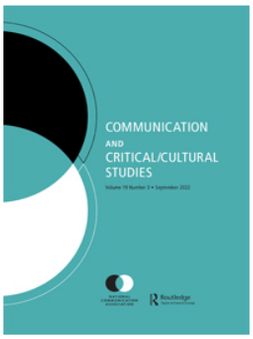

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Violent spectating: Hindutva music and audio-visualizations of hate and terror in Digital India

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the audiovisual genre of Hindutva pop and its connections to Hindu right-wing violence in India. Hindutva pop music videos instigate violence against Muslims and advocate the establishment of a Hindu state. Examining the YouTube channels on which these songs circulate, as well as the textual aspects of music videos, I argue that the genre becomes a machine for the transmission of political affect. Consequently, I argue for what I call "violent spectating" – a visceral and affective politics of spectacularized hatred that takes advantage of digital platforms but exists in constant dialogue and exchange with right-wing extremism offline.

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Introduction

In 2017 Shambhulal Regar, a man from Rajasthan in northern India, brutally murdered a Muslim labourer by the name of Mohammed Afrazul. Regar was motivated by a desire to prevent "love *jihad*" – a term that has been used by the Hindu right wing in India to marshal imaginations of a conspiracy by Muslim men to marry and convert young Hindu women.[1] Regar had the murder recorded by his nephew and then uploaded on YouTube, where it quickly became one of the most watched videos in India, and on WhatsApp, where it was circulated among chat groups including the epithet "Shere Mewat" (or the "brave lion of Mewar," alluding to the place in Rajasthan from where Regar hails).[2] The impunity with which the display of murder was held up as an act of national pride by the perpetrator, and the celebration of the murderer as a hero (with news in 2019 that he would also be running in elections) illustrates the normalization of spectacular violence in Hindu right-wing action in India. Hindu right-wing ideology (Hindutva) equates India with perceived Hindu autochthony and advocates militant mobilization and cultural/historical revisionism,[3] while viewing Muslims (and Christians) as invaders or converts who are expected to live in subordination or face consequences.[4] Thus, the Regar incident exists on a spectrum of mediated Hindutva violence that has increasingly turned to social media for propaganda and intimidation, as seen in videos of cow-vigilante lynching, where Muslim men and women are targeted for the alleged sale or consumption of beef – a taboo for upper-caste Hindus and another strategy in Hindutva's vilification of Muslims. In such cases, the registering of the act on

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video and its dissemination on social media and mobile messaging platforms is carried out by the perpetrators themselves. This information relay gamifies political violence within a media system where "snuff pornography created from some of these ghastly murders is now part of the information ecology."[5] The recording, dissemination and reception of violence route notions of ethnonational belonging through an affective network become calls to further action, reflecting Leidig's assertion that Hindutva approaches violence "as a legitimate means of achieving ethnonational territorial claims."[6] Perpetrators and consumers of such violent media are affective subjects, whose actions, according to Fortier, "arise from desires, fears, anxieties, insecurities, affection, care, dis/trust, un/ease and so on."[7] Digital media's focus on the individual user plays an intricate role by encouraging a form of "entrepreneurial" violence that includes the recording and incitement of violent acts, and the normalization of killing and lynching through mediated fantasies of Hindutva supremacism.[8]

I turn my attention here to one such mode of violent Hindu-right wing mediation – the transmission over YouTube and WhatsApp of the audiovisual genre that has been called "*Hindutva* pop." Stylistically, *Hindutva* pop music videos are marked by amateurish video aesthetics that fuse traditional Indian tunes and DJ-style beats. Thematically, they instigate violence against Muslims, advocate the establishment of a Hindu state, and are played during rallies and festivals, and in Muslim neighbourhoods as signs of intimidation, seen, for instance, in a spate of incidents of organized violence in April 2022.[9] In this framework, *jouissance* or enjoyment is at the very centre of politics. As Žižek postulates, fantasy "constructs the scene in which the *jouissance* we are deprived of is concentrated in the Other who stole it from us."[10] Within Hindutva logics, this Other coheres in the figure of the Muslim. The abjection of the Muslim Other – and reduction to a state of basic life – is the pursuit of *jouissance* within the ideological fantasy, and this is reflected in the genre of Hindutva pop.

Consider singer Sandeep Acharya's "*Aabar Babar Ke Naam se Awadh Me Savchalaye Banwaunga*," which was uploaded on June 24, 2020 and had over 452,894 views by the time the video was taken down by YouTube in 2021.[11] The title of the song translates "I'll get a toilet made in the name of Babur in Awadh" and references two elements central to Hindutva discourse – Babur and Ayodhya. Awadh is one of the alternative names for Ayodhya, the place where the Babri Masjid (mosque) was located before its demolition in 1992, having been constructed in the sixteenth century under the direction of the first Mughal Emperor, Babur. Hindu fundamentalists have long contested this site, claiming it to be the birthplace of the deity Ram ("*Ram Janambhoomi*"). As Hansen points out, the *Ram Janmabhoomi* agitation drew on the metaphoric and metonymic power of a political geography in which Babri Masjid stood in as a traumatic sign of emasculated Hinduism, and its subsequent removal and replacement with a Ram temple formed the blueprint for an ameliorative agenda founded on vengeance.[12] The 2019 verdict by the Indian Supreme Court allowing a Hindu temple to be built on the exact site of the Babri Masjid, as well as suspect archeological excavations claiming evidence of an earlier Hindu shrine below the Mosque, point towards the tussle over spaces of history and spaces of representation in postcolonial India.[13] The politics of Hindu right-wing revisionism and violence, thus, is not separate from the virtual spaces of media representation.

