

Tracing the Rise of Ascetic Masculinity in India

Arpita Chakraborty

Introduction

Religious ideas have played – and as this chapter will show, continue to play – a central role in Indian politics, and these ideas are gendered in nature. Some of these take a particular masculine form – violent, heterosexual and upper caste – and it finds expression in the political sphere through physical as well as symbolic forms of violence. One such form of masculinity gaining political capital is ascetic masculinity. I demonstrate in this chapter that the manifestation of ascetic masculinity traced in the works of Vivekananda,¹ Golwalkar² and Gandhi continue to be present and influence politics in India. A politics of appropriation in the contemporary Indian politics has seen right-wing Hindutva organizations applauding Gandhi and Vivekananda often. There is a growing trend within the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to celebrate both Gandhi and his assassin, Nathuram Godse (Mukherjee 2019). This chapter will look at how ascetic aspects of the works of Vivekananda and Gandhi are taken out of context and appropriated by the RSS–BJP that helps them correlate their ideas of asceticism with that of Golwalkar, and how that appropriation is serving their violent masculinist tendencies.

The practices of violent masculinism in Indian politics in the early twentieth century bear resemblance to the political masculinity in contemporary India. This violent masculinism derives its strength from other structural hierarchies such as casteism. The need of the hour is to understand gender relations in their totality – the whole spectrum of manhood, womanhood,

sexes, sexualities and their interconnections with our social spheres of culture, politics and religion. In fact, in either responding to a sociopolitical moment or attempting to re-enact a particular sociopolitical situation, the formation of hegemonic masculinity can be of use to bring back historical memories and past imaginings into present use. As Anand (2009) observes:

The sexual dimension of the Hindutva discourse, as revealed in the jokes, slogans, gossip, and conversations of young male activists, is relevant ... it assures the Hindu nationalist self of its moral superiority and yet instils an anxiety about the threatening masculine Other.

In the performance of Hindu masculinity, the spheres of politics and religion continually intersect. The self-identity manifested by the state is that of a father figure – heterosexual, Hindu and patriarchal. This chapter will interrogate this Hindu masculine identity and how violent ascetic masculinity plays a role in its creation based on Islamophobia since the nineteenth century. Ascetic masculinity is indivisible from communalized anxiety about emasculation.

In the first section, I briefly discuss the writings of Vivekananda and Gandhi in relation to celibacy and ascetic masculinity. The second section will then look at Golwalkar's idea of celibacy and how the *pracharaks* of the RSS have put it into practice. The resurgence of ascetic masculinity in the wake of the BJP's hegemonization of state structure at both national and state levels since 2014 is discussed in the third section. This section will thus build on the previous discussions of ascetic masculinity and show its praxis in contemporary times. Through these sections, I argue that ascetic masculinity is becoming a dominant articulation of masculinity in Indian politics. It is propagated as ahistorical, or perennially present in the Hindu culture. With the rise of Hindu supremacists into prominence in Indian politics, ascetic masculinity is claimed as a true representation of ideal masculinity in India.

Tension between the Celibate and the Mother

Evidence of religiously motivated violent assertions of masculinity is a lived reality in India. The beef lynchings by vigilant right-wing Hindu nationalist

or Gau Raksha committees (Ayyub 2018; *The Wire* 2017), the growing political capital ascribed to celibacy as seen, for example, in prime minister Narendra Modi's election campaign, which focused on his image as a celibate (Srivastava 2015), increasing violence against women and Muslims (Ellis-Peterson 2020; Reuters 2019) and the rising nationalist othering of minority communities (Subramanian 2020) all bear testimony of it. As contemporary globalized Indian society continues to be saturated with violent communal imaginations of masculinity, Vivekananda's ideas are also regaining popularity. His focus on virile masculinity and Vedantic philosophy has attracted the Hindu right wing. Beckerlegge (2004) shows how Vivekananda continues to directly inspire organizations such as the Vivekananda Kendra, which is also influenced by the RSS. On the topic of the Somnath Temple, for example, Vivekananda commented: 'We took this and others over and re-Hinduized them. We shall have to do many things like that yet' (ibid.: xiii). This 'othering' of non-Hindu religious communities is attractive to the Hindutva ideology. However, Vivekananda rejected the notion of violence celebrated by both the Christian and the Kshatriya model of masculinity (Vivekananda 1900a):³

[F]rom the point of view of the Englishman, the brave, the heroic, the Kshatriya – conquest is the greatest glory that one man can have over another. That is true from his point of view, but from ours it is quite the opposite. If I ask myself what has been the cause of India's greatness, I answer, because we have never conquered. That is our glory.

Selective, out-of-context appropriation of quotes such as the earlier one have led to his popularization among Hindutva organizations, even though he had never justified the use of violence against other communities.

Hindu leaders have often employed religious ideas about celibacy to achieve political ends. Celibacy was variously understood as *brahmacharya*, or sexual constraint or the act of renunciation. Vivekananda, Golwalkar, Gandhi – all three use celibacy as a prominent feature in their ideological teachings. Gandhi defined a *brahmachari* as 'one who never has any lustful intention, who by constant attendance upon God has become proof against conscious or unconscious emissions, who is capable of lying naked with naked women, however beautiful they may be, without being in any manner

whatsoever sexually excited' (Lal 2000: 123). In his lecture on the Vedas and the Upanishads, delivered in San Francisco on 26 May 1900, Vivekananda also upheld renouncement as the highest ideal⁴ for men (Vivekananda 1900d).

