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Debadrita Chakraborty

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Men in the making of nations: understanding the nexus between nation, belonging, and complicit masculinity

Debadrita Chakraborty

School of Liberal Studies, Cardiff University, Dehradun, India

ABSTRACT

The ideal of masculine Hinduism which is currently being employed within the Indian national rhetoric to sustain and build a modern *Hindu Rashtra* is a direct consequence of India's tryst with British imperialism. Since it is men who, as real actors of nationalist movement defend their homeland and the honour of women, the current Indian right wing politics ensures that men continue to uphold the ideals of Hindu hegemonic masculinity defined by martial prowess, muscular strength, moral fortitude and a readiness to battle groups to strengthen the nation. However, while the hegemonic notions of Hindu masculinity are achieved by a small minority who become the public face of gender and sexual politics, the majority are those who reap benefits from such gendered arrangements by being complicit in the hegemonic project. This paper makes an attempt to study the complex interdependencies between hegemonic and complicit masculinities in nation building processes in India. The aim is to uncover how complicit masculinities are created to sustain Hindutva nationalism within the current Indian climate and whether there are alternative possibilities and codes of behaviour in which privileges of masculinity and power are confronted and exposed.

Introduction

In his work *National Identity*, Smith defines the term as 'a measure of common culture and civic ideology, a set of common understandings and aspirations, sentiments and ideas that bind the population together in their homeland' (Smith, 1991, p. 11). Scholarship on gender has demonstrated how the construction of national identity is based on masculine values and characteristics since state institutions for the most part in history have been dominated by men (Connell, 1995; Gupta, 2001; Jeffords, 1989; McClintock, 1995; Sarkar & Butalia, 1995). Feminist scholars point towards the nation state's gendered hierarchical structure in terms of male domination of decision-making positions, the male superordinate/female subordinate internal division of labour, and the male legal regulation of female rights, labour and sexuality (Chodorow, 1978; Hasan, 1994). Nationalism

is thus gendered in that it draws on socially constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity to shape female and male participation in nation building as well as the manner in which the nation is embodied in the imagination of nationalists. The culture of nationalism is constructed to emphasise and resonate with masculine cultural themes. Terms like honour, patriotism, cowardice, bravery, and duty are hard to distinguish as either nationalistic or masculinist, since they seem so thoroughly tied both to the nation and to manliness. In his influential work, Mosse (1996) argued that ideas of what it means to be a good (modern) man were from the very beginning co-opted by the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century.

Banerjee further points out that the attributes of a man comprising traits of physical strength, action, toughness, assertion, dominance, and aggression which are important components of Anglo-American hegemonic masculinity continue to exist as a part of the nationalism agenda in the contemporary times (Basu & Banerjee, 2006, p. 8). This masculine construction of citizenship was opposed to an effeminacy marked by weakness, impotency, and cowardice. The gendered narrative of nationalism founded in hegemonic masculinity usually locates an 'other' to reinforce communal unity. Recent scholarship has shown how nationalism builds on masculine 'othering' processes first through homophobia (as a technology of othering) where the national masculine self is constructed by denying the masculinity of internal 'others' and second the use of the logic of contrast to reaffirm the nation's position at the top of the hierarchy by positioning other races, cultures, and classes as lesser (Mole, 2011; Slootmaeckers, 2019).

In the past years, India has witnessed countless brutalities and episodes of violence against perceived enemies of the nation in the name of nationalism articulated through religious metaphors by the aggressive, virile Hindu man whose masculinity is achieved through vigilance and violent defence of the national community. Since it is men who, as real actors of nationalist movement defend their homeland and the honour of women, the current Indian right wing politics ensures that men continue to uphold the ideals of Hindu hegemonic masculinity defined by martial prowess, muscular strength, moral fortitude, and a readiness to battle groups to strengthen the nation. Any man who fails to sustain the above mentioned ideals are then considered a peril to the security of the nation, labelled as powerless, inferior, passive, and is reminiscent of India's colonial oppressed and emasculated past. Masculine Hinduism is thus rooted in a rigid 'us vs them' view of nation that becomes implicated in violence and intolerance. However, while the hegemonic notions of Hindu masculinity are achieved by a small minority who become the public face of gender and sexual politics, the majority are those who reap benefits from such gendered arrangements by being complicit with the hegemonic project. Even then, the ideals of Hindutva masculinity which comprise military prowess, muscular strength, moral fortitude, and a readiness to battle the perceived other for the sake of a Hindu nation are upheld only by a small minority – the patriarchs of religion, culture and society who hierarchise knowledge, power, society, and gender to sustain Hindutva values or what Banerjee calls cultural nationalism or communalism (2005). Given the small number of men driving toxic Hindutva masculinity, what then has led to the sustaining of religious violence and minority repression in India?

