationalism while also safeguarding its majoritarian essence and reinforcing the association between them in the early years of economic reforms in India (Rajagopal, 2001).

In a triadic structure of influence comprising Modi's campaign strategy, the party's social media presence with regional trajectories, a Modi-centric campaign style (Jaffrelot, 2015), and an active middle class aspiring for a better India, right-wing Hindu nationalist mobilization gained momentum in new millennium India as a composite ideological space. In the years after electoral victory and in preparation for the 2019 national elections, the campaign-style management of online media by the Modi team accelerated on various social networking platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Instagram, Telegram, and the short video sharing app TikTok, pushing the appeal beyond middle class supporters. Twitter has remained an important platform for the ideological work, but the party's social media presence is further diversified with the vast expansion of the messenger service WhatsApp after 2014, continued popularity of Facebook, and the emergence of TikTok.<sup>9</sup> Simultaneously, ABVP, the student wing of the Hindu nationalist "parivar" (family or ideological coalition), has started accumulating strength on online media, straddling the three layers of influence.<sup>10</sup>

BJP's social media presence has been tinged by allegations of employing bots, when several media reports revealed that Modi's online followers had a large number of fake handles. Moreover, bots and rumors spreading on social media networks such as WhatsApp have become the new feature of (interreligious) communal tensions and riots in India. In major incidents of preelection violence, digital manipulations have provoked cycles of rumor and street violence targeting minority communities, forcing social media companies to respond with restrictions on sharing activities.<sup>11</sup>

In an atmosphere of "permanent campaign" (Neyazi, Kumar, & Semetko, 2016), the central IT cell of the party keeps the momentum alive on social media, with war-like spikes in provocation but also routine everyday exchanges that repeats and reproduces the "party line." The IT cell has thus evolved into a significant wing of the party with a small team of fully paid workers stationed in New Delhi but drawing support from a large number of (unpaid) volunteers. Perceptive of the volatile nature of online communities, the party has adopted the strategy of close distance nurturing rather than aiming for a tight-fist control of the educated online support base, alongside a heavily funded campaign employing digital marketers to reach out to a broader mass of supporters. Although the party organizes regular offline events for online supporters, the technique has been to regulate by staying with the flow, allowing voluntary work to augment party campaigning (A. Malviya, head of BJP IT cell, personal interview, July 24, 2017).

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<sup>9</sup> At 241 million users in 2017, India had the largest user base for Facebook. Its messenger service, WhatsApp, had 200 million users. See <https://www.livemint.com/Consumer/CyEKdaltF64YycZsU72oEK/Indians-largest-audience-country-for-Facebook-Report.html>.

<sup>10</sup> In 2018, ABVP's official Facebook page had 274,313 followers, and the verified Twitter account @ABVPVoice had more than 73,000 followers. See <https://www.facebook.com/ABVPVOICE/> and <https://twitter.com/abvpvoice>.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/whatsapp-limits-number-of-forwards-for-indian-users/articleshow/65330205.cms> .

A crucial node in the triadic structure of online Hindu nationalism is the vast number of volunteers whose everyday work feeds the top-down campaign with continuous engagement. In 2017, the BJP had more than 100,000 volunteers spread across the country and the diaspora locations. The central IT cell could rely on their online support anytime. This group was separate from the volunteer base that the party's regional and subregional units cobbled up in various numbers across the country, as well as fuzzy enthusiasts online. The very presence of a large number of volunteers testifies to online ideological work that is neither fully directed nor bound by party mentoring.

Online volunteers of Hindu nationalism are far from a homogenous group of indoctrinated foot soldiers. With diverse occupational backgrounds and levels of ideological commitment, online volunteers of Hindutva [Hinduness, a key ideological principle of Hindu nationalism] discuss mighty points of the ideology, gliding around a set corpus of themes (Udupa, 2018). These themes include rhetorical patriotism, emotional reference to the sacrifice of the Indian army; territorial attachment to the sacred land of India; minority Muslim community as threats to the security of the nation; the symbolism of the sacrificial cow; global conspiracy for Christian proselytization; the glory of ancient, undivided Hindu India; and the flawed history of India built by the left-liberal intelligentsia, who are derided through various labels of ridicule, from "pseudoseculars" to "urban naxals." Historically, these have been the key tropes of the Hindu nationalist movement in postcolonial India (van der Veer, 1994). Contradictory as social media debates may be, the maneuvering within the ideological space testifies to the diffused logics of Hindutva online, which I have defined as "enterprise Hindutva" (Udupa, 2018).