He considered spirituality and intellect to constitute two separate spheres of social and political lives. While the spiritual nature of women contributes to the moral fabric of society, it is the intellect that drives political aspirations. Hence, we see him promote education among women, but repeatedly stress its use by women as mothers⁵ rather than politically active members of the society. Renunciation of marital and familial life is thus never an ideal for Indian women,⁶ unlike his male disciples. Celibacy was a symbolic capital unavailable to women. Making renunciation a necessary aspect of masculinity denies the role of reproduction to men. Dissociation of masculinity from reproduction was one of the central elements of Vivekananda's mission of recuperating Hindu glory – and this Hindu glory was for all practical purposes the glory of Hindu masculinity. The myth of lost masculinity is, contrary to established expectations, not countered by a claim to hyper-fertility. In Vivekananda's work, the highest form of masculinity is bestowed to those who refrain from sexuality in all forms. This loftiest spiritually ideal state of being was not a possibility for women in Vivekananda's imagination. Thus, ideal femininity and ideal masculinity seem to be always in tension with each other. The achievement of ideal femininity and masculinity together was a spiritual impossibility since motherhood and celibacy were in contradiction.

But why was *brahmacharya* so crucial to Gandhi and Vivekananda? According to Gandhi (M. K. Gandhi 1925: 316), without *brahmacharya*, men will be unable to conduct their duty towards the family and duty towards the greater good of the community together. The importance of the concept of *seva* emerges here:

I clearly saw that one aspiring to serve humanity with his whole soul could not do without it. It was borne in upon me that I should have more and more occasions for service of the kind I was rendering, and that I should find myself unequal to the task if I were engaged in the pleasures of family life and in the propagation and rearing of children.... Without the observance of brahmacharya service of the family would be inconsistent with service of the community. With brahmacharya they would be perfectly consistent.

Gandhi firmly believed that sex, even marital sex, leads to the loss of the vital bodily fluid, or semen, which is the cause of masculine effeminacy among Indians. Celibacy played a central part in his politics of non-violence. Sex was merely a tool of reproduction, and *brahmacharya* is to be followed even by a married couple. This is a distinctive difference from Vivekananda's ideology, who clearly envisioned a more sexual reproductive role of motherhood for women. In his obsession with *brahmacharya*, Gandhi had imagined masculinity not only as bodily strength but also self-control through semen retention. There was a mystification of the semen and its extraordinary power, which was based on hardly any scientific evidence. He could link any bodily ailment with the imperfect practice of celibacy, be it constipation (M. K. Gandhi 1913: 103), pleurisy, dysentery or appendicitis (M. K. Gandhi 1924: 117).

Somatic conceptualization of sexuality also played a central role in his sexual experimentation; he was firmly of the belief that retention of semen in the male body was related to increased strength and masculinity.⁷ Joseph Alter (1994: 45) writes about how Gandhi succeeded in amalgamating politics, religion and morality through this sexual self-control:

Affecting the persona of a world-renouncer, Gandhi was able to mix political, religious, and moral power, thus translating personal self-control into radical social criticism and nationalist goals. Gandhi's mass appeal was partly effected on a visceral level at which many Hindu men were able to fully appreciate the logic of celibacy as a means to psychological security, self-improvement, and national reform.

His advocacy of androgyny (Lal 2000: 119) would perhaps have been revolutionary, but for the fact that it was limited to a re-imagination of solely masculinity. Androgyny became the other of Christian masculinity, but it was also the other to a liberated femininity that he had been critical of all his life. It was Gandhi's position that in order to make Indian masculinity stronger, it had to induct the virtues of suffering and restraint from Indian femininity. However, the induction of such qualities was not intended to uplift Indian women to an equal status.

The idea of celibacy in married relationships was only tenable if initiated by the husband. This is a social reality Gandhi left unaddressed. While he

formulated this *brahmacharya* for both men and women, denial of a sexual relationship by a married woman would have been an impossibility in conjugal relations in India in the twentieth century. In other words, *brahmacharya* as a spiritual or political choice was present only for married men like himself, while women like Kasturbai could only have been the passive recipient of such a decision. In these women's inability to take this decision lies the greatest gendered manifestation of Gandhi's political philosophy. While thinking of *seva*, he ignored a man's sexual responsibility towards their partner. And this led to another tension in his conceptualization, pointed at by Palshikar (2016: 420):

... its practice was supposed to make the practitioner more maternal, but it was also supposed to give him access to extraordinary potency. Gandhi ascribed asexual nature to women and 'lust' to men. If women were naturally less driven by sexual urge, if they were naturally maternal, if they had natural capacity for enduring suffering, then there was no 'overcoming'; where there is no 'overcoming', there could be no extraordinary potency.

This ideation of women being their finest as 'domestic goddesses' continues to this day, as verified by the lowering of percentage of women in Indian workforce from 42.7% in 2004–2005 to 23.3 per cent in 2017–2018 (Government of India 2019). Three out of four Indian women are neither working nor seeking paid work, putting India among the bottom ten countries in the world in terms of women's workforce participation. This brings us to the concept of work, or *karma*,⁸ and how work is imagined in the ideation of ascetic masculinity. In the next section, I will look at the conceptualization of ascetic masculinity and how it is integrally connected to the religious imagination of *karma* in the works of Vivekananda, Gandhi and Golwalkar.

