



Some Preliminary Comments on the Formation of Online Religious Identities

A Case Study of the Internet-Hindu in India's Cyberspace

Denzil Chetty, University of South Africa

Abstract

The growing presence of Hinduism and its adherents in India's cyberspace has led to the conceptualization of the categorical identity the 'Internet-Hindu.' Using Castell's theorizing of communication in a network society, this paper articulates a critique on the nature of cyberspace and its use by the Hindu community in the construction of online religious identities. The context of this paper derives from the globalization of technology and computer-mediated communication, which brings to the fore an imperative discourse demanding the critique of whether the presence of Hindu adherents in cyberspace is not an emerging paradox. The thesis of this paper is that information and communication technologies are opening up unlimited horizons of creativity and communication, with possibilities of exploring new dimensions of religious identity in online social action and interaction, thereby challenging our societies to engage in a process of structural change. This paper aims to articulate some introductory comments to this crucial area of exploration.

Introduction

I recall the earlier years of my childhood, when physical communal interaction shaped religious experience and provided the context to articulate one's religious identity, beliefs, and practices. However, two decades later amidst globalization and the advancements in information communication technologies (cf. K ung: 581; Castells 2004: 5), communal interaction still remains a crucial factor, albeit the physicality of interaction has embraced a new paradigm of virtual interaction in a virtual space, i.e. cyberspace. This shifting paradigm

of social interaction and religious articulation has called for new creative and innovative approaches to the study of religion. According to Dawson, the new dimension of cyberspace is immersed with religious content of both a conventional and innovational kind. For Helland, Beckerlegge, and Brasher, it is clearly evident that religion has found a growing presence in cyberspace. In addressing this contested terrain, Baker argues that any scholar of religion who chooses to ignore this new dimension, faces the consequences of not understanding the unfolding of contemporary society.

Cyberspace: Towards Conceptual Clarity

In developing this discourse, a critical challenge is to provide a contextual working definition of cyberspace. Scheifinger contends that it is relatively difficult to provide an accurate conceptualization of such a complex concept. This is particularly true among those who are reluctant to acknowledge the existence of virtual space and who see the Internet as a tool that merely disseminates knowledge and communication. Hence, I now turn to a few selected theorists. Vasseleu (46) refers to cyberspace as “space within the electronic network of computers.” For both Hine (109) and Cowan (262) cyberspace can be articulated as a form of “social space” that exists alongside physical space. According to Dodge and Kitchin (1), the term refers to the “conceptual space” within information communication technologies (ICTs). However, Dodge and Kitchin further contend that it does not consist of one homogenous space, but is a myriad of rapidly expanding spaces, each providing a different form of digital interaction and communication. For example, there are spaces that store data and there are spaces that allow synchronous interaction with other people, i.e. Instant Messaging (IM), a form of real-time direct text-based communication (e.g., GoogleTalk, Nimbuzz, Skype, Windows Live Messenger, etc.) and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Ning), which facilitates connections between a number of users via the Internet. In this paper, I employ the definition provided by Rheingold (5) that cyberspace is “conceptual space” where words, human relations, data, wealth, and power are manifested by people using computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies. Thus, one of the critical articulations emerging in this discourse is the notion of “inhabiting” space as opposed to “traveling” through space.

Religion in Cyberspace

Amidst the growing contextualization of cyberspace for use in corporate communication, political propaganda, and social activism, religion has also come to the fore in laying claim to cyberspace as a critical medium for religious expression. Many sociologists and religion scholars, such as Dawson and Hennebry, Fuller, Helland, Perrin, Lawrence, Chidester, and Mayer, have studied the presence of religion in cyberspace and its influence and impact on its adherents in the modern age. Perrin highlights the use of cyberspace in Christianity to deliver pastoral care, education, and ethics. Lawrence articulates the use of cyberspace in Islam to address issues of Islamophobia and create a space for online dialogue. Chidester (ix) emphasizes the use of cyberspace in shaping virtual religions, such as the “Church of the Covert Cosmos,” and contends that they are doing real, authentic religious work in cyberspace by negotiating what it is to be a human person in a human place.

Hinduism is no stranger to cyberspace. Wertheim (38) contends that due to the nature of cyberspace, a new kind of “non-physical” space (i.e. with emphasis on “dualism”), it was bound to be embraced by Hinduism. Scheifinger affirms this notion by contending that the large number of websites dedicated to Hinduism is not surprising since the nature of cyberspace and the structural characteristics of Hinduism (i.e. the acceptance of non-physical space) make Hinduism conducive to an online environment.

Chat rooms and list servers dedicated to Hindu topics create a “virtual” space for devotees around the world to discuss and debate religious matters. Religious experiences are even available online through “virtual temples” and sites that allow users to purchase rituals at faraway temples (Rinehart: 293).

Brasher highlights Hindu websites that allow for *pujas*¹ to be ordered and performed, festivals to be broadcast, and cremations witnessed.² Both Rinehart and Brasher contribute to a significant discussion of whether cyberspace is an emerging *Tirtha* (sacred space), or an *e-tirtha* (sacred cyberspace) for Hinduism. However, a response to this question is beyond the scope of this paper.

This paper uses India as a case study to highlight current issues pertaining to the construction of modern online Hindu identities within the broader ambit of a cyberspace discourse. My objective and the thesis of this paper is to articulate a wider discussion on the uniqueness of cyberspace in facilitating new religious identities within a framework of what Harrison (146) terms an “intra-movement awareness.”

Current Trends in Virtual Communities and Identity Discourses

Cyberspace provides an opportunity to create new virtual communities. However, the problems of group membership, issues of identity, recognition, belonging, solidarity, in-group and out-group relations and processes, come to the fore and mimic real life scenarios as people interact with one another by transporting worldviews, ideologies, social perceptions, social stratifications, and religious beliefs into a virtual portal. These issues become more challenging when we consider cyberspace to be non-regulatory space. In my analysis of contemporary cyberspace, discourses on virtual communities, and identity, the following trends have taken preeminence.