The discussion above does not suggest a complete ideological capture of India's social media by the Hindutva ideology. After a decade of the BJP's "first mover advantage," major political parties are more active on social media, and social movements challenging the Hindutva perspectives have emerged from the vibrant and multivalent voices of Dalit, feminist, student activist, and caste-based groups, as well as digital campaigns of opposition parties (Neyazi et al., 2016; Paul & Dowling, 2018). However, this does not diminish the importance of online Hindutva because neither can the latter be reduced to political instrumentality nor to the ebbs and flows of online contestation. Online Hindutva is better assessed as a cultural and political sensibility that is capable of working with diffused logics, reproducing through generations by articulating the entrails of the old with emerging concerns, and altering the modality with changing circumstances. While certainly being challenged from diverse online expressions and opposing claims, Hindu nationalism remains a potent cultural and political force. This is evidenced by the continued growth of online followers for the party, the diversification of its social media presence with regional and subregional sites, and more recently, by the thumping victory of the BJP in national elections (2019).<sup>12</sup> How then do we approach the unique mediation of online networks in the resurgent, if contested, mobilization of Hindutva? How is it connected to the global rise of online nationalism and right-wing movements? A brief overview of key theoretical studies of media and nationalism in the following section will suggest that the relationship between fun and violence—ignored in many studies of online right-wing movements—is key to grasp the current phenomenon.

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<sup>12</sup> In 2018, the Facebook page for the national unit of BJP had 14 million likes <https://www.facebook.com/BJP4India/> and the national unit of RSS had 5 million likes <https://www.facebook.com/RSSOrg/>.

### Nationalism in Digital Times

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to rising nationalist feelings in Europe and North America under the global conditions of migration and neoliberal economic reforms (Fuchs, 2016; Hervik, 2019), as well as under different, yet interconnected, conditions in China (Schneider, 2018); Nepal (Dennis, 2017); Sri Lanka (Azeez & Aguilera-Carnerero, 2018); and other countries in the "global South." Defining the "re-emergence of nationalism" in Europe as "neo-nationalism," Banks and Gingrich argue that it is an "essentialist and seclusive reaction against the current phase of globalization" that relies on the concept of "culture" rather than "blood-based homogeneity to define the boundaries of the national" (2006, p. 9). Fuchs notes that anti-immigration and anti-EU mobilization has precipitated "differentialist racism" under strong leadership that uses cultural populism (2016, p. 177). In Denmark, Hervik observes that growing "Danish distrust of ethnic minorities" has led to "rigid dichotomization . . . between a neo-national 'we' and 'the others'" in popular consciousness (2011, pp. 8–9). Similar to Fuchs' analysis, he connects neonationalism with neoracism and populism as "relational concepts" (p. 9). Deem (2019) notes that a resurgent White racial consciousness defined by the colonial logics has entrenched violent discriminatory nationalism as the new populist face of extreme right-wing groups.

Mouffe recognizes the crippling "consensus at the center" in the neoliberal era as a key factor for right-wing populism (2005, p. 66). This analysis, however, doesn't hold true for cases beyond the advanced Western economies. In a useful comparative study of populism in the United States, Sweden, China, and India, Schroeder notes that "It is not just economically disadvantaged groups that turn to populism, and populism has not just been a response to economic crisis" (2018, p. 62). The explanation, he suggests, lies in the field of politics: within domestic national politics, the refusal to extend full citizenship to those who are not part of the "people" and externally, the "enemies that are also supposedly threatening the nation, economically and geopolitically" (p. 62). Thus, religion, ethnicity and immigration, he suggests, shape contemporary articulations of populism with nationalism.

Studies show that recent articulations of antielite populism with exclusivist nationalism have relied prominently on Internet-enabled media. Schroeder notes that "digital media have been a necessary precondition for the success" of right-wing populist movements, as they allowed circumventing "traditional media gatekeepers" (2018, pp. 56–60). Fuchs has shown that social networking sites such as Facebook played a key role in the "rhetorical strategies that emotionalize nationalism" and in identifying a "negative outside" for constructing a nationalistic identity (Fuchs, 2016, p. 181). He argues that online discourses that take networked forms work in tandem with the "celebrity culture and personalization of politics" that have brought neonationalist leaders to the frontstage of political appeal.

These studies have highlighted several important features that define the current phenomenon, but the analysis still builds on a specific conception of nationalism as violent and extraordinary, put to use by populist leaders for rhetorical appeal and strategic political mobilization. The emphasis on Modi in India, for instance, falls into the analytical bias for political charisma and iconoclasm, paying less attention to common digital cultures that constitute contemporary attachments of nationalism. This is not to say that Modi's celebrity status is unimportant. Modi had indeed filled the need for a strong leadership figure—a need that had stemmed from a host of factors, including the perceived weak leadership of the incumbent

government and an ambient mediated culture to legitimate “celebrity icons” to take charge of corruption-free new India (Udupa, 2015). However, I suggest that the analytical model should include a broader sweep of online dynamics that constitute and exceed the aura of celebrity icons.