Celibacy and the *Swayamsevaks*

The idea of *seva* (organized service to humanity) (Beckerlegge 2004) is the conceptual connector between *karma* and *dharma*⁹ for Vivekananda,

Golwalkar and Gandhi. Vivekananda stressed the role of the *sanyasi* as not spiritual renunciation but social activism through service of humanity. Influenced by the Western ideas of Christian masculinity, as well as the traditional ideas of sperm retention or 'spermatic economy' (Bramen 2001) as a way towards garnering masculine prowess (*kshatra-virya*), Vivekananda's central aim was to create a generation of young men who would dedicate their lives to service of the community and their spiritual upliftment through a focus on the teachings of the Upanishads and the Gita. In the formation and daily rituals of the RSS, we find reflection of the same aspiration in a more violent, communal form.

Currently estimated to have more than six million members spread among 74,622 *shakhas* (branches) and more than a hundred affiliated bodies (P. Gandhi 2014; Sagar 2020a), apart from thousands of other shadow organizations, the RSS is one of the principal forces of Hindu religion-centred politics in India. Its political thought envisages a future for India where Hindus will be able to retrieve their prominence in society, lost allegedly during the Mughal and British periods of domination. A theory broadly contested by historians like Thapar (2016), it has been enjoying growing popularity. According to the Constitution of the RSS (Chitkara 2004: 318), members have different roles based on their level of participation in the activities of the Sangh. The initiation role is that of a *swayamsevak*: 'Any male Hindu of 18 years or above, who subscribes to the Aims and Objects of the Sangh and conforms generally to its discipline and associates himself with the activities of the Shakha will be considered as a Swayamsevak.' In this conceptualization of general discipline, celibacy plays a crucial role.

Just like in the ideology of Swami Vivekananda, the idea of the celibate *sannyasis* of Hinduism and Christian missionaries amalgamated in Golwalkar's imagination (Golwalkar 1966: ch. 35) to create the imagined rescuer of the Hindu nation (Golwalkar 1939: 88, quoted in Jaffrelot 1996):

It is always the selfless, self-confident and devoted band of missionaries, intensely proud of their national ethos, who have roused the sleeping manliness in our nation in times of adversity and made our nation rise gloriously from a heap of shambles. Verily such men have been the true salt of this soil.

Religion played a significant role in such a reinvigoration, as is amply shown by the speeches of Golwalkar: ‘Today, more than anything else, Mother needs such men – young, intelligent, dedicated and more than all virile and masculine. When Narayana – eternal knowledge – and Nara – eternal manliness – combine, victory is ensured. And such are the men who make history – men with capital “M”’ (Golwalkar 1966: ch. 35).

However, there is a decisive shift of importance from the Mahabharata (of which the Bhagavad Gita is a part) to the Ramayana when one compares Golwalkar’s teachings with that of Vivekananda. While the warrior image of Krishna repeatedly finds mention in the works of Vivekananda, the RSS shifts its focus to the warrior Rama, starting from the times of Golwalkar. Physical training, exercises and drills were introduced from the very first day of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh n.d.). The inspiration behind the formation of muscular, virile Hindu men was not the spiritual conquest of the world as Vivekananda envisaged but the political conquest of the Indian subcontinent from foreign rulers – the Muslims. The creation of Ramrajya – a political utopia with Hindu cultural, religious and political identity – is the ultimate goal of the organization, as is evident from the focus on building the Ram temple in Ayodhya. This indicates a decisive shift from the field of religion of Vivekananda to the field of communal politics by Golwalkar, despite the oft-repeated disavowal from the RSS.

Another crucial similarity between Vivekananda and Golwalkar is the idea of ‘man-making religion’ – religion coming to the use of masculinization. Golwalkar’s interpretation of *dharma* and *karma*, decisively shaped by the protective duty one has towards the country as the mother figure, was imagined as the assertion of protectionist, virulent heteronormative masculinity. Golwalkar appropriated Vivekananda’s conception of *seva* and conceptualized the idea of ‘Positive Hinduism’ (Beckerlegge 2004: 49). For Golwalkar, the *karma* of every Hindu was the service of the Hindu nation, and the *dharma* was to protect the Hindu nation from outsiders.¹⁰ The humanity in Vivekananda’s vision is narrowed to ‘Hindus’ in Golwalkar’s definition of *karma*, thus religiously coding the subjects of such service. Andersen (1972) discusses at length the daily practice of physical exercises at every RSS *shakha* during Golwalkar’s leadership, a practice which continues to this day. The use of weapons was also a common practice, especially in the *shakhas* in Punjab in

the 1940s. He envisioned the 'work' of an individual as realizing his manhood while strengthening his Hindu community:

The ultimate vision of our work ... is a perfectly organised state of society wherein each individual has been moulded into a model of ideal Hindu manhood and made into a living limb of the corporate personality of society.