Virtual Communities as Traditional Communities

Bonner, Parsons and Shils, and Simmel see traditional communities as places where social interaction, shared value systems, and shared symbol systems govern the sense of community and are characterized by fellowship, custom, understanding, and consensus. According to Fernback, a more contemporary approach is to see community encompassing the social, economic, political, and cultural – solidarity and social interaction, the production

¹ *Puja* is an act of worship, which involves the presentation of “honor offerings” to the deity (cf. Eck: 89).

² See *Online Puja* (<http://www.spiritualpuja.com>); *Online Puja Hindu Rituals* (<http://onlinepuja.org>); *Pujahoma* (<http://www.pujahoma.com>); *Mahalaxmi Online Pujas* (<http://www.rudraksha-ratna.com/laxmipuja.htm>); and *Muktidham* (<http://www.muktidham.org>). There are many more sites that offer these services, and a critical question that comes to the fore relates to the commercialization of these services – a noteworthy discussion for future research.

and consumption of goods, the collective formation of goals and implementation of policy, and the shared experiences and symbolic constructions that bind us together. Fernback's approach indicates that the notion of community is dynamic and evolves as society evolves, which is crucial in the context of emerging virtual communities as a parallel to physical or traditional communities. Rheingold (5) conceptualizes virtual communities as "social aggregations" that emerge in cyberspace when many individuals or a collective engage in public discussions with sufficient human feelings over a period to form webs of social relationships in cyberspace. According to Fernback (41), a critical characteristic in Rheingold's conceptualization of virtual communities is the notion of a "placeless" community, i.e. where virtual community is real and encompasses vast numbers of "disenfranchised people" who desire a more organic type of community amidst the confusion and chaos of a post-industrial society. For Rheingold, virtual communities are places where people gather for "fellowship" and it is in these places that communities are built and sustained. In contextualizing Parsons' (1968: 45) notion of the *Gemeinschaft*, it is in this space that individuals function as social agents, striving to find recognition within the collective. For Fernback (40) Rheingold's virtual community performs the functions of traditional or *Gemeinschaft*-like communities, where anyone can drop in, have a friendly chat, receive some advice about a problem, argue politics, debate religion, and interact with other people.

Virtual Communities, Collective Orientation, and Collective Action

In traditional society, social action is defined as individual actors interacting with each other in a situation, motivated towards the optimization of gratification, and whose relation to their situations, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols (cf. Parsons 1991: 4). In this system of solidarity, members of a social group define certain actions as required in the interest of the integrity of the social system itself, and others as incompatible with that integrity, with the result that sanctions are necessitated. According to Parsons such a group is termed collectivity or a collective. In the context of cyberspace, Smith and Kollock (19) articulate a view similar to Parsons' by attesting that individuals strive to define themselves in relation to others and find recognition in the context of collective orientation within a collective group or virtual community. Smith and Kollock further contend that it is important to investigate the ways in which collective groups in cyberspace impact the real world; i.e. can the social relations created or supported in cyberspace alter the fabric of our physical world?

For Dodge and Kitchin this is indeed possible, as virtual communities often structure their lifestyles into practices which aim to live out and bring about selected aspects of their cyberspace experiences.

Many communities are using cyberspace to develop cross-community and cross-issue alliances to help fight particular concerns . . . These avenues are extremely useful ways of creating and sustaining new community-based, political structures that are explicitly tied into geographic locals. Cyberspace is materially grounded in geographic communities through the development of identifiable subcultures explicitly focused around ICT technologies [emphasis added]. Subcultures are centered on cyberpunk and youth

movements which meet in cyberspace, cybercafés, nightclubs and communes, and whose material practices are grounded in computer use, rave, ambient and industrial music, smart or designer drugs, science-fiction writing, and calls for cultural and political change (36).

Adding to the discussions on the relations between cyberspace and social action in the real world, Schuler and Day (4) contend that cyberspace has become an important tool for “net activism” which is translated into social activism in the real world. Lim (8) articulates a case for *jihad* where collective Islamic fundamental movements use cyberspace to increase their potential of reaching audiences more directly.

Virtual Communities Problematizing National Discourses through Online Imaging

Another important contribution to the present discourses on virtual communities and identities comes to the fore in Mitra’s work that uses India as a case study to articulate the problems that arise when online communities construct an insider view of a country in an online environment. The image of a country is articulated in two mediums. The first is a public image constructed by organized sources such as national media, international news, and other mediated forums where a monolithic image is constructed for the primary purpose of political and ideological portrayals. The second medium can be categorized as an unmediated electronic space which offers opportunity for people to create a reimagining discourse of the realities inside the country. This comes to the fore in online discussions through chat rooms, social networking sites and blogs written by individuals affected by and interested in various issues.³ Mitra contends that this is particularly true in the case of India where discussions involve the merits of Hinduism as contrasted with India’s secularism, problems with neighboring Pakistan, and both support for and criticism of emerging Hindu political constituencies. Online discussions are manifestations and concretizations of fundamental contradictions between different social, cultural, and political communities in imaging India. In fact, India’s internal cultural, religious, and political contestations become evident in cyberspace discussions.

Virtual Communities and Notions of the “Other”

According to Miller, Brewer and Arbuckle (79), members in complex groups are differentiated or subdivided along meaningful social dimensions, e.g., gender, sexual orientation, economic sector, religion, and political ideologies. These divisions provide a basis for shared identity and group membership that can become an important part for online social identification. For Blanchard and Markus (327), members often experience anxiety about their inclusion in a virtual community, and hence much of their participation takes the form of attempting to establish an identity and to experience feelings of belonging and solidarity. For Lott (33) shared identity in the physical realm serves as a way of aligning ourselves with a distinctive way of life and with the people that share those values, albeit affirming a shared identity also entails some degree of contrast with the “other.” The paradox is that although shared identity intends some form of collective integration, it also

³ A directory of India’s most widely read and popular blogs covering various aspects from literature, poetry, politics, religion, and activism can be found on *India Blogs 1.0* (<http://www.labnol.org/india-blogs/indian-bloggers.html>).

entails some form of collective differentiation. According to Lott (33-34), in making clear who we are and where we belong, we implicitly set ourselves in some measure over and against others who are different; alignment inevitably creates some form of collective alienation. However, notions of the “other” in virtual communities are relatively problematic and take on a more radical interpretation. Derogatory terms function not only to demoralize an individual, but also to provide labels that mandate an essential identity. Zickmund defines the other in terms of two online social constructs. First, the other is social containment, a metaphorical representation of a cultural disease whose presence within the virtual community is sufficient to destroy the stability, values, and ideologies that premise the community’s identities. Second, the other is a conspirator who possesses certain hegemonic power and whose primary objective is to influence the virtual community (192).