Moving beyond a leader-centric analysis entails attention to the materialities of nation-building (Postill, 2006)—of nation as the site where divergent views of the nation contest and negotiate with each other, moving in “heterogenous time-space” (Chatterjee, 1993). In a useful formulation, Mihelj (2011) emphasizes a distinction between “hot nationalism” and “banal nationalism” (Billig, 1995). Hot nationalism refers to the “transgression of the national ethic,” often dramatic and severe, “whether in the form of hate speech or physical acts of violence against communities considered as outsiders to the national whole or even as threats to the nation” (Mihelj, 2011, p. 188). Banal nationalism is the “reassuring normality” of the nation as a frame—“the collection of ideological habits” and “unimaginative repetition” that reproduce nation-states (Billig, 1995, p. 10). In either case, it is not just the nation-state machinery that produces the effects, but in times of digital media, I suggest, also increasingly by the everyday work of millions of Internet users. Furthermore, hot nationalism as a psychology of extraordinary emotions and the banality of repetition, habit, staging, and signaling the nation, enter a coconstitutive relation on digital media.

I have elsewhere argued that everyday nationalism on digital media is best understood as “nation-talk” (Udupa, 2018). Nation-talk, the culture of verbal confrontations prominent among young online users in India, fans hypervocality to debates on national belonging. The confrontations precipitate along a perceived divide between the self-proclaimed liberals and Hindu nationalist volunteers. Although the divide appears irreconcilable and is positioned as such in online debates, the common discourse of national pride that runs between them reveals the blurred boundaries of ideology that constitute middle class politics of online deliberation in urban India. Much of this confrontational dynamic online comes from the huge volunteer base of Hindutva. In many instances, Hindutva is not a preconstituted reality but emerges as a political subjectivity in online practice. As practice theory emphasizes, this prompts an examination of “the practices and discourses that people engage in and embody, and a focus on the actual ways people produce these practices and discourses within socio-cultural constraints which themselves are subject to reproduction and change through such human activities” (Holland & Skinner, 1996, p. 193). Media practice scholars have adapted this usefully to ask what people do with media, what sense they make, and what uses they derive—and also to examine media texts in historicized, embodied, and contextualized ways (Couldry, 2010; Hervik, 2011; Postill & Brauchler, 2010).

Online Hindutva volunteers, diffused and diverse as they are, engage in fact-checking to contest the mainstream media narratives; archive the confrontations for evidencing and future use; create memes, tweets, and Facebook texts to offer repetitive summaries of the Hindu first ideology and “Muslim menace”; boost the Internet traffic for Hindutva reasoning through tags, retweets, mentions, and likes; complement the crafted bots of Hindutva with actual human labor; and confront opposing views with an arsenal of stinging ridicule, accusations, and abuse, riding on a wave of online vitriol, which is prevalent among diverse ideological groups. Fun, I suggest, is a metapractice that prominently shapes these practices. By metapractice, I mean a straightforward sense of practice of practices.



Fun is not frivolity of action. It is not pointless “timepass.” Quite the contrary. It is laden with political purpose, but in a manner of gathering together on one’s own will, chiding and clapping together, exchanging online “high fives” for “trending” or pushing back opposing narratives, and making merry with the colloquial use of online language and vibrant visuality, which are distinct from a serious style of political pontification or cadre based disciplining. The metapractice of fun, to follow practice theory, does not refer to unchecked and autonomous individual agency. It is shaped by and shapes the ideological discourse that is increasingly organized through social media campaigning described in the previous section and emerging surveillance infrastructure (Anwer, 2018). Quite often, online users are conscious of these structures. Most online users we interviewed shared a sharp awareness of paid trolls and political manipulations of social media, yet they articulated their online work with all seriousness of purpose, regardless of politics as usual, experiencing autonomous agency that came with the everyday resources of social media messaging. The next two sections will ethnographically chart two sets of online Hindutva practices—trending and memes-making—to delineate fun as a metapractice of violent nationalism. The section on trending will highlight fun in relation to satisfaction attached to online labor and palpable results of online visibility metrics, while the section on memes considers fun more specifically in terms of hilarity. The distinction is only an analytical one, while in practice, achievement and hilarity intertwine and constitute one another.

### **Trending the Hashtag, Having Fun**

“I follow almost 5000 handles on Twitter,” says Amar, “most of them are politicians, bureaucrats, journalists—national and international. I have a range of interests from foreign policy to Indian politics to [the] Middle East.” A student of international studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, Singh was known as a “staunch ABVP supporter” even before the campus started to see a sizeable number of right-wing activists. Amar pursues a PhD at JNU and tweets regularly on Indian foreign policy, displaying a special interest in Modi’s diplomacy. He aspires to become a politician or an academic. He tells us he is a “Hindu,” and comes from “OBC-backward”—a category that refers to “other backward” groups in bureaucratic parlance. Although his mother tongue is Bajjika and Bhojpuri, and he is most comfortable speaking in Hindi, he tweets largely in English. “I think on an average I spend six hours on Internet every day,” he tells us after a quick calculation. Twitter, he believes, is “more intellectual.” “You can interact with journalists, academics, or high profile bureaucrats and politicians . . . unless you are abusive, they will reply to your messages.” When we ask him about his role model on Twitter, he names a prominent male, right-wing tweeter whom he thinks is “very intelligent” and witty. He also lists Eminent Intellectual (@padhalikha), a Twitter handle with a pseudonym. We notice that Amar’s face lights up when he cites the handle. He says he does not know who runs Eminent Intellectual, but he addresses the tweeter as a male with unthinking certainty. “He tweets to the point and in a sarcastic language,” he tells us enthusiastically. “After the ICJ [International Court of Justice] verdict on 18th of May, he tweeted: ‘Third class *Bhakt*s [literally devotees, a new media coinage for supporters of Modi] rejoicing a small victory in the International Court of Justice. They will always lose in the International Court of Narrative.’” Perhaps sensing that we needed more explanation, he continues: “That is a very precise targeting of liberal intellectuals of India who think they create an international narrative about India on everything—politics and culture. He is attacking this understanding.” He chuckles as he recounts the quote verbatim, admiring the wit and sarcasm.