I argue that for both Vivekananda and Golwalkar the conscious use of religion as a tool worked towards masculinizing not only individual men but the entire political habitus. Their belief in the 'spermatic economy' (Bramen 2001) excluded those unable to reinforce virile masculinity in a visible, physical way. The concept of 'spermatic economy' for personal as well as collective regeneration desexualized individual masculinity on the one hand while on the other it made this desexualized masculinity a central element of Indian politics. Thus, during the 2014 election campaign, we see Modi being projected as a *brahmachari*, *lauha purush* (iron man), whose unceremonious discarding of marital life was seen as proof of his virile masculinity necessary to be a national leader. By desexualizing himself and distancing himself from the marital responsibilities, he was seen as able to masculinize and dedicate himself towards the entire society rather than merely his family.

Distrust in the role of women as political agents is a recurring feature of the writings of Vivekananda and Golwalkar. Irrespective of their political positions in relation to caste, communal politics or violence, Vivekananda, Golwalkar and Gandhi all subscribe to the symbolic capital associated with ascetic masculinity. This symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1989) in the field of Indian politics can be capitalized to influence political practice: a vicious cycle exists that rewards masculinist practices ensuring its continued existence. The aim of Golwalkar's teaching is thus to create a habitus that will ensure the sustenance of this Hindu symbolic capital and its dominance over all others. In this he differed from the vision of Vivekananda, which was based upon a spiritual reawakening of the Hindu religion and Hindu men. Vivekananda did not provide a hierarchy in terms of citizenship in his teachings. In the light of this observation, let us remember one of Golwalkar's most quoted

lines about the position of non-Hindu populations in his vision of 'Akhand Bharat' (Undivided India)¹¹ (Golwalkar 1939: 55–56):

[They] must either adopt Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion ... and give up their attitude of intolerance and ungratefulness towards this land and its age long traditions ... or may stay in this country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges ... not even citizen's rights.

This exclusivist view of nationality, as Smyth (1972) called it, has been brought into practice by the post-2014 BJP government in India. The *seva vibhag* is one of the 'six pillars' of the RSS, and according to Shankar Das, the *baudbhik pramukh* or intellectual head of the RSS in Assam, works cohesively in the form of social work to achieve the ultimate aim of Hindu Rashtra (Sagar 2020b).

The field of communal politics and Hindu religion are located sartorially in the body of the Hindu man, in contradiction to the nineteenth-century focus on the body of the Hindu woman by theorists like Chatterjee (1989). The shift of anxiety from the female body in the home to the male body in the field of politics shows that the resolution of the women's question was negotiated in complex social and political re-imaginings. By moving our focus from social reform to the broader political field, it becomes clear that masculinity as both political agency and symbolic capital came into crucial focus in the last century. The culmination of this masculinization occurred in the Hindu supremacist politics of communalization after 2014. The last six years have seen a communalized masculinism in Indian politics – with the state structure in the hands of the BJP, all three pillars of the state have been communalized and masculinized. The next section will therefore focus specifically on this period.

Ascetic Masculinity and Violence in Post-2014 Indian Politics

Ascetic masculinity is on the rise in the political sphere in India. Despite their decreed renunciation of worldly affairs, ironically more and more ascetic

figures are occupying political positions. There is a calculated promotion of religious ascetic figures in the public and political sphere in India. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Yogi Adityanath and Sakshi Maharaj are only the more well-known of such figures. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's annual address to the organization was broadcast live on the state television channel Doordarshan. Doordarshan till date had been reserved as a communication medium for the state – allowing only democratically elected leaders such as the prime minister or the president to address the entire nation. The three most important and symbolic political positions in the Indian federal system of government are the posts of prime minister, president and vice-president. The current president has close ties with the RSS, while the other two are former RSS *pracharaks* themselves. These are definite markers of the rising importance of non-elected ascetic masculine figures in the Indian political landscape. They reaffirm the intersection of religion and politics in Indian society and are embodiments of ascetic masculinity in praxis in Indian politics. The political appeal of such figures lies in their lack of personal attachments, since their proclaimed celibacy is proof of their ability to serve the country without any partiality. There is a connection made between celibacy, patriotic duty and masculinism that makes ascetic male figures the ideal political subjects and agents. Both the prime ministers of India from the BJP – former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and current prime minister Narendra Modi – have been projected as *brahmacharis*.¹²

The current prime minister of India is the biggest promoter of this brand of political asceticism. In the 2014 election campaigns, Modi was pictured as a national 'strongman' with a hypermasculine image. This is in sync with his tactical navigation of symbolic masculinity, which has also manifested in his dress, as described by Visvanathan (2013): 'Originally Modi appeared in the drabness of white kurtas, which conveyed a swadeshi asceticism... Modi realized that ascetic white was an archaic language. His PROs forged a more colourful Modi, a Brand Modi more cheerful in blue and peach, more ethnic in gorgeous turbans.' He reformulates and publicizes ascetic masculinity in a more palatable garb even while the essence of his communalized politics continues to remain the same.