This is reflected both in the lyrics and the video of Acharya's song, and the accompanying (hyper)textual material. The video description puts the title of the album as "*Toilet Babar Ke Naam Ka*" ("a toilet in Babur's name") and includes the hashtag "#New_Hinduwadi_Song," ("pro-Hindutva"), as well as the phrase "Ayodhya-Hinduwadi Song." Such surrounding material pre-inscribes the video within an ideological matrix where the reinstatement of social *jouissance* is dependent on vengeance. In this imaginary, the normative Hindu subject is posited as what Sara Ahmed calls "the ordinary" – "one that is 'hurt' or even damaged by the 'invasion' of others."[14] In corollary, the imagined other's "proximity becomes a crime against person as well as place."[15] Lyrics and visuals in Acharya's video echo this ideology. We see an array of images including excreting children and people cleaning public toilets, at times superimposed with Mughal miniature paintings of Babur. As Acharya sings, we see animated red text in Hindi that reads "Babur Sauchalay." Lyrical themes range from popular Hindutva historical revisionism ("Babur was a looter, now we shit on his name"), to blatant threats of violence and humiliation ("I'll make their descendants clean sewage tanks"), to expressions of homophobia ("Babur was gay, now we'll see if they have any guts") (author's translations).

If we contextualize Acharya's music video in the context of Hansen's assertion that Ayodhya was "a sign of an "original lack (in Hindu society),"[16] then the song's expression of libidinal violence becomes clear. As Varghese notes, the murder of Afrazul by Regar on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Babri demolition gestures towards the "rhetorical and material violence implicit in the logic of Hindu nationalism and nation-building in the context of India" where "the figure of the Muslim other comes to stand in […] for the demolition itself."[17] In Acharya's video, a direct link is made between the historical figure of Babur and contemporary Muslim society in India, and vengeance is expressed in terms of taboo – i.e. excrement and homosexuality. The handling of human waste constitutes a taboo in Hindu society and reinforces notions of (caste) purity and cultural otherness through practices of untouchability and othering.[18] The inscription of homosexuality as taboo within this logic, further reduces the Muslim to a state of abjection. What we encounter here is a politics of the body, in which Hindu upper-caste identity is asserted through collective (libidinal) violence against the Other.

Such expressions of collective violence are also seen in the YouTube comments on the song. A common thread runs through these, especially the use of the phrase "*Jai Shri Ram*" ("Hail Lord Ram") which has been militarized by the Hindu right wing and was prominently used during the Babri Masjid demolition. It has also become a fixture in cow vigilante lynching where Muslim victims are often forced to shout "Jai Shri Ram" as a sign of defeat and humiliation.[19] Such comments on the video are accompanied by a bevy of emoticons – clapping hands, high-fives, saffron flags and arms with biceps flexed. Some also make explicit reference to the idea of the Hindu nation or India for Hindus only, which is a cornerstone of Hindutva ideology ("*Jai hindu rashtra*" or "Hail the Hindu nation"), while others exhort Hindus to share the song ("Requesting all Hindu brothers to share this song, hail lord Ram"; author's translation). Thus, Acharya's music video provides us a cross-section of Hindutva ideology itself.

Through an investigation of YouTube channels in which such songs and videos circulate, and a deconstruction of the visuals and lyrics of these songs, I explore the connections between social media platforms and the politics of Hindu right-wing hate speech in

contemporary India. Such politicized and digitally-mediated hatred engenders a form of violent spectating – a visceral and affective politics of spectacular hatred that takes advantage of the affordances of platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube, but exists in constant dialogue and exchange with Hindu right-wing extremism offline. In this ecosystem, violence is not merely a physical act in which bodily energy is to be invested, but something to be partaken in through visual and auditory consumption. Thus, the violence of Hindutva pop is not located only in extreme cases such as those of lynching, but in viral articulations of hatred and disgust that elicit affective responses from a digitally connected public. Hindutva pop is a digital vernacular form that fuses the viral affordances of social media with what Banaji has called "vigilante publics" – a techno-fascist form of mediation – where spectacular violence becomes a communicative act.[20] To this, I would add that a violent act cannot be seen in isolation but must be viewed as part of an ecosystem of violent articulations. Each instance of violence becomes a node in networked circulation, replication, and repetition. Participation in such violence is not limited to active enactment but is normalized through absorption and propagation by users/viewers who spectate and re-circulate messages and objects of violent hatred. Pro-Hindutva media, including music videos, play an important role in this transmission of affect. In examining the propagation of hate as an affective relation between media objects/texts and individual subjects, I suggest an expanded definition of hate speech. Music videos and their attendant digital surplus (forwards, comments, likes for example) are not hate speech *per se*, but are nonetheless digital utterances of hate that "materialize on the very 'surface' of collective bodies."[21]