Amar's fascination for witty, humorous tweets illustrates the appeal of hilarious tweets circulating on online media, aimed largely at discrediting mainstream, organized media; political parties seen as hostile to Hindutva; and the liberal intelligentsia. A large number of tweets—like this one—ridicule the left-liberal intelligentsia as hegemonic managers of the narrative about India for the rest of the world. During our ethnographic interviews, online right-wing users regularly referred to and defended the twitter handles that infuse public discussions with "wit and humor" ranging from soft-touch sarcasm to aggressive ridicule of anti-Hindutva views. These included Facebook groups the Illogical Indian @illogicaldesi (64,207 followers)<sup>13</sup>, the Frustrated Indian (1.1 million followers)<sup>14</sup>, India Against Prostitutes (455,107 followers)<sup>15</sup>, and Twitter handles such as Eminent Intellectual @padhalikha and @UnSubtleDesi. As online users consume and create the content across these spaces, laughter trickles down and creates ripples across loops of tweeting followers, and fun turns politics into palpable pleasure.

Fun is not just funny. While hilarity is a key element of online fun—elaborated further in the next section—a great deal of fun is in trending the hashtag and making a mark, however momentary, in online discussions. Referring to the campaign "Letstalkabouttrolls" started by the English language newspaper *The Hindustan Times* in 2017, Pradip Jha, a prominent Hindutva activist, told us that the labeling of trolls for Hindutva tweeters is uncharitable and incorrect. These tweeters, according to him, were laudable because they not only exposed the hypocrisy of journalists; they also trended the tweets. "*Unhone kya kiya in sab journalists ke filthy tweets ka screenshots le kar tweet kar diya aur ye sab ke tweets number 1 par trend kar rahe the* [What the tweeters (for Hindutva) were doing was that they took the screenshots of filthy tweets of all the journalists, tweeted them, and made these tweets the number one trend]."

A telling example for the fun of trending was the sudden death of the hashtag #ModiInsultsIndia, which was trending for a brief period in May 2015 when a section of online users criticized Prime Minister Modi for his statement on a foreign visit that Indians abroad need no longer feel ashamed about being born in India.<sup>16</sup> Online outcry about "insults to the nation" revealed that even Modi was an insufficient icon for digital nationalists. What followed was equally intriguing. The unexpected affront led Modi's team to brace up and undo the damage. On the morning of May 19, 2015, #ModiInsultsIndia started to trend. By that evening, it was overtaken by #ModiIndiasPride, which came in defense of the prime minister. #ModiIndiasPride is a more direct instance of hypernationalism converging on the figure of Modi, but the hashtag it superseded was no less nationalistic. In any case, #ModiIndiasPride tried to rid the nationalistic fervor with a possible challenge to Modi's leadership by raising a wave of tweets that hailed Modi as a committed, hardworking leader. The network graph (Figure 1) of tweets collected using the tool TAGS Hawksey between May 20, 2015, and May 27, 2015, for #ModiIndiasPride, suggests the significance of trending hashtags for online Hindutva practices. Social network graph covering 14,468 tweets collected during this period reveals the top influencers of the network: @\*S,<sup>17</sup> with 78,300 followers, was the

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/illogicaldesi/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/TheFrustratedIndian/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/IndiaAgainstProstitute/>