An Adaptation of Castells’ Communication Theory as a Framework for analyzing Religious Identity and Communication in Cyberspace

In constructing a conceptual framework for analyzing discourses of religious identity and communication in cyberspace, this paper proposes an analysis of three important social stages: (a) attaining power in cyberspace, (b) constructing online identity, and (c) framing online action and interaction. These three stages are based on Castells’ theory of communication in a global network society.

Attaining Power in Cyberspace

The element of power is central to the discourse of online social action. Castells (2009: 10) defines power as the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decision of other social actor(s) in ways that favor the empowered actor’s will, interests, and values. This power is exercised by means of coercion, and/or by the construction of meaning on the basis of the discourses through which social actors guide their action. This view is shared by Simmel and by Parsons (1968) in regard to the physical realm. However, Castells adds a new dimension by defining an actor as not just an individual, a collective, an organization, or an institution, but also as a network. Hence, with the inclusion of network, relational capacity implies that power is not an attribute but a relationship between subjects of power, those who are empowered and those who are subjected to such empowerment within a given situation. For Castells (2009: 11-12), “asymmetrically” should be understood as the degree of influence of one actor over another, but power is never absolute because there is always the power of resistance which calls into question the power relationship.⁴

According to Monge and Contractor, networks are communicative structures, which comprise the patterns of contact that are created by the flow of messages amongst communicators through time and space. Castells (2009: 20) defines flow as a stream of information circulating through channels of connectivity in which social actors foster their values and interests around a set of goals that simultaneously ensure unity of purpose. A network society can be defined as a society whose social structure is constructed around

⁴ According to Armitage and Roberts (110), power in a network society is not inherently distributive and does not necessarily imply that the actors escape the older societal forms of power and inequality in cyberspace.

networks activated by digitally processed information and computer-mediated communication technologies (cf. Castells 1989: 12-13). For Castells (2009: 24), these social structures embody organizational arrangements of humans in relationships of production, consumption, reproduction, experience, and power expressed in meaningful communication coded by culture. According to Borja, Castells, Belil, and Benner (3), this social structure is global, albeit most human experience is local in both territorial and cultural terms.

Just as traditional society is a cultural construct comprising values and beliefs (i.e. religion) that inform, guide, and motivate people's behavior, network societies are also premised by an integration of multiple cultures. According to Castells (2009: 36), network societies have a global characteristic and are embedded within specific geographical contexts, i.e. they will have their own history and culture. Specific cultural identities become independent communities and sometimes platforms for resistance by collectives and individuals who refuse to integrate into a more diverse and pluralistic global network society (cf. Castells 2004). Thus, rather than the construction of a homogenous global culture, there is an emergence of diversity as the main common trend. A critical question that comes to the fore is the capacity of these specific cultural identities to communicate with each other.

In a society of networks, the ability to exercise control over other members is central to defining the level of power one possesses. Hence, two critical mediums of such control emerge: (1) the ability to constitute networks, and (2) the ability to connect and ensure the cooperation of different actors in a network by sharing common goals. Power in a network society refers to the power of the actors and organizations included in the networks that make up the core of the network society over human collectives or individuals who are not included in these networks (cf. Castells 2009: 42). This type of power operates on the premise of inclusion and exclusion strategies. Social actors may establish power by constituting a network that accumulates valuable resources and then exercising strategies of exclusion, i.e. "gatekeeping," which implies barring access to those who do not add value to the network or jeopardize the dominant interests of the network society (cf. Stalder for further discussion of Castells' theory of power).

Constructing Online Identity

Castells' definition of a network society is very similar to Parsons' (1991: 25) conceptualization of a social system (in the physical realm) that can be defined in terms of a system of processes of interaction between individual actors and the structure of the relations between the interactions of these actors. This refers to the interaction of individual actors, which takes place under such conditions that it is plausible to treat this process of interaction as a system in the scientific sense. One of the critical components of this interaction is identity. In the context of this discourse, identity is the means by which certain individuals or collectives become or attempt to become legitimate. For Castells (2004: 6) identity is people's source of meaning and experience that is constructed on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a set of cultural attributes, that is given priority over other sources of meaning. Thus, Castells contends that although identities can also originate from dominant institutions, they only become identities when and if actors internalize them and construct their meaning around this internalization:

The construction of identities uses building materials from history, geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations. But individuals, social groups, and societies process all these materials and rearrange their meaning, according to social determinations and cultural projects that are rooted in their social structure, and in their space/time framework (2004: 7).

For Castells (2004: 8) the following three forms are critical in the construction of identities:

- *Legitimizing identity*: introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination vis-à-vis social actors;
- *Resistance identity*: generated by those actors who are in positions or conditions that are devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from the dominating group; and
- *Project identity*: when social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and in doing so, seek to transform overall social structure (i.e. a case of feminism for women's identity and women's rights).

In Castells' theorizing, identities that start as resistance may induce projects, and may also become dominant in the institutions of society, thus becoming legitimizing identities to rationalize their domination. However, it is also critical to understand what cultural materials permeate through the different domains of experience and structure the frameworks of meaning. Castells (2009: 117) explains this by highlighting the following four critical processes of cultural change:

- *Cultural globalization* refers to the emergence of a specific set of values and beliefs that are largely shared around the world.
- *Cultural identification* refers to the existence of specific sets of values and beliefs, which allow specific human groups to find recognition. Cultural identification is largely the result of the geography and history of human organization, but can also be formed on the basis of specific projects of identity-building.
- *Individualism* is the set of values and beliefs that gives priority to the satisfaction of needs, desires, and projects of each individual in the orientation of his/her behavior.
- *Communalism* is the set of values and beliefs that places the collective good of a community over the individual satisfaction of its members. Community is defined in this context as the social system organized around sharing of a specific subset of cultural and/or material attributes.