Hindutva's dabbling in audiovisual technology is not new. The role of media technology during the *Ram janmabhoomi* campaign in the 1980s and early 1990s has been well documented.[22] Manuel notes that "in 1989–90 audiocassettes produced by Hindutva militants played a crucial role in raising the *Ram janmabhoomi* campaign to fever pitch." This techno-cultural past is echoed in Basu's postulation that contemporary Hindutva has an "augmented presence," mediated via forms ranging from "techno music to animation, advertising, commodity culture, or graphic novels."[23] Unsurprisingly, audiovisual media continue to be exploited by the Hindu right in the creation of what Brosius calls Hindutva's "think space,"[24] one that sustains such violence. In this digital ecology, the accumulated energy of affective media forms can facilitate the formation, maintenance, and propagation of hatred, as texts, representations and even bodies are routed through viral and networked forms.[25] I turn towards a Benjaminian understanding of aesthetics in the service of fascism here. Benjamin writes in his famous essay on mechanical reproduction that the "logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life."[26] If we are to update this formulation for the digital, then we must understand aesthetics to be not merely beauty or harmony, but a certain arrangement of and relationship between forms of media-making and reception. Thus, aesthetics is not merely the property of one media object, but a network of relationships between human agents (makers/receivers) and the technological contexts of media (how media are produced, where and how they are distributed). Aesthetics is the force that affects us when consuming media, and it binds affect and representation together. As Bruce argues, affect consists of both the "representational (usually described with language of the emotions, with linguistic referents) and non-representational attachments, forces, and energy that push and

pull communicative encounters."[27] Attending to the ideological energies of online right-wing media requires us to read closely and unpack how affect works through "structure, form, and aesthetics."[28] Arrangements of and interactions between image, music and text convert affective energies into tangible political attitudes, if not always action. In this conceptualization of *Hindutva* pop as a form of political media, I examine how textual (lyrics, video, representation) and techno-contextual (digital circulation) aspects of music video inaugurate an affective media assemblage that is not completely new, but nonetheless viral in a novel way.

Such novel developments can be noted in the way the representational economies of Hindutva pop have evolved to adapt to today's social media influencer network – the landscape of Hindutva pop is peppered by a bevy of recognizable singers and performers, whom we can call "Hindutva influencers." Figures such as Sandeep Acharya, Laxmi Dubey, Prem Krishnavanshi, Sandeep Chaturvedi, Pawan Verma and Sanjay Faizabadi – all singers and musicians – boast considerable online followings. We must also take care to differentiate these singers and musicians from politicians and activists who have a big online following. Instead, my use of the term "Hindutva influencers" is limited to those engaged in cultural production. But how exactly do these Hindutva influencers influence? These singers are not politicians in the "professional" sense; rather, it would be useful to understand these human agents themselves as dynamic elements in the affective circuit, where their strategies are "meant to provoke feelings, memories, emotions, and social ties."[29] The work of the Hindutva pop singer as an influencer of political attitudes is a coalescence of online and offline work – they perform live shows and release audio albums as singers did before the digital. Yet, they also incorporate a transmedia imagination in which hashtags, apps and platforms are deployed for circulation and exchange. Following the work of Lamarre and Steinberg, one might call this (with caveats) the Hindutva media-mix, which I describe in the following section. The key point is that influence is a shorthand for affective transfers of political attitude, mediated by the singers as they create and circulate entertainment material for the vernacular, digital landscape. As Jutel states in his analysis of far-right populism in the United States, such affective media makers act as "permissive agents of *jouissance* offering the obscene enjoyment of degrading their enemies through an unbridled conspiracy that speaks to the irrational drives of the libidinal."[30] Following Jutel's logic, we can postulate that Hindutva pop is constituted by an online space that constructs "a pure politics of *jouissance* [that] channels the pathological enjoyment and libidinal frustrations of fascism arising from this space."[31]

In what follows, I undertake an analysis of such "pathological enjoyment." In the first section I examine how the form of the Hindutva pop video engenders new forms of political affectivity. Through a close reading of videos, I show how music, lyrics, iconography and hypertextual elements are repeated as they circulate on online platforms. The second section examines the connections between digital music production and political affectivity under the figure of the "DJ." Tying these strands together, the conclusion offers an expanded view of "hate speech" and how Hindutva pop's circulation creates conditions for affective hatred, which is a mainstay of Hindutva's maintenance of its political space.

The forms of Hindutva pop: fantasy, repetition and the production of the political

Understanding the genre of Hindutva pop requires attention to its music, and also the visual, textual, hypertextual and performative elements of the ideological retinue that work together to produce (inter)textual affectivity. Such intertextual affectivity is a result of the "media mix" – the wider ecology within which media texts and objects circulate. Lamarre (2009) and Steinberg (2012) use the concept of the media mix to refer to the conditions of circulation and exchange in Japanese media (more specifically, anime). Steinberg characterizes the media mix as "an expanded economy of return [that] depends on a new form of active consumption that encourages its consumers to follow a series across transmedial incarnations."[32] Hindutva pop, of course, differs from the Japanese media ecology and industry that has a specific history of franchising strategies. But the key point is the transmedia ecology in which one media object interacts with others and is often accompanied by repetition of form and content. Hindutva pop does not (yet) peddle in toys and franchise objects, although Hindutva itself can be said to have adopted a similar expanded "economy of return" if one considers the role of Narendra Modi masks, plushies, comics and other merchandise.[33] However, in Hindutva pop such transmedial production and consumption can be found within the textual, visual and lyrical patterns of repetition that invoke a Hindutva "think space," and also the digital infrastructure consisting a retinue of apps and platforms that its consumers participate in.

For instance, although Acharya's music video mentioned in the introduction was hosted on the YouTube channel run by the label Mayur Music, we can glean further textual and contextual elements if we look at his own, now defunct, YouTube channel (s). Acharya had two YouTube channels which have been deplatformed by YouTube: "Sandeep Acharya Ayodhya," which was taken down in 2021, and "Team Sandeep Acharya," which was taken down in 2022. The video fits neatly into the arrangement in Acharya's first YouTube channel, "Sandeep Acharya Ayodhya," which, when live, hosted about 55 videos with 13,000 subscribers. A look at the "video" tabs on the channels (both old and new) operationalizes a platform aesthetic. In YouTube's grid structure, Acharya's video thumbnails demonstrate a fascinating consistency. Almost all the thumbnails include an image of him alongside images of deities, crowds, or other religious paraphernalia, with either symbols of Hindu aggressive masculinity or threats of violence (direct or implied) against Muslims. We can glean specific patterns of violent speech and imaginations of righteous violence from the grid itself, as the platform's affordances produce an aesthetic of seriality and repetition that becomes key to the work of techno-fascist politics.