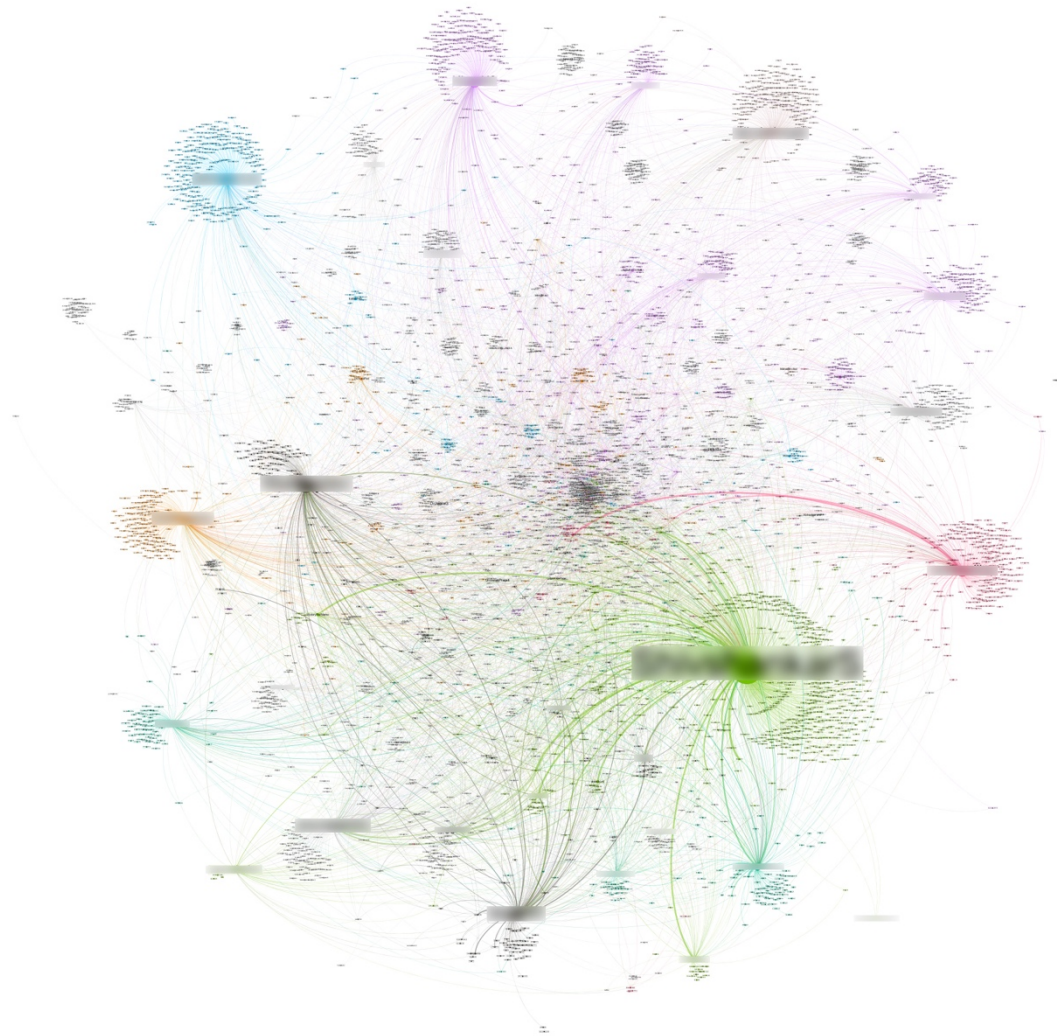
<sup>16</sup> <http://www.deccanchronicle.com/150519/nation-current-affairs/article/modiinsultsindia-trends-twitter-pm-gets-lashed-comments>

<sup>17</sup> Actual Twitter handles are pseudonymized in the text and masked in the network graph.

strongest influencer in the network (Eigenvector centrality measure, ECM: 1). The pinned tweet in Hindi on his Twitter page eulogizes the towering figure of Modi. The other power users with ECM 0.42 to 0.31 are known among online political users as regular supporters of online Hindutva, including Tajinder Bagga (ECM 0.31), who is the spokesperson of the Delhi unit of the BJP. The network graph offers a snapshot of key actors with open support for the BJP as the drivers of online discussion. While hashtag tweetpools can be examined for various features, including the nature of retweet relations as a measure for polarization,<sup>18</sup> centrality scores of specific Twitter profiles combined with the ethnographic data used here is indicative of the enthusiasm of highly connected right-wing actors to drive discussions online. Ethnographic interviews revealed that trending the hashtags is experienced as absolute victory over opposing narratives within the gamified contexts of scoring on social media trendometers. Fun of trending nationalist hashtags is often seen as a collective endeavor buoyed by success, in ways that denial for the belligerent tone and abuses (Udupa, 2017) is made possible by attributing the activity to a potentially expanding network of supporters of which they are a part.

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, in an analysis of 15 million tweets mentioning "Obama" and "Romney" during the 2012 U.S. presidential election, Pablo Barberá found that "85% of retweet interactions take place among Twitter users with similar ideological positions," and political polarization is "particularly intense among right-leaning Twitter users" (2015, p. 87). Similarly, in a study on Pegida and Alternativ fuer Duetschland (AfD), the far-right movements in Germany, Puschmann, Ausserhofer and Slerka (2018) find that a large part of the commenting activity on the Facebook pages of these groups is carried out by a small number of highly active users.