Framing Online Action and Interaction

Entman (5) defines framing as the process of selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular

interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution. When framing is performed as a chosen action by the sender of a message, it can take the form of a deliberate, an accidental, or an intuitive act. According to Castells (2009: 158-59) framing is not just words or images, but is a mode of thought. These frames are not external to the mind, albeit only those frames that are able to connect the message to the pre-existing frames in the mind become activators of conduct. For Entman, frames that employ the most culturally resonant terms have the greatest potential for influence, i.e. words and images that are noticeable, understandable, memorable, and emotionally charged. Castells suggests:

Framing operates by leaving gaps in the information that the audience fills with their preconceived schemas: these are interpretive processes in the human mind based on connected ideas and feelings stored in memory. In the absence of counter-frames, the audience will gravitate towards the frames that are suggested. Frames are organized in paradigms: networks of habitual schemas that provide the application of analogies from previous stories to new developments (2009: 158).

An integral component of framing is agenda-setting, which refers to the special relevance given to one particular issue or set of information by the source of the message (i.e. a specific marginalized religious collective rallying for religious freedom and recognition), with the expectation that the audience will correspond with immense focus to the content and format of the message (Castells 2009: 157). An important function of agenda-setting for Parsons (1999: 99) is the shaping of the collective in conformity with collective-orientation and the response of the individual as a member of the larger collective.

A Case Study of the Internet-Hindu in India's Cyberspace

Porterfield (165) argues that religious groups are significant examples of collective orientation, whereby they exert significant power in the larger social world as collective actors for a specific agenda, i.e. collective actors of social order or social change. The power exerted by the collective group can be attributed to their group actions to implement social agendas and shape the attitudes and behaviors of their individual members. As centers for the implementation of group agendas, religious groups work through various forms of social action to restore social order believed to have existed in the past, help create a new order for the future, or contribute to forces supporting social conditions as they exist in the present. Religious groups are centers for the socialization of the individuals; they teach members to cultivate certain attitudes towards themselves and others, and encourage particular social behaviors that members bring to their interactions in the larger world.

Cyberspace offers an ideal platform for such postulation. I now turn to an emerging modern phenomenon in India's cyberspace, the Internet-Hindu.⁵ India's base of about 120 million Internet users is currently the third largest in the world (Gnanasambandam et al.). The Internet's role in communication and social networking is critical to understanding the

⁵ The Internet-Hindu is an emerging modern phenomenon of Hindu adherents who are socially active in blogging, micro blogging, online forums, social chat rooms, and social networking sites, who affirm their religious identity and are vocal about their religious beliefs and political views.

changing dynamics of India, especially its increasing level of urbanization, rapid growth in consumer base, and its profile as one of the most youthful demographics worldwide.

Ethnology: Who is the Internet-Hindu?

I first encountered the term “Internet-Hindu” in an article by Ashok Malik, a Delhi-based political commentator, in the *Hindustan Times*. Malik articulates the growing presence of an emerging online Hindu force by contrasting two situations in which they were able to postulate a sense of fiery religious activism. The first situation is a reference to the imbroglio between the Hindu community and the Muslim artist Maqbool Fida Husain and the controversies surrounding his nude portraits of Hindu gods and goddesses. Husain was forced to take citizenship in Qatari after several of his exhibitions were disrupted by angry mobs. According to Malik, the Internet-Hindus blogged, tweeted, and emailed exultantly and rallied a major collective force that compelled Husain to eventually move into exile. In a parallel situation, this major force turned its attention to the American academic Wendy Doniger and her book, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Her analysis of modern Hindu movements was met with great opposition from a section of Hindus and she was accused of attempting to put a psycho-sexual twist on everything Hindu and an eroticization of sacred Hindu texts. Tensions increased when Doniger’s publication was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award in the United States. This resulted in an uproar by the Internet-Hindu community who forcefully reiterated that awarding Doniger would dishonor 800 million Hindus. They initiated an online campaign calling for (1) Doniger to be tried under the United Nations Defamation of Religion Act and (2) an online petition calling for Doniger’s publishers, Penguin Books’ India and United States subsidiaries, to withdraw the book. The force of this online Hindu community in both situations poses some real challenges for contemporary social action and activism. However, Malik’s postulation as to why Internet-Hindus are even worthy of notice stimulated a greater desire to understand more about this emerging phenomenon. Against the background of Castells’ theory, I began my cyber-exegesis of the Internet-Hindu.

The first reference to the term Internet-Hindu emerges in blogs and Twitter posts of Sagarika Ghose, a journalist from CNN-IBN, who claims to have coined the term and has filed for securing its copyright and trademark (Patrakar). In her Twitter post dated February 27, 2010, she refers to Internet Hindus as those who want to Islamize Hinduism, and are enamored of the extremist version of Islam. Ghose further describes Internet-Hindus as bees that come swarming at you at any mention of Modi, Muslims or Pakistan (cf. Rairikar 2010a). In Ghose’s usage of the term Internet-Hindu, she postulates two variations of online Hindu identity, (1) the liberal Hindu who holds fast to more moderate views and ideologies, and (2) the fundamentalist Hindu, an emerging group of online Hindus who possess a fundamentalist view of Hinduism and have harnessed the power of cyberspace to communicate such ideologies. She uses the term “Internet-Hindu” to refer explicitly to this group.