While Muslim masculinity expressed through violence is commonly associated with Islamic terrorism, violence by Hindu masculine organizations

has achieved acceptance from a large group of Indians as a necessity to save Hindu cultural heritage. This symbolic approval also leads to and promotes a gender and caste hierarchy. The recent state policies taken up by the Modi government – planting trees to collect dowry for daughters thus reconfirming the dowry system,¹³ banning of beef, silence on communal lynchings across the country – are manifestations of the same Hindu upper-caste masculinity, which gains legitimacy and religious sanctions through repeated quotes from the Gita and images of Vivekananda by Modi and other leaders. The popularization of Vivekananda in current times is particularly ironic, given his professed preference for beef eating. In a traditionally leftist stronghold like Bengal, using the imagery of Vivekananda has given the BJP an initial level of acceptance and opening into mass politics. The RSS and its various umbrella organizations have also strategically used Vivekananda to give the current government's policies a more acceptable face among its Hindu middle-class followers across India.

The reverence to Vivekananda is itself shown as evidence against reported conservatism – by using the beef-eater Vivekananda as their front face, they deflect the criticism against beef lynchings from within Hindus. This dissociation of masculinity from culinary restrictions, I argue, has made Vivekananda more acceptable to the middle classes in contemporary India.¹⁴ Vivekananda and Gandhi have been appropriated as the faces of various governmental campaigns launched by the BJP government to increase its acceptability to a wider section of the population (Sen 2016). Vivekananda has been extensively used as an acceptable front for Hindu nationalist ideas to the middle class in India, associating his name with youth-related schemes such as the Yuva Vichar Vikas Rath (Menon 2014).

In contrast, Modi's silence on Golwalkar, whom he had professed earlier as one of the seminal influences in his life, also demonstrates his strategic use of all three leaders (Patel 2014). Though he has been a *pracharak* of the RSS, Golwalkar's imprisonment in Gandhi's murder case has made it imperative for Modi to distance himself publicly from his Guru. Publicly acknowledging Golwalkar as his Guru will affirm the xenophobic, Islamophobic ideas of the RSS and the BJP which Modi follows. However, the influence of Golwalkar's violent communal masculinism is clearly evident from the recent Citizenship Act and the Babri Masjid verdict, among others. Instead of

directly professing to follow Golwalkar's path, Modi has instead appropriated a distorted, militarized version of the teachings of Vivekananda and Gandhi to promote sectarian, violent masculinity. It is a cultivated tactic that helps the party navigate a thin line between their ideology and realpolitik. Swami Vivekananda appeals to the middle class and youth in India and gives the BJP a more palatable face to these other Hindu sects, while Golwalkar is used to cater to the RSS's core following and its affiliate organizations. The cultural hegemony within the RSS following is important because it translates into votes for the BJP in electoral politics. The ironical co-optation of Vivekananda and Gandhi has made the violence acceptable, giving it a more bearable, internationally recognized face. Even while Gandhi and Vivekananda had promoted an ascetic masculinity which was not sensitive to the goals of gender equality, they would not have subscribed to the state-sponsored violent Hindu masculinism that the BJP has unleashed against minorities and any dissident voices.

Consider the occurrence of 'love jihad'¹⁵ cases in the political sphere in recent times, the most famous of which was the case of a medical student Hadiya. In seeking to convert to Islam and marry a Muslim, Hadiya came to the centre of a controversy around Islamophobia, conversion and the freedom of Indian women to take decisions on their personal life. Hadiya, a twenty-four-year-old woman previously known as Akhila, was reported missing by her father in early 2016. In 2017, the Kerala High Court annulled her marriage with Shafin Jehan, on the grounds that Hadiya was a victim of 'indoctrination and psychological kidnapping' (Indian Express 2017). She was handed over to her father by the High Court, in one of the most blatant examples of patriarchal and masculinist essence of the Indian judiciary, with the remark: 'As per Indian tradition, the custody of an unmarried daughter is with the parents, until she is properly married' (Krishnan 2017). The Supreme Court finally restored their marriage in March 2018 (Mahapatra 2018). However, the prevalent masculinism in judiciary continues to affect judgments in cases that clearly define the lives and choices of many. Hadiya's experience is one among many incidents which have been termed 'love jihad'.

Anti-Romeo squads have now been created by shadow armies of the RSS such as the Bajrang Dal and the Hindu Yuva Vahini led by another violent ascetic politician Yogi Adityanath to stop such interreligious relationships.

With the tacit approval of the state and inaction of the police forces, these squads resort to a violent show of masculine force on such couples, terrorizing them, separating them and, in some instances, killing the Muslim men involved in such relationships (Jha 2017) in an extra-judicial show of violent Hindu masculinity. These squads are primarily made of young, unemployed, lower-middle class, upper- and middle-caste Hindu men trained in arms and committed to the ideology of Hindutva through involvement with one of its many organizations (Chacko 2020). The rise of the Hindu Yuva Vahini has catapulted Yogi Adityanath into the national political scenario. They use social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook to campaign against 'love jihad' and share information about suspected interreligious couples. The political hegemony of the Hindu right has been concurrent with the increase in the number of such groups all over the country.

According to Golwalkar, the only ground for Indian unity and harmony was a common respect for the cow (A. Sarkar and R. Sarkar 2016a: 334; Golwalkar 1966). Thus, it is no surprise that in keeping with the RSS position on cow slaughter, the BJP has encouraged the state-level ban of cow slaughter in BJP-ruled states, thus creating the horror of beef lynchings across the country. As of now, twenty-four out of twenty-nine states in the country have laws against cow slaughter (Indian Express 2015).¹⁶ Cows have been a source of not only protein but also livelihood for many Dalits who used cowhide for leather, handicrafts and other forms of income generation.¹⁷ The performance of such ascetic masculinity is also related to another form – culinary masculinity, which focuses on dietary habits as an expression of masculine performance.