The answer lies among a large section of the male population in India who have either been silent spectators of state sponsored vigilante attacks on oppressed minorities or

have perceived benefits in supporting and partaking in ethnic and religious violence, such as the 2002 Gujarat riots and post 2014 minority lynching in the name of nationalism and in both ways have been passively and actively complicit in strategising and sustaining the Hindutva project designed to guarantee power control.

While most gender theorists such as Kimmel (1996), Hearn (2004), Donaldson (1993) have focussed on how the construct of hegemonic masculinity sustained by cultural ideals and institutional power thrives on the perpetuation of gender inequality, power play and subordination of other men, very few have focussed on complicity that according to Connell determines relations among masculinities. Hegemony is not actually effective if a careful and strategic plan is not well designed to guarantee power control. That is why complicity is a cautious conspiracy and one of the main important factors in the power of masculinity because it refers to the intellectual planning to dominate other groups. This paper makes an attempt to study the complex interdependencies between hegemonic and complicit masculinities in nation building processes in India. It reconsiders the ways in which hegemonic masculinities and nationalisms are constructed, and sheds new light on the agency of complicit masculinities in processes of gendered nation building.

Complicit men: participatory and contributory actors

Influenced by Gramsci's theory of hegemony used to analyse class relations and struggle, Connell theorised hegemonic masculinity as the:

> configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy' which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women and, requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it. (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005)

Hegemonic masculinity has traditionally been structured as the normative gender whose foundation has been laid in heterosexuality, breadwinning, and aggression. In particular, she refers to a cultural dynamic where one group of people claim and sustain social life's leading position, which is established and maintained when there is some correspondence between the cultural ideal of the hegemony and institutional/disciplinary power. According to scholars of Masculinity Studies, hegemony is deemed successful when it embodies and wields power and authority (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hearn, 2004; Kaufman, 1987). Ascendency and leadership among those men performing hegemony can only be achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion. It is through the building of consensus and complicity rather than simply imposing power as domination that gives meaning to hegemonic masculinity.

In her work *Masculinities*, Connell identifies three other masculinities that are influenced by hegemonic masculine performances namely complicit, subordinate and marginalised (1995). Together the four categories according to Connell are in constant interaction with each other. Subordinated masculinities are those relations that are internal to the gender and are labelled as deviant. Subordinated masculinities do not conform to what is accepted as 'masculine' in a given social or contextual setting. Marginalised masculinities are constructed through their relationships with those masculinities that are socially, culturally, and economically superior. It is dominant/hegemonic

masculinities that are able to label and sanction those they deem inferior. Unlike marginalised and subordinate masculinities who are disadvantaged due to their unequal membership in a patriarchal society, complicit men conform to and support hegemonic ideals. Complicit masculinities are 'lesser versions of the hegemonic ideal' (Connell, 1991) that benefit from the patriarchal dividend without having to undertake hegemonic/authoritative positions. According to Kahn, complicity would include participation in aspects of masculinity that conform to dominant masculine norms in hopes of receiving rewards for being like the dominant group, while recognising perhaps at some level one will never be primarily in the dominant sphere (35). The relationship of complicit masculinity to hegemonic masculinity is a way of showing how a large number of men have a connection with the hegemonic concept without embodying it. What these definitions fail to acknowledge is that those men complicit to hegemony are not passive individuals whose agency and voice is acted upon by another performer. Complicity evokes a sense of participation in a wrongful act. *The Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Longman, 2013) suggests the word is used in formal documents and means: 'the act of taking part with another person in some wrong action, esp. a crime'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* entry on complicity simply states: 'partnership in an evil action' (Oxford University Press, 1968). At the heart of complicity lies questions of ethics, responsibility, and morality.