Further cyber-exegesis shows that bloggers have varying definitions of the term. I now turn to a few bloggers to illustrate how they have developed this conceptual anecdote. The blog *Vu-Point: Different Views, Different Points*, acknowledged to be authored by Sanchit, provides a broad conceptualization of the Internet-Hindu by defining them as people who

are socially active on blogs, forums, social networking websites, and micro blogging websites, who are vocal about their views on Hinduism, media, politics, and the nation as a whole. The blogger further contends that this identity comes to the fore as a consequence of media control, which articulates the secular image of India and denies the Hindu-ness of its inhabitants. Gupta contends that Internet-Hindus are people who are proud to assert their religious identity, fly the tri-color high, and have found a new platform on which they can articulate and freely express their views:

Tired of being derided by pseudo-secularists in media who see nothing wrong with Muslim communalism and Christian fundamentalism but are swift to pounce upon Hindus for being intolerant, their cultural ethos crudely denigrated by the Left-Liberal intelligentsia as antediluvian, Hindus have begun to harness technology to strike back with deadly effect.

Blogger Rairikar articulates a similar discourse with emphasis on an emerging platform for the common individual:

The emergence of this new genre of Hindus comes as a rude shock to those who had been manipulating in their safe haven where no one could question them. The space which had hitherto been strictly guarded is no longer their monopoly. They now have to share it with the crude voice of the lowly masses coming from the grass roots; the masses which might not be apparently as sophisticated or articulate but have their own views and the right to express them. The debates and discussions, no longer restricted to the secure surrounds of the studio, have come out to the forums where all are equal and free to express. The voice of the common man [woman] has gone beyond the control of the traditional media and can no longer be ignored. Obviously, the elitist lobby loves to hate this new lot of activists which it calls the Internet-Hindus (2010b).

Daipayan Halder a columnist on *Mid-Day* highlights the political nature of Internet-Hindus by describing them as a fast-growing tribe of fanatics who tweet and are e-friends of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or scuppies on a self-awareness drive. Halder refers to the Internet-Hindus as members of BJP who have taken their nationalist ideology of *Hindutva* to a new platform.⁶ However, Sanjay Kaul, a member of Delhi's BJP's Executive Council and a self-confessed Internet-Hindu, contends that an Internet-Hindu is about being self-aware and taking pride in one's religion, irrespective of political allegiances. He further contends that "for too long, the Left-Liberal media has tried to suppress the Hindu identity, [however], the Internet is changing the game" (quoted in Halder).

Clearly, the application of the term Internet-Hindu is contested. What is indeed notable is a need to differentiate between the two types of Hindu contingencies active in cyber space, liberals and fundamentalists. The following sections will focus on an analysis of the fundamentalists.

⁶ The political stance of BJP is premised on modern conservatism, social conservatism, and progressive ideologies, which it draws from India's cultural and religious traditions.

Cyber Politics: The Fundamentalist Internet-Hindu (FIH) and the Discourse of Hindu Nationalism

Building upon Castells' theory, power in cyberspace rests on two premises: coercion, and the construction of meaning on the basis of discourses through which social actors guide their action. For the fundamentalist Internet-Hindu (FIH), this is inevitably a rhetorical process (i.e. a process of persuasion), which bloggers such as Gupta, Halder, Malik, Rairikar, and Rasquinha term "cyber politics." Nayar (2004: 174) defines cyber politics as the use of the Internet to influence public opinion and political activities offline. A critical factor for the FIH is the ability to create and sustain a discourse that can unite individuals within a Hindu nationalist collective.

Amongst the many factors which contribute to the emergence of the FIH and the articulation of a Hindu nationalist discourse is the growing presence of secularism and religious plurality in India. Lott (296) contends that the prevalence of secularism, which is evident in the dominating attitudes of English-speaking intellectuals who wield the power in urban centers of India, tends to marginalize the more indigenously religious modes of thinking and discoursing. He explains:

The secularist thinking underlying Indian policy has meant that the great majority of Indian people, whose ways of experiencing life are inextricably bound up with religious faith, have found themselves alienated at various levels of national life and its ideology. At least for some this was specifically the felt lack of an integrated Hindu identity. Among Muslims, Sikhs and Christians on the other hand, distinctive identities seemed to be burgeoning. And so among the Hindu majority a dangerous vacuum was created (196).

The desire of the FIH to establish a Hindu nationalist discourse is enhanced by the reinvigoration of the Muslim world, even within India. In recent years, Islam has emerged as a major force to contend with in the religious, economic, and political domain. This resurgence is feared as a direct threat to Hindu self-identity (Lott: 296). For both Misra and Desai the revival or re-initiation of a Hindu nationalist discourse serves as a critical medium to counteract the threat of the global Islamic resurgence. Based on the above premise, there is also the perceived threat to the unity of India by Islamic insurgent movements that desire to mobilize the Indian Muslim community for collective support in situations such as the crisis in Kashmir. The threat to Hindu self-identity is further enhanced by the marked increase in the aggressive missionary activity of evangelical Indian Christians, who are often supported financially and ideologically by their western counterparts. Lott (297) contends that illegal proselytizing by missionaries visiting with tourist visas is a highly sensitive issue and viewed by Hindutva militants in socio-political rather than in religious terms. These tensions create an ideal climate for the FIH to ground and mobilize their Hindutva or Hindu nationalist discourse using cyberspace as a medium. However, it is worth noting that while Lott (307) contends that the Hindu nationalist discourse has served to unify individuals of the different castes, and hence transcend the caste social barriers within Hindu society, Gokulsing and Dissanayake (10) claim that the ascendance of Hindu nationalism has a damaging effect on the fabric of the nation of India by depicting it as a secular state.

The defining attribute of the FIH is their embodiment of techno-cultural Hindu nationalism. According to Chopra (2008a: 2) techno-cultural Hindu nationalism is the use of

the Internet by the Indian community for the promotion of Hindu nationalist ideologies.⁷ During the 1980's and 1990's, when Hindu nationalism resurfaced as a critical discourse, the domain of technology, particularly cyberspace, emerged as a key area where various perspectives on the Indian nation converged. Various Hindu nationalist websites articulated the Hindu religion and culture as the authentic foundations of Indian national identity.⁸ For Chopra, technology, particularly cyberspace began to enable and symbolize the conflation of the categories of Indian and Hindu into a new articulation of national identity.