Thousands of *gau-rakshak dals* (cow-protection vigilante groups) have been created by Hindutva activists at local levels to prevent cow slaughter. Violent shows of masculine force are the signature mark of these groups inspired by Golwalkar's active participation in the *goraksha* (cow protection) movement in the 1960s. There are reports of lynchings by these groups from across the country. Accused of having beef in his refrigerator, Mohammad Akhlaq was lynched by a mob in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, in 2015 (Kumar 2017). Other cow-related lynchings have been reported from the states of Gujarat (Chaturvedi 2016), Rajasthan (*Huffington Post* 2018) and Jharkhand (Dasgupta 2018), among others. Muslims and Dalits have been forced to eat

cow dung (Dayal and Verma 2016), stripped and beaten, and incidences of harassment in the hands of these vigilante groups have become a common occurrence in various parts of India in the last few years. Apart from causing death, grievous bodily harm and psychological trauma, these groups are also successfully establishing cultural and symbolic hegemony of the masculinist Brahmanical Hindutva ideology. The violence of these groups in the name of cow protection supported by ascetic politicians like Uma Bharati and Yogi Adityanath¹⁸ is meant as a show of virile Hindu masculinity. Rising ascetic masculinity in Indian politics and the reclamation of ascetic political figures like Swami Vivekananda as masculine ideals signify the growing popularity of right-wing politics.¹⁹ The integral characteristics of this ascetic masculinity is misogyny, homophobia, anti-conversion and Islamophobia – gender equality, LGBTQ rights, Islam are all seen as foreign imports detrimental to the Hindu religion. Vivekananda and Gandhi are regularly mentioned in RSS rhetoric against conversion to other religions (Ghatwai 2014). The Ayodhya judgment of November 2019 has also brought to the fore the concerns about not only the secular framework of the state but also the judiciary. The violent ascetic masculinity championed in the name of saving Hindu religion is gaining traction.

The writings of Vivekananda, Golwalkar and Gandhi had symbolic power precisely because they act as repositories of such symbolic capital which can be easily manoeuvred and manipulated to influence public opinion and shape social positions on issues. The image of the violent Muslim prevalent in popular media has a much more complex and ambivalent history. This is the antithesis on which the idea of the violent Hindu masculinity has been created and propagated. Hindu nationalist masculinity thus works towards the consolidation of the boundaries between the two communities of Hindus and Muslims, and nowhere is this more evident than on the bodies of women. In the performance of Hindu nationalist masculinity, a significant characteristic is the violent claim on women's bodies made by the Anti-Romeo squads.

Even while hegemonic masculinity is transitioning, there are certain culturally significant events or metaphors that can be brought forth in order to stress on an eternal essence that remains unchanged. For example, in attempting to remind people of the communal tensions during

pre-Independence and Partition times under the influence of which Golwalkar formed his ideology, forms of hegemonic masculinity practised at that time are brought into use by the RSS and its sister organizations in the name of *seva*. In this process, religious capital is efficiently utilized due to its permanence across political and temporal spaces.

The idea of *seva*, discussed earlier in this chapter, continues to be effective in the daily RSS activities. Bhattacharjee (2019) has shown how disasters like earthquakes are used to promote the ideology of masculinity using the idea of *seva*. In a speech delivered on 26 April 2020, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat urged RSS workers to focus on *seva* in the context of Covid-19 as in a way 'part of an ongoing exercise of rebuilding the nation' (Bhagwat 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, evidence from investigative journalism has shown that the state administrations have been collaborating with 736 RSS-affiliated non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Sagar 2020c) to distribute relief, control migrant crowds and issue special passes to RSS cadres. Government funds were reported to have been siphoned to RSS organizations in order to be distributed as relief (ibid.). These state resources were then distributed among BJP families by RSS workers as *seva*, thus helping to consolidate its organizational network among beneficiaries and donors. Questions arise as to who ensures that these state resources were distributed according to need and not according to religious and caste identities. There is little evidence of this *seva* benefiting non-Hindu faiths, particularly Muslims during the Odisha super cyclone, the Gujarat carnage in 2002 as well as the Delhi riot in 2020 (Rehman 2020). This majoritarian *seva* advances the image of Hindu masculine prowess in the figure of the masculine *sevak* at the expense of state resources.

Through an analysis of masculinism in the written works of Vivekananda, Golwalkar and Gandhi and ascetic masculinity practised in the contemporary Indian political sphere, I argue that even while hegemonic masculinity changes in form as it responds to cultural, social and political moments, this process does not take place in historical amnesia. The formation of hegemonic masculinity attempts to bring back historical memory and past imaginings of masculinity into present use. Mining through the archives of their written works is a method that proves rewarding in two ways: it shows the role of prominent individuals in building regional masculinity, and it points towards

the historical continuity of notions around masculinity that plays a critical role in masculinism.