**Figure 1. #ModiIndiasPride on Twitter May 2015 by Eigenvector centrality measure. Visualization was done using Gephi to determine the retweet relationships using the Eigenvector centrality measure for the node size. The original file had 14,622 tweets of which 10,229 were retweets. The network graph consisted of 4,845 nodes and 10,229 edges. The layout used a modified version of the Force Atlas 2 algorithm.**

Fun as satisfaction of achievement sometimes extends to “real world” changes. A prominent ABVP social media activist proudly told us how volunteers like him mobilized online posts to put pressure on the

BJP to deny the election ticket to Pramod Muthalik, a controversial, local-level right-wing activist whose social conservative organization had barged into a pub and attacked women for consuming alcohol.<sup>19</sup> Amit Trivedi, another Hindu nationalist activist, was thrilled when his video from a television interview, explaining the constitutional provisions on freedom of expression, was retweeted by a BJP leader. This occurred in 2017 during the tense climate on the university campuses in Delhi, when right-wing student activists challenged free speech advocates by asserting that shouting slogans “against the nation” was unconstitutional.

Fun cultures—of hilarity and seemingly solid results of online labor—thus oscillate between real-world effects and those that are properly online. Internet memes, the imitable remediations of visual-textual expressions, belong to the latter category of “properly online” artifacts. Below, I discuss how memes-making illustrates the fun cultures of articulating political positions through the vibrant visuality of remixed images and provocative superimposed texts.

### **Memes-Making: Subversive Speech or Quotidian Infrastructure?**

The polychromous landscape of memes in India straddles leisure and politics with a variety of cultural expressions, which are shared and archived on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Whatsapp, and YouTube, and enabled by a growing number of instant “memes generators” in an upward global trend of mashup cultures. Often untraceable to the points of origin or creators, meme circulations range from an explicitly pro-Hindutva position of Facebook pages, such as the Frustrated Indian, and “Internet Hindu” tweeters to those who directly challenge them (FB parody accounts of influential Hindutva leaders such as Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy and Adityanath;<sup>20</sup> FB pages such as Inedible India—49,920 followers,<sup>21</sup> @darshbalak—1.2 million followers;<sup>22</sup> Tumblr account Hindus of Hindutva; feminist groups the Spoilt Modern Indian Woman, the Empowered Indian Woman, and Feminist GIFs; and anticasteism groups such as Just Savarna Things—13,503 followers.<sup>23</sup> They also include meme groups that engage political themes with ambiguous stances (e.g., Hindu Nationalist Anime Girls) and a large number of leisure memes that feed political expressions with indirect references and popular cultural idioms (All India Meme, @sarcasmHubb; theindianidiot.com; Useless Talk; Sticky India; Bollywood existentialist memes). Such has been the growth of the memes scene that curators and creators came together to host the first Meme Fest in New Delhi in March 2018, promising “Memex (like Tedex) talks, comedy night, meme market, meme cosplay contest, meme photo-booths, meme awards, food trucks and what not.”<sup>24</sup>

The central attribute of Internet memes is to “spark . . . user-created derivatives articulated as parodies, remixes, or mashups” (Shifman, 2013, p. 3) with no obligation to follow the formal communication

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<sup>19</sup> It is a common practice among online volunteers of Hindutva to disown leaders such as Muthalik by defining them as “fringes,” thereby constituting a fluid space of ideological belonging.

<sup>20</sup> <https://scroll.in/magazine/832707/the-alternate-universe-of-adityanath-where-he-tries-snapchat-filters-and-celebrates-bad-photoshop>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/inedibleindia1/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/adarshbalak/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/justsavarnathings/>

<sup>24</sup> <http://theindianidiot.com/the-meme-fest-india/>

styles. As Milner notes, “political, social, and playful purposes exist simultaneously in these images” (2016, pp. 70–73). In an ongoing joint study, Krishanu Bhargav (2018) suggests that memes in India have emerged as an “important vernacular for the everyday communicative practices,” which should be understood at the intersection of digital politics and creative digital leisure. Image macros, .gif animations, and audio/video files have proliferated on global media, but they also build on local media traditions of cartooning (Khanduri, 2014) and the bazaar art (Jain, 2007). In an insightful study on memes in India, Sangeet Kumar points to the “logic of repetition with difference” in text and medium that “allows the text to repeat at new sites creating new meanings” (2015, pp. 232–233).

Internet memes complement the nondigital visual cultures that have been important for the Hindu nationalist movement (Rajagopal, 2001), while giving access to “the shared production of affect on a transnational basis” (Brosius, 2004, p. 139). The current meme scene is striking in its multimodality and the joy of irreverent and witty mashups that drive a political point through creative participatory labor. Fun lies in remediating memetic texts and infusing them with the splendor of pop cultural symbols—from Bollywood and regional cinema to folklore, local idioms, and wordplays.