Alongside visual cues, lyrical and thematic elements are also repeated. For instance, another song in the older YouTube channel is titled "*Are Papiyo Mat Maro Ye Gai Hamari Mata Hai*" ("Hey Infidels, Don't Kill the Cow, She's our Mother") which aligns squarely with the Hindu right-wing agenda of cow protection and lynching.[34] Lyrics preach violence against Muslims – "shove these cow killers into burning embers, stop cow slaughter, and kill those who don't obey" (author's translation). Such violent calls involve the "symbolic and almost ritualistic representations of Hindu supremacy over minority communities."[35] As Mukherjee points out, cow

protection vigilantes also record their own acts of violence on mobile phones and "many of the videos are edited to include songs and percussion beats, including the latest Punjabi and Haryanvi hip-hop music."[36] This demonstrates the exchange between the hypermasculine violence of cow vigilantism and Hindutva pop. While Acharya's YouTube video is composed only of a still image composite of him, a cow, and an axe, and does not directly feature violence (Figure 1), it aligns with this logic of "symbolic and ritualistic" domination.

Other videos on Acharya's older page repeat themes of domination and violence. Acharya's second channel ("Team Sandeep Acharya") displayed similar arrangements. While some of the older videos are no longer available, they circulate in other YouTube channels with different visuals. However, in both iterations of his YouTube channel, music, iconography, text and hypertext are overwhelmingly repetitive. Almost all the videos are pro-Hindutva, anti-Muslim and/or anti-secular, and carry the word "Hinduwadi" either in the titles, descriptions, or hashtags. Take for instance the song "*Hindu Matlab Sabka Baap* ("A Hindu is the Boss of them All) in Acharya's first channel which performs this through the masculinist iconography of a mustachioed man on a motorcycle.[37] Acharya's YouTube channel(s), thus, are a cross-section of Hindutva ideology and showcases elements of the Hindu-supremacist fantasy repeated *ad infinitum*.

Such intricacies of Acharya's YouTube channel provide us with a template for reading the online presence of other singers in the genre. In an interview with *The Quint*, Acharya has self-identified as a pioneer of the genre of "*Hinduvaadi* songs," claiming that other singers are simply copying him.[38] We can think of repetition here not only in the case of individual YouTube channels, but across them. Hindutva pop begins to take the

Figure 1. Hindutva pop aligning with cow vigilantism. YouTube screenshot.

shape of a genre – not merely because of its musical attributes, audiovisual cues, or online forms, but because of a totality that can be repeated. Repetition is key to the structure of the ideological fantasy as a "politics of *jouissance*." If the fantasy is virtual, it is actualized in each repetition of the form. Virtuality, Deleuze writes, is not opposed to reality; it is a reality that has not been actualized.[39] In *Difference and Repetition*, he says: "The reality of the virtual is structure […] The elements, varieties of relations and singular points coexist in the work or the object, in the virtual part of the work or object."[40] We could think of a genre as the virtual arrangement of the parts, and the individual iteration as an actualization of this virtual structure. In these YouTube channels, each repetition, with its slight differences, is an actualization of the virtual right-wing fantasy. If the structure of the right-wing fantasy is the pursuit of *jouissance* through acts of violence, then taken together, the YouTube channels of singers like Acharya demonstrate not only uniformity, but a platform aesthetic that is replicated through propagation.

On Krishnavanshi's channel, we see similar strategies of presentation and performance. One notable song title is "*Jo Roja Nahi Rakhte Wo Acche Nahi Hote*" ("Those who don't observe Roja are not good people").[41] Krishnavanshi's song is a response to another song about Muslim piety (with the same title) but inverts the intentionality of the original through lyrics. Krishnavanshi begins by proclaiming that the original song is quite popular on TikTok, and his song is a response to the original which in his view, attacks everyone. He ends his speech with the patriotic words "*Jai Hind. Vande Mataram*" ("Hail India. Mother, I Bow to Thee"), which have been mobilized by the Hindu right in the last decade to effectively equate Hindutva with patriotism. The lyrics immediately turn to: "Those people who do not speak well of Hindutva, they are hypocrites … and by people, I mean you, got it?" (author's translation). This statement refutes both Islam and secularism. Again, the "video" consists of only a still image – Krishnavanshi himself, the TikTok logo, the title text, the visage of a man bearing a saffron *tilak* (a mark on the forehead worn by Hindus), and a cartoon image of two Muslim children praying. Hashtags in the video description again include "#Hinduwadi_New_Song" and "#Hindu_Song" among others. This textual-visual entourage reflects familiar rhetorical and ideological strategies used by the Hindu right, but also shows a keen understanding of India's social media landscape as evidenced by the reference to TikTok (which has since been banned in India because of geopolitical tensions with China),[42] as well as the use of the word "viral" in the video descriptors and lyrics. In the light of such repetitions and reverberations we might ask if the Hindutva media-mix, to use Lamarre's words, "thinks technology."[43] Writing about the technical affordances of animation, Lamarre states that "technical objects co-evolve with their technical ensembles, which include humans."[44] Hindutva's use of media technology pre-dates the digital; yet, the digital enforces novel ways of engaging with the ideological apparatus through new, viral forms of interaction between images, words, music, platforms, and users. This aspect makes contemporary Hindutva a techno-culture.