The violent masculine practices in contemporary India are both an attempt to practise hegemonic anti-Muslim masculinity of the kind propagated by Golwalkar and an attempt to convince people that the sociopolitical reality of contemporary society is the same as the perceived Muslim threat from pre-Partition times. Riots at Mujaffarnagar, the beef lynchings, the surgical operations against Pakistan are all examples of such a vicious cycle of masculinism and masculinist habitus reinforcing each other. Hindu religious concepts upholding such violence, especially in the form of the caste system, is shaping the violent nature of hegemonic masculinity in India. However, it is an ideal that very few Indian men actually embody in its totality. To understand contemporary Indian politics, the comprehension of this cycle remains crucial and as yet partially explored.

In this context, it is also vital to address the existence of concurrent regional hegemonic masculinities globally. As Ratele (2014) mentions, often political masculinities occupying a hegemonic role in the region might be marginal in the global political context. The rise of the alt-right globally and its relations with the rise of Hindu masculinity in India will make for a very necessary study. In fact, the understanding of political masculinism needs to address both cross-temporal and cross-geographical spaces.

The place of such heteronormative, virile masculinity in the times of technology-based capitalism remains unquestioned. In fact, gendered violence and violent masculinity are taking on newer forms in the virtual space. The performance of masculinity in Indian society can be seen live on social media today. Feminists, activists and politicians are all visibly and often violently interacting with each other on social media. Narendra Modi is now the second most followed politician on Twitter (Paul 2015). The role social media played in the last general election showed abundantly the promise of online platforms in an age when India has more mobile phones than toilets. This also means the politics of violent masculinity has become more visible and traceable in these spaces. Paid Twitter handles, paid media houses (*Al Jazeera* 2018) and trolls have emerged as the new violent masculine Hindu nationalists, defining the Indian political discourse. While I have mostly focused on incidents of violence manifested physically in this chapter,

I have discussed this elsewhere (Chakraborty 2019). The role of social media companies like Facebook and Twitter in giving space to hate speech and dissemination of the image of a politician (for example, Modi as a modern iron-man) and the impact these have on perpetuation of the gender hierarchy need detailed research.

Modi has been recast as a 'modern, development hero' through his Facebook page, Twitter handle @narendramodi, Pinterest board, YouTube channel, profiles on Google+, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Instagram and online products like laptop bags featuring him (Paul 2015: 380). Even in this recast Modi, however, nascent ideas of hegemonic masculinity are clearly present. The capitalist mode of economy that Modi has come to usher in since 2014 – opening the market for foreign investments, divestment from public sector undertakings and privatization of public sector enterprises – has been leading to increasing inequality and poverty for more than 80 per cent of the population. It is thus understandable why the current government has renewed initiatives to popularize the Gita (Nanda 2016). The Bhagavad Gita has already rationalized and justified inequality in society and in the production systems through its acceptance of one's position in the society according to *guna* and *karma* (Nayak 2018).

Conclusion

As Pandey (1993: 240) pointed out long before the BJP came to political power and formed the national government, 'What we sometimes have is the remarkable proposition that all social and political activities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which Hindus took part were geared to the task of re-establishing the Hindu nation in its superior and glorious splendour.' This seems to be valid even today – and so does the masculine nature of such a 're-established Hindu nation'. The threat it poses is not only to minorities or the women but it can subsume the Hindu men themselves and restrain them from achieving their potential as human beings. In the same way, violent Hindu nationalist masculinity can restrain India from achieving its potential to become a nurturing and peaceful space for people of all beliefs, genders and sexualities.

Hegemonic masculinity can and is reconstructed continuously. But even while it is transitioning, there are certain culturally significant events or metaphors that it can go back to in order to stress on an eternal form of masculinity. Religion is one of the many discursive networks that shape up the definition of masculinity in India – sexual, economic, political and legal. This hegemonic masculinity, even while marginalized in the global scale of masculinities (Ratele 2014), continues to influence the shaping of bodies and bodily practices physically, socially and psychologically. These bodies are not only biologically male ones but all those who aspire to be a part of the masculinist power structure. It is clear that all men have been victims of this idea of violent masculinity. Constricted within the expectations of confirming to this idea of masculinity, unable to find any other form of expression of their identity, normative masculinity often impedes the right to freedom of expression.

On the other hand, the masculinism prevalent in state structures has meant that at the legislative and executive levels, mitigation of violence against women has been addressed primarily by aiming reformative policies at women, rather than addressing the pervasive presence of masculinism in society. The state has been trying to treat the symptoms without treating the disease, which lies at the heart of the issue of violence. Locating this research in the context of the work already done in terms of masculinity and colonization, one can see that the myth of manliness is not a static concept handed over across generations. Manliness, as an idea, as an ideal concept of gender performativity for those who want to be seen as ‘men’ in the society, go through repeated processes of adaptation. This adaptation takes place through accommodation of new information, changing social realities and discursive shifts in the society. Myth does not adhere to historical accuracy by definition, and the changing nature of myth only serves to show its dependence on a host of historical factors (Barthes 1972). Thus, the myth of manliness and the myth of the Hindu nation worked hand in hand in times of colonial struggle and are still working in tandem to continue the project of *Bharat Mata* (Banerjee 2006; Blansett 2012; Thapar-Björkert and Ryan 2002). The questions around gender roles in India, and continuing gender discrimination in all walks of life despite rising education and income, cannot therefore be addressed if we do not look at how the myths that are

the foundation of the idea of the 'nation' perpetuate it. Their invisibilization is only the last step of their normalization: once made commonsensical, these ideological components are assured societal acceptance at large. In Indian society, the diversity of societal, communal and geographical richness makes the workings of ideologies localized to a large extent. The concurrent myths surrounding masculinity continue to prop up masculine domination as a natural phenomenon.