What Masculinity Studies has glossed over is the case of complicit masculinities that is largely invisible from scholarly reflection since male complicities have been considered as passive expressions of male agency and subjectivity. This paper aims to re-emphasise the hierarchical relationship between masculinities, especially how a masculine category supports and legitimises hegemonic masculinity whilst challenging and resisting those (subordinate and marginalised masculinities) that oppose power and control. Complicity also reaffirms hegemonic masculinity 'on how men should behave and how putative "real men" do behave, as the cultural ideal' (Morrell, 1998, p. 608).

In his seminal work, *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age*, Kutz observes how individual lives are complicated by collective actions and by the harms that flow from social, economic and political institutions in a morally flawed world (Kutz, 2000, p. 1). By that logic, individual relations to this collective harm constitute complicity. Kutz draws on two categories of complicity while explaining individual's position, responsibility, and morality while committing a wrong. Drawing on the example of two burglars ransacking a house together, Kurtz classes these accomplices in the category of 'co-principals' since the two of them are acting together in a joint enterprise. The other category consists of what he terms as 'accessories' that is those individuals who are not a direct accomplice of a wrong doer since they do not commit the crime as a collective. As examples, he mentions how buying a table made of tropical wood that comes from a defoliated rainforest, or inhabiting a region seized long ago from its aboriginal occupants can make individuals members of a joint criminal enterprise (Kutz, 2000, p. 1). For Kutz, these examples fall in a moral grey zone: 'Although in each of these cases we stand outside the shadow of evil, we still do not find the full light of the good' (Kutz, 2000, p. 1). His understanding of the legal and moral implications of complicity forces us to consider how overt (participatory) and covert (contributory) joint enterprises can affect immediate surroundings including people to whom we may now have an increasing sense of responsibility. Kurtz also draws attention to a third category of complicity

which signals a sense of responsibility that stems from human solidarity. Using Kurtz's claim as a point of departure in this paper, I will examine the overt form of masculinity or the action/participatory side whereby an individual need not share the wrongful purposes and intentions of the wrongdoer to be liable for moral blame for being complicit with his wrongdoing, and the covert form of masculinity or the intention/contributory side where an individual need not participate with the wrongdoer in some joint action. The paper aims to show how contributing knowingly to a wrongdoing, without in any sense of committing it, is enough to qualify as morally complicit with that wrongdoing (Kutz, 2000).

This paper will begin by examining the trajectories of both hegemonic masculinities and complicit masculinities in India through a socio-cultural lens. I will argue how a section of the Hindu male population have been complicit in sustaining the Hindutva ideal through masculinisation of the Hindu culture, influenced by cultural images and symbols of Hindu male deities as hypermasculine figures and the visual representation of nationalist zeal and fervour of the 'warrior king', the Hindu soldier figure and the consumerist culture around 'desi' superheroes. Appealed by mythic symbols and masculinised historical beliefs coupled with religious nationalism, I aim to examine how the complicit man calls upon right wing hegemonic socio-political discourses to perpetrate violence over the marginalised and subordinate masculine other and by that logic upon himself. I will then examine how state mechanisms of biopower foster national gender hierarchies, 'making live' those who manifest masculine traits of assertiveness, dominance, forcefulness, aggressiveness, and strength and 'letting die' those with feminine traits of sympathy, compassion, understanding, and warmth. The purpose is to understand the nexus between national identity and masculinities in terms of how the Indian state political discourses promote and prefer certain masculine ideals and attributes over others in order to use masculinised national identities as a formidable force in the international stage. The hierarchisation of masculinities by state technologies, I argue lead to the formation of overt and covert forms of complicit masculinities that participate in the act of promoting violence, power and control and sustaining hegemons in state institutions.

Decoding Hindu nationalism and political masculinities

Hindutva literally translated as the quality of being a Hindu is a modern political ideology that grew out of communalism and caste politics in the colonial period. In the 1990s, scholars defined Hindutva as 'an oppositional and often violent mobilisation of the imagined Hindu nation against the institutional order of the state establishment and the Muslim other that the secular Indian state was accused of favouring and "appeasing"' (Hansen & Roy, 2022; Pandey, 1990; Tambiah, 1996). Post Modi's victory in the general elections of 2014, the politics of caste has assumed a new and intense significance for Hindu nationalist mobilisation and electioneering. Individualised forms of vigilante action have emerged alongside mass organisational forms to advance the violent politics against the Muslim Other.