In effect the Hindutva media mix in the digital era signals a transformation of the demographic of what has been called the "Internet Hindu." Mohan describes "Internet Hindus" as a phrase used to "refer to individuals across an entire spectrum of the Right, ranging from those who spout Hindu supremacist, anti-Muslim and/or anti-Christian views, to those who are socially liberal, but espouse right-wing approaches to economic policy."[45] He also describes this demographic as "young, often urban,

middle-class/upper-middle-class."[46] However, the target demographic of the music videos uploaded by the likes of Acharya and Krishnavanshi today, is not limited to either urban areas or upper and upper-middle classes. Rather, platforms such as YouTube and WhatsApp are popular across regional and class demarcations. Banaji and Bhat note that WhatsApp, in particular, plays a crucial role in misinformation and violence among "rural and urban upper and middle-caste Hindu men and women," and this includes participation in group chats that extend and facilitate caste, religious and political affiliations.[47] In relation to YouTube, Mohan and Punathambekar observe a kind of platform localization that recognizes both the regional nuances of the Indian market, as well as the infrastructural realities of the Indian user base, as seen in the introduction of a Hindi interface as well as the option to "download videos for offline playback" in the light of uneven data access.[48] The digital logics of contemporary India enfold those who may not be part of the metropolitan imagination, but may very well participate in the global through fragmented and localized access to the platform economy.

Thus, while we cannot pinpoint the class demarcations of viewers and listeners from YouTube comments alone, aural cues and visual iconography can give us clues. For instance, in the case of Krishnavanshi's video mentioned above, as well as Acharya's "*Hindu Matlab Sabka Baap*" video, the visual iconography of the still images consists of saffron-clad young men, pointing towards a cult of masculine performance. This is also evident in Acharya's video, where the image displays a moustache-toting man on a motorcycle, sporting a saffron T-shirt and a *tilak*. As Srivastava has pointed out, this is a repackaging of the image of the Hindutva fanatic, whereby the "threat to an imagined ancient Hindu manhood is sought to be countered […] through a variety of modern symbols," such as the rendering of Hanuman as a muscle-bound, superhero-style figure that has become the mascot of macho Hindutva.[49] Similarly, Jain also notes a transformation in the iconography of Hindu deities such as Ram and Krishna into more muscular, hyper-masculinized forms since the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement in the 1990s.[50] Jain observes that "muscular, spectacular/speculative declarations of identity" map on to logics of scale (as in the case of statues) in contemporary India that exist "alongside state and non-state spectacles of violence directed against "antinational" others."[51] This links muscular/spectacular articulations of identity with violence, and draws attention to the context of India's embeddedness in neoliberal globalization. The iconography of the two videos discussed above presents an image of the Hindutva *kar sevak* (volunteer activist), empowered by access to technology and consumer goods, for whom neoliberal mobilities, class-affiliation or geographical location do not pose roadblocks.[52] Instead, as Jain demonstrates, the "sensory-affective field" of contemporary Hindutva is "shot through with the scalar forces of democracy, capital, and devotion (religious and otherwise)."[53] In this neoliberal rendering of a masculinist, hardline imagination, the *kar sevak* becomes not only a figure of devotion, but rather, through participation in a global, technological landscape, the iconography of the "*kattar* Hindu" (hardcore or radical) becomes a signifier of Hindutva "cool."

Such masculinist packaging of Hindutva rhetoric transforms particular images (for example, the *tilak* bearing *kar sevak*) and linguistic utterances (for example, "Jai Shri Ram" or even the word "*kattar*") into what Bruce calls an affect generator – a "supercharged image that enables multiple claims and performances of solidarity and

identification to take place."[54] Such "supercharged" identification can be seen in the repetition of right-wing iconography by singers like Acharya and Krishnavanshi. Saffron-clad and bearing *tilak* on the forehead, they embody the "*kattar* Hindu" persona with pride. While the image of the "*kattar* Hindu" has been a constant presence in the minefield of Indian politics, it has become increasingly more acceptable since the 2014 General Elections that brought Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power. The election of Yogi Adityanath as the Chief Minister of the state of Uttar Pradesh in the 2017 Assembly Elections is a case in point, as Adityanath had previously been accused of hate speech and inciting communal violence. Or take for example, Sadhvi Pragya – accused in the Malegaon blasts (2008), and later elected as a Member of Legislative Assembly in the 2019 General Elections. According to Jaffrelot, such political victories point towards the "mainstreamization of erstwhile fringe elements of the Hindutva nebula,"[55] and its reverberations can be clearly felt in the case of Hindutva pop as well.

A YouTube search for the hashtag "#kattarhindu" leads to a bevy of videos (both music videos and others) centred on themes of Hindu supremacy and Islamophobia. Many music videos that fall under this category include either the hashtag or the phrasing of "*kattar* Hindu" in the video title or description. One video uploaded on the DJ4X.in YouTube channel is titled "कट्टर हिंदू - Kattar Hindu 2020 Dialogue DJ Competition Song | DJ Priyanshu"[56] and runs with the hashtags "#कट्टर_हिंदू" and "#KattarHindu" (the former is the Hindi form of the latter). Another video on the "Kattar Hindu" channel – "The Hindu Offical Song"[57] (*sic*) – uses a variant of the motorcycle-riding *kattar*-Hindu image that we also see in Sandeep Acharya's "Hindu Matlab Sabka Baap" video (Figure 2). Thus, Hindutva pop exists within a network of visual, aural, textual, hypertextual and performative elements that facilitate the repetitive actualization of the ideological fantasy.