A systematic content analysis of political memes in India is still an ongoing project, but several media events of confrontation testify to the vibrant creative labor that coalesces around Hindu nationalist claims online. A striking example is the “meme war” sparked by an online video that challenged nationalist jingoism of the Hindutva forces with an India–Pakistan peace message. Located within the sphere of online dissent politics (Kumar, 2015) with a “healthy unwillingness to be taken in by stock explanations of complex phenomena” (Sengupta, 2012, p. 309) as well as tied to the interests of digital marketing business, an independent collective called Voice of Ram<sup>25</sup> that is defined by its motto of “humanity comes first,” crafted a video<sup>26</sup> with an India–Pakistan peace message. Such videos are encouraged by new media’s “potentially global dimensions through simultaneity [and scale] of transmissions” (Sengupta, 2012, p. 303). The video produced by Voice of Ram showed a female protagonist softly leafing through handwritten posters in front of a camera to narrate the story of her martyred father who had served the Indian armed forces. The central message was delivered in an evocative expression: “Pakistan did not kill my dad; war killed him.” Hindutva memes went on a rampage, ridiculing the video. The sharply worded message was turned and twisted in awkward angles to decimate the initiative, while hailing the sacrifice of the Indian army in protecting the borders. In a four-panel meme (Figure 2), the agency—or blame—for historic and contemporary events was shifted to objects (gas/Hitler, bombs/Obama, and bullets/Bollywood actor Salman Khan as “bhai”)<sup>27</sup> to lampoon the original message. Several other memes dismissed the intention as an electoral stunt and a “drama” staged by political opponents.

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<sup>25</sup> The group defines itself as “a collective of social commentators, innovators, political strategists, ad-filmmakers, marketing experts, movement creators and peace activists.” See <https://voiceofram.com/>.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97yJsfddi4w> and accessed 15 May 2016.

[https://www.facebook.com/pg/VORdotcom/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/VORdotcom/about/?ref=page_internal) accessed November 8, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Bollywood actor Salman Khan, referred to as “bhai,” was convicted by the courts and granted bail in 2018 in a blackbuck poaching case 10 years after the reported incident. See <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/1998-2016-a-timeline-of-the-blackbuck-killing-case/articleshow/53377957.cms>.



8:22 AM · 28 Feb 17

**Figure 2. Meme sourced from a verified Twitter account.**

"Hindutva memes," constructed as they are, regularly confront an active stream of critical memes that combine sarcasm, parody, allegory, and irony to caricaturize nationalist jingoism. In a multipanel meme (Figure 3), Inedible India drew a reference to the South Indian Tamil movie *Mersal* and superimposed the short commentaries onto the famed 19th-century paintings of Raja Ravi Verma to satirize the key themes of Hindu nationalism and their aggressive defense of the right-wing regime, including accusatory labels of "antinationalism" and "anti-Hindu," the defensive justification of Digital India and Goods and Services Tax (GST), conspiracy theories around Christian missionaries. The meme also had a commentary on the regional politics of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu and a sarcastic comment on left, liberal "academics."





Figure 3. Source: Inedible India.<sup>28</sup>

Meme repositories critical of Hindutva often feature watermarked memes, and several creators have come out in public to describe the motivation behind their meme creations. Vaibhav Vishal, who created parody accounts of Hindutva political leaders such as the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, was worried by “the normalization of the Hindutva hardliner” and decided to challenge it with “humor and parody.”<sup>29</sup> The “grammar of contention” (Kumar, 2015), enunciated by his parody creations, speak to the intentions of subverting established power. “There is this simmering, ongoing grudge that we have against the people in power,” he said in a media interview:

<sup>28</sup><https://www.facebook.com/inedibleindia1/photos/a.867700539950464.1073741827.867695293284322/1473008899419622/?type=3&theater>

<sup>29</sup> <https://scroll.in/magazine/832707/the-alternate-universe-of-adityanath-where-he-tries-snapchat-filters-and-celebrates-bad-photoshop>



It is good to see them stripped of their power, so to say, with just some fun wordplay and random imagination. The smiles and the chuckles, therefore, are not just at the one-liners. The joy goes beyond that. It is the Davids having fun with the Goliaths.

Similarly, the creator of Humans of Hindutva, a Facebook page directly challenging the Hindu nationalist claims, quipped: "My histrionic version of the truth is only slightly madder than what the nationalists actually believe."<sup>30</sup>

Competitive politics has added more dynamism to the relation between subversive memes and the political sphere, with many more political parties actively taking part in expressions of online hilarity in recent years.<sup>31</sup> Politicians from different parties and ideological persuasions have started to use social media to great effect, including through the use of regional languages (Pal & Bozarth, 2018). On one level, this trend eats into the sacrality of visual symbolism, which was key to Hindutva mobilization in the 1990s. On another level, however, the fun of squabbling through improvised memes establishes a quotidian affective infrastructure for Hindu nationalism's just-in-time preparedness to frame unfolding events. It offers the daily means to express affiliations through playful outrage. This raises the question on whether fun, humor, and enjoyment are inextricable elements of contemporary right-wing movements. How does social media enable and modulate this relation?