The social categories of religion and caste as they are perceived in modern-day India were developed during the British colonial rule. New socio-cultural, political, and legal structures were devised by the colonisers so that the homogeneous colonial identity

gained precedence over other types of community identity, and traditions that were not previously rooted in religion were subsumed under the religious label (Chitnis & Wright, 2007, p. 1321). This was done to serve the British Indian government's own interests – primarily to create a single society with a common law that could be easily governed. At the same time, the British through the process of bureaucratisation instated upper castes, who had hitherto maintained dominance through religio-cultural ideology, into a unified bureaucracy for administration with effective power (Cohn, 1997, p. 3). The immediate effect of such an act brought the upper caste primarily Brahmins to the direct influence of English culture, education and ideals. Native men were considered civilised and masculine once they imbibed desirable masculine traits of British culture through English language education and these traits could be further strengthened if native men were authoritative at home by teaching native women their 'correct domestic roles' (Chandra, 2012, p. 217). The colonial desire to produce English educated mimic men to uphold the civilisational standards of colonialism, as Chandra observes 'was not the end point of colonial cultural engineering' (Chandra, 2012, p. 217). To assert their masculinity, English educated native men not only controlled the domestic sphere by advocating women's domestic roles and their education but also denied English education to other caste and class subjects thereby marginalising them.

However, even as Western education and its ideas of liberalism and modernity were well received by the upper castes, they chose not to abandon their religious ideal and tradition. Hindu revivalist Dayanand Saraswati who valorised the spiritual glory of Indian antiquity and, advocated against religious malpractices that retrograded Hinduism founded the Arya Samaj (1875) to introduce proselytisation in Hinduism, and to initiate reconversion of Dalits who had converted to Islam and Christianity to escape the stigma of untouchability, and to experience greater mobility and self-respect.

Hindu nationalism appeared on the political map of India with the formation of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1915 and the Rastriye Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 that promoted principles of Hindutva, the ideas of a majority religion and dominant castes and, identified India as a Hindu Rashtra (Jaffrelot, 2007). Post independence, RSS predominantly an organisation of the Brahmins sought to replace a caste-ridden 'everyday Hinduism' with Hindutva as a new, 'thin' and patriotic 'civil religion' that projects itself as a caste-blind 'nationalist Hinduism', hospitable to all Hindus regardless of caste and birth (Hansen & Roy, 2022). With the formation of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) in 1980, the construction of a Hindu brotherhood opposed to its universal other – the Muslims, became the rallying point in electoral democracy. In the late 1990s, BJP played on its strong Hindutva roots capitalising on the national Hindu uproar over the Ramjanmabhoomi issue – a movement concerning Lord Ram's birthplace in the very site where the sixteenth century Babri Masjid is situated in Ayodhya.

However, even as the Hindutva project sought to include and incorporate a variety of previously marginalised caste groups within its umbrella to mobilise them against the Muslim Other, deep down the political alliance forged by upper castes with other castes has only been undertaken to attain political power and no such interaction or cooperation is encouraged into the ritualistic or religious aspects of the caste. Therefore, the Hindutva project of creating cultural citizenship is not a negation of caste hierarchies but of masking such gradations by representing casteism as internal cultural diversity within Hindus which Natrajan defines as the 'culturalisation of caste' (Natrajan, 2011).

Besides representing caste as cultural difference or ethnicity rather than as hierarchical descent-based relations, Hindutva has also maintained brahmanical patriarchy whereby upper caste Brahmin men sustain patriarchal and brahmanical codes of caste and class hierarchies and, hegemonic masculine institutions that suppress and control female agency, and the masculine other. According to Chakravarti who conceptualised the term brahmanical patriarchy, it is a system of 'effective sexual control over women to maintain not only patrilineal succession but also caste purity' (Chakravarti, 1993, p. 579). In addition, brahmanical patriarchy exerts control on political economy, gender, caste, legal structures, and the state (Katju, 2018; Omvedt, 2000). However, this system is not restricted to upper castes alone but has percolated down to lower caste groups in the form of Dalit patriarchy and caste masculinity whereby men not only control sexuality and agential capacities of women but also marginalise and brutalise the masculine Muslim other influenced by Hindutva's violent religious politics.