Although this fantasy structure is masculinist, it does not exclude women. While Hindutva pop is dominated by masculinist iconography and male singers, one of the most well-known singers in the genre is a woman – Laxmi Dubey. On her website, Dubey presents herself as a "National Bhajan Singer" (*bhajan* refers to Hindu devotional songs) and the top banner on her homepage contain the words "Jai Hind, Jai Hindutwa, Jai Shree Ram" (Hail India, Hail Hindutva, Hail Lord Ram) while the text on the bottom ribbon translates as "Safeguarding Hindutva, striving for Hindu unity, and preaching Hindutva is my religion. Jai Shree Ram" (Figure 3).[58] In this version of religious piety, patriotism is directly equated with *Hindutva* and this aligns with the agenda of the BJP which has also roped in Dubey for campaign publicity.[59]

Dubey's feminine presence in an arguably toxic-masculinist space reflects Bannerjee's assertion that Hindu right-wing women have claimed a space within this masculinist ecology either by embodying the persona of the "citizen warrior" or through the role of the "eloquent speaker, celebrating the idea of masculine Hinduism."[60] In Dubey's case, her role as a singer allows her to occupy the latter position ("eloquent speaker"), while embodying the "citizen warrior" persona though performative gestures. One of her songs "*Kashmeer Na Denge*" ("We Won't Cede Kashmir"),[61] is a direct reference to the troubled status of Kashmir, and the conflict between India and Pakistan for control over the region. The video alternates between images of Dubey singing, Indian military displays on Republic Day, images of militarized Kashmir, archival war footage

Figure 2. Masculinized iconography in the "Kattar Hindu" channel. YouTube screenshots.

and selective appropriation of Indian independence fighters such as Subhas Chandra Bose. Dubey's refusal through lyrics to give up Kashmir, posits her as the voice of not just Hindutva, but purportedly, also that of the nation (the logic of "Jai Hind, Jai Hindutwa, Jai Shree Ram" becomes actualized here). Dubey frequently assumes this position in her videos and performances. In another video, "*Hindu Aaya*" ("The Hindu has Arrived")[62] she proclaims – "it's every Hindu's wish, to manifest the *Ram Rajya*, all traitors we must send scurrying across the border" (author's translation). *Ram Rajya* alludes to the establishment of a Hindu state, while the allusion to the "border," references the

Figure 3. Laxmi Dubey's homepage. Screenshot.

frequently used Hindu-right tactic of telling opponents (usually either secular or Muslim) to leave India and go to Pakistan. In her live shows, Dubey has been reported to encourage listeners to take part in cow protection drives, and to proclaim that she would "target those 'living in Kashmir, exploding things.'"[63] An attention to Dubey's persona and presence gives us a sense of her relation to the larger field of Hindutva pop; i.e. we can read Dubey's persona in the light of what Hansen has identified as the Hindu right's archetypal "theme of restoring masculinity" through violence.[64] In light of the two intersecting personae, Dubey's ripples in the Hindutva pop pool are a repetition of the form and an actualization of its virtuality.

What also becomes clear through such repetitive actualization is a sense of locality that is not necessarily metropolitan. This resonates with the point about the transformation in the demographic of the "Internet Hindu," especially if we look at the geographic traces that are inscribed within these videos. Hindutva pop videos often localize their singers as belonging to certain towns and cities, and Sandeep Acharya's older YouTube channel was titled in this way ("Sandeep Acharya Ayodhya"). If we move beyond these singers, we can also find remixed songs and electronic tracks overlaid with pro-Hindutva speeches that are uploaded by "DJs," and very often the names of these DJs themselves are localized in a region-specific manner. Track names and video titles are often marked in this way – "BAGHAWA RANG NEW HINDU KATTAR SONG 2018 by DJ SAGAR JHANSI,"[65] "बकरे की अम्मा कब तक खैर मनाएगी | 2021 Yogi dialogue | Kattar hindu dialogue | Dj Santosh RBL"[66] and "Kattar Hindu Jaikaara Dialogue – (Kargil Maar Dhaar Dance Mix) – Dj Ps BaBu Sikandarpur – &-Dj King K."[67] Jhansi, Sikandarpur and Raebareli (denoted by RBL) are all small towns in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

While this is not an exhaustive list, it is indicative of a kind of regionalized modernity in which the techno-aesthetic of modern electronic dance music is seen as compatible with the aspirations of both non-metropolitan smaller towns, as well as non-upper/upper-middle class denizens of urban areas. This is a result of the mainstreaming of

Hindutva discourse through its fusion with a neoliberal ethos. Political commentators have called this Hindutva 2.0, "a particular variant of neoliberalism that dovetails religious nationalism with economic progress."[68] Economic progress here often translates into a promise of jobs and social mobility, and the promise of access to the world of global commodities. What we have then is an image of progress that is affective – whether attainable or not, this image deflects the notion of progress within diffuse technocultural effects. Social media penetration and increased cellphone access are part of that story; news reports about Hindutva pop themselves mention the "penetration of internet in the Tier II and Tier III cities and the low data cost" as one of the causes for the recent popularity of Hindutva pop.[69] But there is also a parallel in the transformation of the music industry itself.