In both web resources, *Hindutva* and the *Hindu Universe*, Indian civilization is equated with Hindu civilization. In both web resources, the claims of the nation supersede those of the state; in fact, a discourse of the state is nearly or completely absent from the websites. In both websites, the professed universalism of Hindu (which is treated as synonymous with Indian) culture does not extend to Indian minorities; on the contrary, they are marked by strong antiminority sentiment (2008b: 171).

Hindu nationalism in cyberspace emerged as a representation of a hegemonic, ultra conservative force. This can also be partially attributed to Khandelwal's (198) thesis that cyberspace is perceived to be a more convenient context of building networks as compared to geographical communities where various political and generational interests are more prevalent. However, the resurgence of the narrow identity motifs of Hindu nationalism and its articulation within the cyber political discourse can be immensely problematic. For example, individuals who do not subscribe to the particular ideological positions of the FIH are categorized as the "other." They are often ostracized, labeled with derogatory terms, and come under immense attack by selective members of the online collective. This is evident in blog comments of Meena Kandasamy, a Dalit activist.

I was attacked by the Internet-Hindus, not only for being pro-Muslim, but also for being a woman and a Dalit activist. They have called me a prostitute. A fascist mentality prevails among them. I was also attacked for criticizing Gandhi for what he did to Ambedkar. There is no logic in what they say, only abuse (posted on Halder).

In terms of Castells' (2009) communication power theory, a dominant power discourse has been formulated that confirms the superiority of the FIH and their Hindu nationalist discourse. By stereotyping all other liberal Hindus as the other, this discourse brings into question the construction of online Hindu identities.

The Encroachment of Hindu Identities and their Inner Tensions in Cyberspace

The emergence of cyberspace and virtual reality allows us to grasp an alternative general form, by which time-worlds and space-worlds of everyday modes of life increasingly bring

⁷ Sundaram (44) contends that this new domain is composed of young, English-speaking individuals who possess a strong cultural-political imagination of a Hindu-nationalist movement. Hence, this new techno-cultural Hindu Nationalist discourse appeals to elites in fast-growing cities and towns using innovative forms of electronic production (i.e. social networking sites and websites).

⁸ cf. *Hindutva* (<http://www.hindutva.org>) and *The Hindu Universe* (<http://www.hindunet.org>).

about new forms of social integration. According to Holmes (4) new technologies of simulation and communication powerfully cohere to create immersive environments, which displace our experience of monumental, architectural, and corporeal social and urban references based on mutual presence. This brings to the fore the critical debate of constructing and managing online identities within the context of action and interaction.

According to Kokswijk (87), virtual or cyberspace identity is a persona that is implied when communicating online; it is a perceived view of who you are when online. The construction of the implied persona embodies the perceptions, political worldviews, religious views, and other ideologies of the individual. Hence, identities in virtual environments are rather complex. They include implicit social identities (such as reputation and social networks) that people develop via their online behavior when they blog, chat, discuss, and act, and also represent their physical social identity and positioning in society. The case study of the Internet-Hindu opens up a new dimension for exploring online social religious constructs within the discourse of intra-movement awareness. A critical emerging discourse of the online Hindu is the formation of two separate identity constructs: (1) the liberal Hindu and (2) the FIH. This comes to the fore in blog posts and comments that articulate the difference between “we and them” and “us and you,” which highlights the intra-Hindu distinction in cyberspace.

In order to expand on these distinctive formations, I now turn to Castells’ categorization of identity-building in cyberspace with emphasis on (1) legitimizing identity and (2) resistance identity. For Castells (2004: 8) legitimizing identity is introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination via social actors that serve as agents for the advancement of their ideologies. As noted earlier, India strives to maintain discourse that portrays its legitimizing identity as secular. This is partially due to religious diversity and the co-existence of its citizens. Liberal Hindus tend to exemplify this identity; they are more tolerant in their blogging, chatting, and online interaction while critically interacting with the FIH to challenge their views. However, by maintaining a more liberal position, they set themselves apart from the FIH.

As inner tensions between these two online constructs begin to increase, Hindus in cyberspace are compelled to find belonging and solidarity within one of these collectives. This is crucial if one wants to find a shared space to develop online relationships, articulate views, or find support within a virtual community.

Interactive Relationships in Cyberspace

When people interact and communicate with one another through chat rooms, virtual communities, or other computer-mediated-communication modes, they are engaging in cyberspace interaction which has characteristics that distinguish it from ordinary face-to-face interaction. A critical component of cyberspace interaction is the element of anonymity. An individual can express social, religious, and political views freely. Although the element of anonymity is prevalent, individuals also strive to position themselves within specific online communities that can provide them with a sense of identity, belonging, and solidarity.

Fundamental or radical cyber cultures do not exist in a communicative vacuum. As members discover more efficient ways to reach others who share similar views, they tend to

encourage them to join the online collective. In my analysis of the FIH blogs, I have discovered the presence of the other – the liberal Internet-Hindu, who tends to contest the blog posts of the FIH. Most of their comments play a critical role in triggering a dialogue or providing a theme for further discourse. The following is a snippet of a dialogue from a blog post, “At 60 Proud to be Labeled Internet Hindus”:⁹

[User: Drummasala] - January 25, 2010

. . . I am an Internet-Hindu who is not a prostitute of western church money. We love our country and religion and we will swarm after you like bees if you ever malign Modiji.

[User: Arun] – January 26, 2010

I hate you Hindutva Apologists in Internet. Stop spreading hatred. Get a life.

[User: Prakash] – January 26, 2010

Let me ask what is Hindutva? And a personal question, do you have a life?

[User: Jatkesha] – January 26, 2010

@ Prakash: Let those bleeding-heart liberals be. They just cannot take truth. More often than not, something that is politically incorrect is true. And unfortunately our bleeding heart liberals can't take it . . .

[User: Arvind] – February 3, 2010

All these so called liberals will regret one day. Islamic fundamentalism has spoilt young minds and has devastated lot of countries through preaching wahabism in madrasas. Very soon India will join list of countries where nobody will have freedom of speech . . .