Notes

1. Swami Vivekananda was born as Narendra Nath Dutta on 12 January 1863, in Kolkata, West Bengal. Vivekananda was first recognized internationally when he represented Hinduism at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, and stories about the effect of his speech at the convention reached mythical dimensions in India. His speech also fuelled interest in Hinduism in the West, and for the next few years, Vivekananda travelled across North America and Europe, giving lectures and collecting disciples in various parts of the continents. This was deemed by him to be of crucial value for the reinstatement of Hinduism to its previous glory, and 'over time, several prominent Western intellectuals such as Leo Tolstoy, Romain Rolland, William James, J. D. Salinger, Christopher Isherwood, Henry Miller, Sarah Bernhardt, and Aldous Huxley, to name a few, were influenced by Vivekananda's teachings about Vedanta philosophy' (Roy and Hammers 2014). He returned to India in 1897 and, on 1 May of the same year, founded the Ramakrishna Mission. The last few years of his life were spent in nurturing the mission, giving lectures on Vedanta across the world – in cities as diverse as New York, Vienna, Paris, Constantinople, Cairo, San Francisco, Los Angeles and London. He died on 4 July 1902, at Belur Math in Calcutta.
2. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS, is the largest voluntary organization of Hindu men created in the pre-Independence days to serve the nation. Madhavrao Sadashivrao Golwalkar, the second chief of the RSS, played a crucial role in the propagation and popularization of this theory. With almost three decades of being *sarsanghchalak* (1940–1973),

it was under his leadership that the RSS built up its organizational framework to 10,000 *shakhas* and more than a million members (Hoda 2006). Golwalkar's vision has become the vision of the RSS; and hence, his works have considerable social influence in contemporary Indian society with regard to not just matters communal and political but also gender and sexualization. Golwalkar in turn was influenced by Swami Vivekananda and even lived in the Sargacchi Ashram of Ramakrishna Mission under the guidance of Swami Akhandananda.

3. Also see Vivekananda (1900b), Vivekananda (1896a) and Vivekananda (1900c).
4. He quotes the Upanishad: 'The Upanishads say, renounce. That is the test of everything. Renounce everything. It is the creative faculty that brings us into all this entanglement'. Also see Vivekananda (1896b), Vivekananda (1898) and Vivekananda (1899).
5. Vivekananda often addressed his female disciples as 'Mother' or 'Sister', even while Bramen (2001) points out to the sexual appeal of the monk to his Western female audiences. For more on his vision for Indian women, see Vivekananda (1896b) and Vivekananda (1894).
6. Most of his female disciples who took up celibacy during his lifetime were Western.
7. In a letter to Harilal, his eldest son, he advocated celibacy since it 'increases your power' (Reddy 2007).
8. *Karma* can be roughly translated as 'the ethics of work'. In the Hindu philosophy of multiple lives, *karma*, or the fruits of one's work, can affect the person either in this life or their consequent next lives.
9. *Dharma* in Sanskrit means sacred duty, the moral order that sustains the cosmos, society and the individual (Miller 1986: 2–3).
10. Jaffrelot (1993: 41) has pointed out: 'In the RSS, one of the usual ways of honouring *pracharaks* when they die has been to designate them as Karma Yogis.'
11. Golwalkar (2000: 178) also places the blame for Partition on Muslims:

The Muslim desire, growing ever since they stepped on this land some twelve hundreds years ago, to convert and enslave the entire country could not bear fruit, in spite of their political domination

for several centuries. In the coming of the British they found an opportunity to fulfil their desire. Naked fact remains that an aggressive Muslim state has been carved out of our Motherland.

12. Though Modi was married as a child, he left his family to live as a *pracharak*, and his followers claim he is celibate.
13. Recent studies have shown links between dowry system, rise of gold prices and increase in female foeticide in India, contributing to gender imbalance (Ratcliffe 2018).
14. The Ramakrishna Mission disciples still follow this tradition, and joining the organization does not include vegetarianism as a requirement, unlike most other prominent Hindu religious organizations like the Arya Samaj or Vaishnavite sects like the Gaudiya Mission.
15. 'Love Jihad refers to love between a Hindu woman and a Muslim man which, as a transgression of communal boundaries, is alleged to be a conspiracy to convert Hindu women.' (T. Sarkar 2018: 119)
16. For a more detailed discussion on the differences between cow-protection laws across various states and its effects on Indian secularism, see A. Sarkar and R. Sarkar (2016b).
17. Muslims are primarily engaged in the USD 10 billion leather and meat production business in India, and thus have been hit the hardest by the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Regulation of Livestock Market) Rules, 2017, which banned the sale and purchase of cattle at livestock markets (Hull 2017).
18. The BJP government in Uttar Pradesh introduced a 0.5 per cent '*gau raksha* cess' in the state to protect stray cattle.
19. Ironically, Vivekananda's dreams of global conquest have also come to partial fruition with diasporic nationalism – also known as long-distance nationalism (Jaffrelot and Therwath 2007).

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