Digital music and the affective socialities of Hindutva pop

Manuel discusses the transformation of the music industry as one encouraged by digitalization, in which the mobile phone has become the "preeminent electronic medium" in many aspects of contemporary life, including music consumption and dissemination as "many singers upload their videos to YouTube via their cellphones."[70] By now, several music labels, as well as independent musicians and DJs, have increasingly turned to YouTube to disseminate their music. Thus, what Udupa has called "enterprise Hindutva," fostered by the emergence of social media,[71] has become the go-to mode for Hindutva mobilization online. The field of Hindutva pop is a convergence of both the cultural logic of music production's digitalization, and of enterprise Hindutva.

Music labels and YouTube channels that distribute Hindutva pop online attest to this change. Supriya Music, which carries most of the songs by the singer Sanjay Faizabadi, describes itself as "a premium destination for Bhojpuri Hot & Spicy content."[72] Wave Music, another label, describes itself as "the leading bhojpuri music record label from India."[73] Similarly, Mayur Music, which carries songs by a bevy of Hindutva singers including Acharya and Krishnavanshi, also describes itself as "the leading Regional music record label from India," offering "songs and music from popular Hindi, Bhojpuri albums."[74] A similar image is projected by Janata Musical and Pictures, which claims to "offer songs and music from popular bhojpuri albums and shows," including singers such as Acharya and Krishnavanshi.[75] While these music labels are not all based out of small towns (Wave Music, for instance, is located in Delhi), inscriptions of regionality are crucial to their business. Thus, the forcefield of Hindutva pop exists within an affective matrix wherein regionality and class are key components along with the developmental promise of "Hindutva 2.0." As Basu notes, Hindutva 2.0 works through a "principle of solicitation, orchestration, or contagion [that] 'touches upon' all gestures of aesthetics or instrumentation."[76] Thus, the affective politics of *jouissance* emerges at the intersection of digital technology, neoliberalism, and Hindu fundamentalism.

We can see the effects of this techno-cultural mash-up in a particular subgenre of Hindutva pop on YouTube – the speech-dub. While this genre does not usually feature better known singers such as Acharya and Krishnavanshi, it thrives on the affordances of electronic music and remixing. For instance, one of the titles mentioned earlier in this paper – " बकरे की अम्मा कब तक खैर मनाएगी | 2021 Yogi dialogue | Kattar hindu dialogue | Dj Santosh RBL" samples pro-Hindutva slogans from Yogi Adityanath speeches. The video

is comprised of a still image of the Lord Ram and while the visuals are not dynamic, alongside the heavily distorted sounds and throbbing bass effects, they render the politician's "*kattar* Hindu status" with an aggressive sonic iconicity. This is especially true given that the incendiary nature of the speech, in which Adityanath states "Those who like Pakistan, let them go there. We won't stop them," referencing the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan, and the latter's status as an Islamic nation to which, Hindutva alleges, Indian Muslims pledge fealty.

This sub-genre is not altogether new; Manuel has written about a tape that circulated during the *Ram janmabhoomi* movement in the 1980s and 1990s, titled "*Mandir ka nirman karo"I* ("Build the temple") [that] mixes speeches with snappy songs."[77] While the speech-dub genre on YouTube draws on this tradition of remixing, it is fundamentally transformed by the affordances of digital music production. In one of the first significant news reports that detailed the phenomenon of Hindutva pop, one of the DJs claims that he started working as a DJ after attending a "ten-day course" in digital mixing.[78] The ubiquity of digital technology and the relative ease of learning digital production has ensured that the "enterprise" nature of Hindutva pop exists beyond the more professional studios that cater to singers like Dubey, Krishnavanshi and Acharya. On YouTube, it is not rare to find remixes and dubs that declare the names of their "DJs" in the track itself, or in the description. The cut-and-paste logic of digital media[79] introduces a do-it-yourself sensibility to the field of music production (Figure 4).

Hindutva music in this genre encompasses a range of producers, some professional, others amateur, all under the sign of the "DJ." Digital affordances allow independent music producers to insert themselves into the Hindutva sensorium. Affect here emerges not merely from visual or aural reception, but out of the "promissory note"[80]

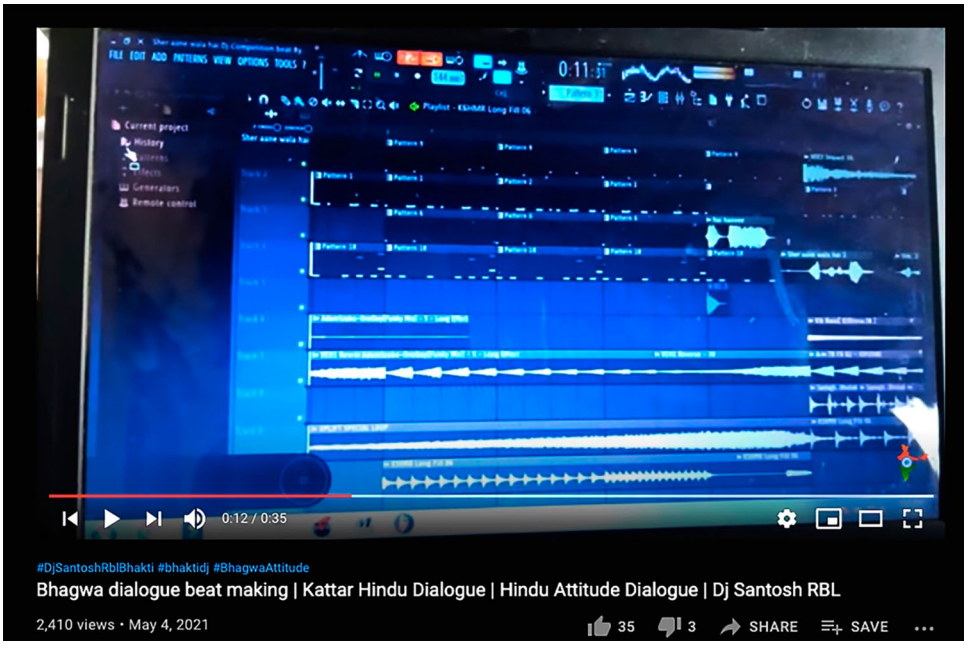

Figure 4. DJ backstage production of Hindutva pop.[97] *YouTube* screenshot.