The above dialogue demonstrates an interchange of critique and insult that frequently surfaces in blog posts of the FIH. For Zickmund (201), these discussions turn into a limited linguistic warfare, limited in the sense that users seek not to end the interaction with the opponent, but to provoke the respondent to a stronger degree of extremism. Based on this thesis, one can argue that while liberal Hindus are not part of the FIH community, their responses may serve an important function; they allow group members to counter-attack, support their peers, and strengthen their internal cohesiveness. This is evident in the dialogue above whereby the *User: Jatkesha* affirms the argument of *User: Prakash* who counter-attacks the comments of *User: Arun*.

Zickmund makes a critical observation. Cyberspace cannot become a substitute for personal confrontation, but it is nonetheless a step toward forcing individuals with a fundamentalist view into an open interaction with society.

⁹ The dialogue was posted on a private blog, entitled *Offstumped – Commentary on an Impatient and Aspirational India* –(<http://offstumped.wordpress.com/2010/01/25/at-60-proud-to-be-labelled-internet-hindus/>).

Conclusion

The objective of this paper is to discuss the emergence of the modern phenomenon of the Internet-Hindu within a wider discourse of techno-cultural religious identities. It begins by providing a contextual definition of cyberspace and highlights the presence of religion in cyberspace. This is followed by an analysis of current trends in virtual communities and identity discourses. Against this background, I construct an analysis premised on Castells' communication theory that I apply to the case study of the Internet-Hindu. I do three things: (1) show how Hindu adherents attain a sense of power in cyberspace by constructing their own narrative; (2) show how they use this narrative to reconstruct an online identity which filters to the offline realm; and (3) show how complex it is to frame online action and interaction within an online space that intertwines the emotions of various actors.

I conclude that cyber space challenges our very understanding of religion, its critical approaches, and methodologies, and beckons creative and constructive ways in which issues of religious identity impact social context. I offer this paper as a work in progress to invite other researchers to explore the possibility of seeing cyber space as a social construct for religious studies.

Bibliography

Armitage, J., and J. Roberts

2002 *Living with Cyberspace: Technology and Society in the 21st Century*. London: Continuum.

Arnopoulos, P.

1995 *Sociopolitics: Political Development in Postmodern Societies*. Toronto: Guernica.

Baker, E.

2005 "Crossing the Boundary: New Challenges to Religious Authority and Control as Consequence of Access to the Internet." Pp. 67-85 in *Religion and Cyberspace*. Edited by M. T. Højsgaard and M. Warburg. London: Routledge.

Beckerlegge, G.

2001 "Computer-Mediated Religion: Religion on the Internet at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century." Pp. 219-64 in *From Sacred Text to Internet*. Edited by G. Beckerlegge. Milton Keynes: Ashgate.

Blanchard, A., and M. L. Markus

2007 "Technology and Community Behavior in Online Environments." Pp. 1-23 in *Communities and Technologies 2007: Proceedings of the Third Communities and Technologies Conference, Michigan State University*. Edited by C. Steinfield, B. T. Pentland, M. Ackerman, and N. Contractor. London: Springer-Verlag.

Bonner, H.

1959 *Group Dynamics: Principles and Applications*. New York: Ronald.

- Borja, J., M. Castells, M. Belil, and C. Benner
1997 *Local and Global: Management of Cities in the Information Age*. London: Earthscan.
- Brasher, B.
2004 *Give Me that Online Religion*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Castells, M.
1989 *The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring, and the Urban-Regional Process*. Oxford: Blackwell.
2004 *The Power of Identity*. Second edition. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
2009 *Communication Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chidester, D.
2005 *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chopra, R.
2008a *Technology and Nationalism in India: Cultural Negotiations from Colonialism to Cyberspace*. Amherst: Cambria.
2008b "The Virtual State of the Nation: Online Hindu Nationalism in Global Capitalist Modernity." Pp. 153-78 in *South Asian Technospaces*. Edited by R. Gajjala and V. Gajjala. New York: Peter Lang.
- Cowan, D. E.
2005 "Online U-topia: Cyberspace and the Mythology of Placelessness." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, 3: 257-63.
- Dawson, L. L.
2004 "Religion and the Internet: Presence, Problems and Prospects." Pp. 385-403 in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion: Regional, Critical and Historical Approaches*. Volume 1. Edited by P. Antes, A. W. Geertz, and R. R. Warne. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Dawson, L. L., and J. Hennebry
2004 "New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New Public Space." Pp. 75-89 in *Religion Online – Finding Faith on the Internet*. Edited by L. L. Dawson and D. E. Cowan. New York: Routledge.
- Desai, A.
2004 *Religions and Religious Freedom in India*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Dodge, M., and R. Kitchin
2001 *Mapping Cyberspace*. London: Routledge.

- Doniger, W.
2010 *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eck, D. L.
1985 *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Chambersburg: Anima Books.
- Entman, R.
2004 *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fernback, J.
1998 "The Individual within the Collective: Virtual Ideology and the Realization of Collective Principles." Pp. 35-54 in *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cyberspace*. Edited by S. G. Jones. London: Sage.
- Fuller, C. J.
1992 *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ghose, Sagarika
2010 Tweet on Twitter (February 27). Available online at <http://twitter.com/sagarikaghose/status/9763996589>.
- Gnanasambandam, C., A. Madgavkar, N. Kaka, J. Manyika, M. Chui, J. Bughin, and M. Gomes
2012 "Online and Upcoming: The Internet's Impact on India." *McKinsey and Company* (December).
- Gokulsing K. M., and W. Dissanayake
2009 "Introduction." Pp. 1-12 in *Popular Culture in a Globalized India*. Edited by K. M. Gokulsing and W. Dissanayake. London: Routledge.
- Gupta, K.
2010 "Don't Block the Internet-Hindus." *Agent Provocateur* (March 14). Available online at <http://kanchangupta.blogspot.com/2010/03/dont-block-internet-hindus.html>.
- Halder, D.
2010 "Meet the Internet-Hindus." *Mid Day* (April 25). Available online at <http://www.mid-day.com/articles/meet-the-internet-hindus/79527>.
- Harrison, S.
2007 "Transgressions, Miscommunication and Flames: Problematic Incidents in Email Discussions." Pp. 105-17 in *Internet Research Annual*. Volume 4. Edited by M. Consalvo and C. Haythornthwaite. New York: Peter Lang.