### **Extreme Speech as Fun**

Examining U.S. President Donald Trump's popularity on Twitter, Mazzarella (2018) draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis to compare aesthetics with enjoyment, and suggests they both enjoin "a kind of wild intimacy." Although his arguments on enjoyment as noneconomic and nonmoral need a more careful application for the case examined here, the point that collective energies of enjoyment should not be brushed away as irrational and destructive leads me to highlight the importance of online playfulness and enjoyment in coconstituting exclusionary social identities. In the case of the U.S. and online White nationalism, this is starkly borne out by the new media cultures of "lulz"—"the raw, jaded fun of knowingly cultivated outrage" (Coleman, 2014; Mazzarella, 2018), or what Deem in this Special Section (2019) defines as "the collective affective economies of transgression." Angela Nagle (2017) attributes deliberate border crossing to online subcultural trends, and traces the transition of online trolls and 4chan from left-anarchic

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<sup>30</sup> <https://scroll.in/magazine/837068/humans-of-hindutva-a-facebook-parody-touches-a-raw-nerve-for-some>

<sup>31</sup> The Indian National Congress party leader Rahul Gandhi's tweets that became more regular and witty after 2017 were a result of meticulous social media campaigning. The party that had long neglected social media mobilization recruited a new team of digital strategists in 2017. In March 2018, the team had a core of forty paid social media workers creating gifs, memes, tweets, tags, and social media posts. Divya Spandana, the national social media head for the Indian National Congress Party, said 80% of the team were women, and they together aimed to challenge the BJP by matching the wit and humor of online exchange (personal interview, March 19, 2018). Other regional political parties also scrambled to recruit social media campaign strategists to augment influence online. These developments signal a certain deepening of the democratizing possibilities of humor, even if not necessarily their progressive outcomes.

cultures to the alt-right movement (see also Philipps & Milner, 2017).

Fun as a metapractice, I suggest, signals collective aggression as constitutive of identity that blends with and derives strength from the new media ecology of playfulness and outrage. By no means are hilarity, playfulness, and styles of expressions that are distinct from the official centrality of political discourse unique to Internet media. In a study completely away from the Internet world, Verkaaik (2004) shows how the ludic, absurd, and effervescent character of assembly were "attractive aspects" of the Muttehida Quami Movement (MQM) in Pakistan. What attracted the youth to the movement was its marked distinction from the "grave, solemn, hollow, ideological language" (p. 5). The fun of composing improvised memes and witty tweets in online political spheres is akin to the attraction of the ludic Verkaaik documents in the case of MQM. The foregoing discussion, however, illustrates that the trend of the ludic as a form of political discourse is mainstreamed and accelerated on online social media all while ensuring a sense of autonomy among online users through trending and other online results. Under the current global conjuncture of multidirectional "colonial matrix of power," which is at once "domestic, transnational, inter-state and global" (Mignolo & Walsch, 2018, p. 5), fun as a metapractice has been crucial for right-wing mobilization online.

Furthermore, I suggest that online fun bears *formal* similarity to "objectivity" in the western journalistic discourse (Tuchman, 1972) and liberal communicative reason more broadly. They both embed distance and deniability. Here, deniability refers to a direct sense of protection from possible regulatory actions for online activities that are in favor of hegemonic nationalism (conversely, also through arrests of regime critical fun). As a political problem of skewed privilege for certain online political groups in India, such protection has drawn journalistic attention but requires further documentation in academic research.<sup>32</sup> Online right-wing fun in India highlights the proto-agentic privilege (Clark, Couldry, MacDonald, & Stephansen, 2015) and favorable political climate shaped by a longer history of religious majoritarian claims. However, distance and deniability should also be seen as performative and tactical features of right-wing practice more broadly. This means fun creates a transsubjective point of address and instigates collective pleasures of identity that can mitigate risk (see also Hervik, 2019). Distance and deniability implied in objectivity and liberal communicative reason based on idealized "impersonal norms of discourse" (Cody, 2011, p. 40) are precisely the performative principles for online fun as a metapractice characterized by collective joking, networked vitriol, and trending. In a curious twist, fun and reason become substitutable in a formal sense.<sup>33</sup> This analysis thus questions the binary between rational action and fun, which has been the basis of political action in the self-performance of western liberal democracy. It instead reveals the similarities between them, highlighting the historical formations of privilege that imbue fun with political power. Methodologically, this entails jettisoning the binaries to pay attention to what people actually do and what meanings they derive from their actions.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/how-a-whatsapp-message-can-get-you-arrested/articleshow/61718967.cms>

<sup>33</sup> I am indebted to Andrew Graan, from the University of Helsinki, for pointing this out, although I am fully responsible for the way it is used here.

<sup>34</sup> Recent studies on news adopt a similar methodological move to examine the historical conditions and actual practices that shape journalistic objectivity in postcolonial contexts (see Udupa, 2015).

As funny messaging, fun of satisfaction in achieving palpable political goals and as collective effervescence (Durkheim, 1995), the metapractice of fun composes the daily work of online right-wing movements, transforming extreme speech to descend to the ordinary—to the new normal that is irrepressibly enjoyable.

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