of digital participation. In the political context of contemporary India, the digital writ large has emerged as precisely such a promissory note. The possibilities of small-scale digital media production (from music, to selfies, to TikTok) replicate at nodal levels the BJP's rhetoric of an "*atmanirbhar*" (self-sufficient) Digital India. While the infrastructures of the Digital India initiative can be located in macro-level policy decisions, economic incentives, trade-agreements and so on, it inaugurates imaginaries of selfhood and citizenship that are routed through technologically mediated processes. This aligns with what Kuntsman has called "selfie citizenship," in which "claims" are made by citizens through ubiquitous technocultural forms merging "the individual and the collective, the deliberate and the spontaneous, the marketized and the grass roots."[81] While Kuntsman focuses on selfies, spaces like YouTube also allow aspiring DJs and small-time creators to similarly route themselves into the public through platforms and make claims about ethnonationalist/religious citizenship through digital production. In this arrangement, the "citizen" becomes a user and a consumer of packaged, digital forms – as Chun puts it, new media are also "N(YOU) media."[82] Thus, the lure of online "enterprise Hindutva" is not merely the premeditated spread of contagious ideology, but the possibility of a viral explosion of the self.

In *The Print*'s video report, one BJP activist draws a direct link between future political mobilization and the affective power of such music: "Through the songs created by the DJs, the youth get inspired and they become more aware of their culture."[83] Reflecting Thompson and Biddle's assertion that the "DJ and the crowd exist in a feedback loop," the use of such music in physical gatherings gestures towards its power as a manager of moods and affects.[84] "Inspired" is an inadequate translation for the Hindi word used by the speaker – "*josh*," whose meaning encapsulates a sense of thrill or a rush, but one that is shared through "affective alliances" forged through music.[85] The activist here is speaking of offline gatherings in which these songs are played during religious festivities and processions, but the gesture towards a contagious affective movement within the crowd is clear. Brennan writes that such contagions are "'simple affective transfers' – in which your aggression communicates itself and I become aggressive in consequence."[86] Such affective transfer as noted by Sampson, "is always, from the outset, social."[87] If Sampson is correct in postulating that the "distinction between being offline and online is now a redundant concept," such contagious affectivity predicates a movement between offline and online crowds.

Thus, while these music videos generate affect by textual means, they also become serialized in the affective transfer through networks. According to Dean, "affect, or *jouissance* in Lacanian terms, is what accrues from reflexive communication [and] the endless circular movement of commenting, adding notes and links, bringing in new friends and followers, layering and interconnecting myriad communications platforms and devices."[88] When coupled with the rhetoric of Digital India and Hindutva, such processes of reflexive communication (forwarding, sharing and liking for example) endow the audiovisual genre with an "intensity accrued from the repetition, the excitement or thrill of more."[89] Hindutva pop and its associated forms thrive on online connectedness as well as offline socialities engendered by online forms.

Conclusion

But why should an attention to affect matter work for network-circulated vitriolic expressions? In the specific case of India and Hindutva pop, the implications are clear. It is important to step away from a cause/effect analysis – these music videos probably do not directly contribute to the killing of political opponents, minorities and otherwise marginalized people. However, the micropolitical ways in which such digital objects can radiate intensities and initiate mobilization should not be ignored. Current conceptualizations of vitriolic online content fall into variants of offensive speech frameworks, as for instance, dangerous speech, which is any expression that "can increase the risk that its audience will condone or commit violence against members of another group."[90] As Gagliardone argues, this can include music alongside other expressions.[91] According to Benesch et al., the dangerous speech model moves away from the ambiguities of the term "hate" speech which can often be used against journalists and political dissidents.[92] The clarity sought by the dangerous speech model charts a way towards actionable measures. While the concept is useful and covers a range of forms, it does not answer the question: what makes such articulations tick?

The lens of affect can inaugurate further possibilities for understanding such phenomena and digital objects. In the politics of hate, "sticky" or affective utterances and objects gain value through "repetition with a difference."[93] While songs, videos, comments, and the likes do not constitute "speech" in the conventional sense, they are digital utterances saturated with affective power. They test the limits of what constitutes hate speech, while also reminding us that hate speech is not merely a question of insult or injury, but one of repetitive signing.[94] As Ahmed postulates in her account of the affective economy of hate, "the more signs circulate, the more affective they become."[95] Hindutva pop thrives on repeated and viral circulation of ideological signage through the infrastructures of the networked media mix.

Libidinal fantasy is actualized and becomes collective through such networked circulation. Hindutva pop music, as well as the comments, forwards and likes it generates, normalizes hatred and dehumanization through representational and network strategies – what Papacharissi calls "soft structures of feeling" in which affect and mediation become ways of inhabiting the public sphere, and indeed being in the world.[96] Such "soft structures" do not always lend themselves to the causal logics of hate/dangerous speech, but they propagate forms of affective belonging routed through channels of hatred and fear. Audiovisualizations of hate and terror in the context of Digital India work by providing space for violent spectating – a vicarious, networked experience of libidinal violence. Consequently, our conceptualization of such forms must expand to account for the affective harms that they cause.

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