- Helland, C.
2000 "Online-Religion or Religion Online and Virtual Communitas." Pp. 205-23 in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*. Edited by J. K. Hadden and D. E. Cowan. New York: JAI.
- Hine, C.
2005 "Research Sites and Strategies: Introduction." Pp. 109-12 in *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. Edited by C. Hine. Oxford: Berg.
- Holmes, D.
1997 "Introduction." Pp. 1-25 in *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace*. Edited by D. Holmes. London: Sage.
- Khandelwal, M. S.
2002 *Becoming American, Being Indian: An Immigrant Community in New York City*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Kokswijk, J. V.
2007 *Digital Ego: Social and Legal Aspects of Virtual Identity*. Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers.
- Küng, H.
2002 "World Religions, World Peace, World Ethic." Pp. 580-86 in *War or Health: A Reader*. Edited by I. Taipale et al. Dhaka: University Press.
- Lawrence, B. B.
2002 "Allah On-Line: The Practice of Global Islam in the Information Age." Pp. 237-53 in *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media and Culture*. Edited by S. M. Hoover and L. S. Clark. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lim, M.
2005 "Islamic Radicalism and Anti-Americanism in Indonesia: The Role of the Internet." *Policy Studies* 18: 1-70.
- Lott, E.
2005 *Religious Faith, Human Identity: Dangerous Dynamics in Global and Indian Life*. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation.
- Malik, A.
2010 "When the Fringe Benefits." *Hindustan Times* (March 7). Available online at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/When-the-fringe-benefits/Article1-516263.aspx>.

- Mayer, J. F.
2000 "Religious Movements and the Internet: The New Frontier of Cult Controversies." Pp. 249-76 in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*. Edited by J. K. Haden and D. E. Cowan. New York: JAI.
- Miller, K. P., M. L. Brewer, and N. L. Arbuckle
2009 "Social Identity Complexity: Its Correlates and Antecedents." *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 12, 1: 79-94.
- Misra, A.
2004 *Identity and Religion: Foundations of Anti-Islamism in India*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Mitra, A.
1998 "Virtual Commonality: Looking for India on the Internet." Pp. 55-79 in *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cyberspace*. Edited by S. G. Jones. London: Sage.
- Monge, P., and N. Contractor
2003 *Theories of Communication Networks*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nayar, P. K.
2004 *Virtual Worlds: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cybertechnology*. New Delhi: Sage.
2009 "India Goes to the Blogs: Cyberspace, Identity, Community." Pp. 207-22 in *Popular Culture in a Globalized India*. Edited by K. M. Gokulsing and W. Dissanayake. London: Routledge.
- Parsons, T.
1968 *The Structure of Social Action*. Volume 1. London: Free Press.
1991 *The Social System*. London: Routledge.
- Parsons, T., and E. A. Shils
1962 "Values, Motives and Systems of Action." Pp. 190-243 in *Toward a General Theory of Action*. Edited by E. A. Shils. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Patrakar, P.
2010 "Sagarika Ghose Files Application for the Trademark over Internet-Hindus." *Faking News* (May 13). Available online at <http://www.fakingnews.com/2010/05/sagarika-ghose-files-application-for-trademark-over-internet-hindus>.
- Perrin, D. B.
2007 *Studying Christian Spirituality*. New York: Routledge.

- Porterfield, A.
1998 *The Power of Religion: A Comparative Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rairikar, S.
2010a "The Internet Hindus." *Haindava Keralam* (April 7). Available online at <http://www.haindavakeralam.com/hkpage.aspx?PageID=10793&SKIN=M>.
2010b "The Internet Hindus." *Hindu Info* (May 6). Available online at <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/hinduinfo/conversations/messages/2570>.
- Rasquinha, R. G.
2010 "Common Social Networking Blunders." *The Times of India* (July 19). Available online at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/relationships/man-woman/Common-social-networking-blunders/articleshow/6141632.cms>.
- Rheingold, H.
1993 *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Boston: Addison Wesley.
- Rinehart, R.
2004 *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture and Practice*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.
- Sanchit
2010 "Who is an Internet Hindu?" *Vu-Point: Different Views Different Points* (March 14). Available online at <http://vu-point.blogspot.com/2010/03/who-is-internet-hindu.html>.
- Scheifinger, H.
2008 "Hinduism and Cyberspace." *Religion* 38: 233-49.
- Schuler, D., and P. Day
2004 *Shaping the Network Society: The New Role of Civil Society in Cyberspace*. Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Simmel, G
2009 *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*. Translated by A. J. Blasi, A. K. Jacobs, and M. Kanjirathinkal. Volume 2. Leiden: Brill.
- Smith, M.S., and Kollock, P.
1999 "Communities in Cyberspace." Pp. 3-28 in *Communities in Cyberspace*. Edited by M. S. Smith and P. Kollock. London: Routledge.

Stalder, F.

2006 *Manuel Castells: The Theory of the Network Society*. Cambridge: Polity.

Sundaram, R.

2005 "Recycling Modernity: Pirate Electronic Cultures in India." Pp. 43-50 in *Internalizing Cultural Studies: An Anthology*. Edited by A. Abbas and J. N. Erni. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Vasseleu, C.

1997 "Virtual Bodies or Virtual Worlds." Pp. 46-58 in *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace*. Edited by D. Holmes. London: Sage.

Wertheim, M.

1999 *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet*. London: Virago.

Zickmund, S.

1998 "Approaching the Radical Other: The Discursive Culture of Cyberhates." Pp. 185-205 in *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cyberspace*. Edited by S. G. Jones. London: Sage.