Since 2014 with the rise of right wing populism has changed the socio-political equation in India. Caste lines have been blurred whereby caste populism has been replaced by the Hindutva ideology to do away with the enemy Other. Simultaneously, Hindu nationalism has further grounded brahmanical and caste masculinity. As versions of right wing populism from around the world has shown through mandates of Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, right wing leaders have valorised the relationship between politics and masculinity by remasculinising the nation state by reviving traditional masculine roles, reinstating male privileges and patriarchal power and, disapproving gender equality measures and, LGBTQ + rights. Like his American and Russian counterpart, Modi represents a muscular approach to politics with a bias for Hindus and the culture rooted in Hindutva. At a time when a great majority of Indian men are suffering from deep feelings of injury, weakness, inferiority, degradation, inadequacy and envy due to inequality, corruption and unemployment in the urban sections, it is Modi who was able to channel their frustration over blocked social mobility 'with his rhetoric of meritocracy and lusty assaults on hereditary privilege' (Mishra, 2019).

The image of Modi as a self-made man from a humble setting, his image as a tea seller, and his promise of employment and social and economic development resonated with the unemployed youth and the lower caste groups who found their voice, agency, and representation through him (Jaffrelot, 2002; Mishra, 2019). Boasting of his 56-inch chest, he promised to transform India into an international superpower and to reinsert Hindus into the grand march of history (Mishra, 2019). Thus Modi's masculinity while in the form of a ruler (raja) promised Hindus the return of a religious nationalism that empowers them socio-economically and politically, his saffron clad monk (rishi) version offering prayers in a cave near a pilgrimage site assured the rehabilitation of an imaginary Hindu civilisation and in doing so present himself as the saviour of the nation. It is such discourses and narratives that have given birth to religious nationalism in India that rely on imaginations of the 'pure' people and their birth right to the nation state's infrastructure from those undeserving others. Religion, and in particular religious resurgence, thus provides a foundation for the creation of intolerance against those who do not share majoritarian beliefs. 'Othering' becomes, in other words, a fundamental part of the closing of religious and nationalist boundaries and a foundation for much populist discourse. Modi's masculinity symbolic of an aggressive, disciplined Hindu male who would create (bio)political mechanisms of control, monitor, and deter the religious

other in an effort to make India a true Hindu nation, garnered support from a large number of both online and offline 'political players' including online trollers, sycophantic newspapers and television channels and complicit corporates. Entrusted with the duty to help Modi reinforce a gendered and racialised social order as well as a Hindu nationalist identity, these supporters/political players are strongly motivated to maintain the gender status quo and will show greater backlash, particularly when the gender status quo is threatened. According to reports, India's online population has almost doubled in the Modi era with a large urban and rural majority being exposed to fake news on Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Whatsapp among others. False accounts of airstrikes claiming lives in Pakistan or claims about the opposition holding secret conspiratorial meetings with nuclear rival Pakistan and discussing internal elections have led Modi to open up 'men of ressentiment' (Nietzche, 1998) who demonstrate anger, hatred and scorn against the enemy 'other'. Despite having failed to create job opportunities for the populace, NE Modi's masculinity in his manly leadership style has licensed his supporters to explicitly hate a range of people from perfidious Pakistanis and Indian Muslims to their 'anti-national' Indian appeasers. Such muscular nationalism that brings together politics of imagination and generates violence against the supposed hypermasculine enemy plays on the ontological and physical insecurities of those who fear losing their manhood and masculine privileges in a secular India controlled by dynastic politics (Banerjee, 2012; Kinnvall, 2019).

Masculinity, muscularity, and complicity: Hindu gods and far right ideology

One of the ways in which threat to an imagined ancient Hindu manhood is countered, is through symbols of Hindu-ness. The images of brawny, muscular, and combative Hindu gods legitimise Hindutva masculinities engaged in cow vigilantism, anti-romeo squad activism, and policing of interfaith relationships. Images of the devoted and *veer vanar*, Hanuman who was once portrayed as devoted to Ram and Sita, his head bowed and hands in prayer gave way to images of an angry, aggressive, and hypermasculine monkey god in the form of posters on public buildings and buses, auto-rickshaws, and taxis. A similar trend is observed in the representation of Lord Ram, the hero of the Hindu epic, *Ramayana* as a warrior with a muscular athletic body wielding a bow and arrow. Other Hindu gods like Shiva and Vishnu have morphed as well from graceful, full-figured beings to hypermasculine figures. According to deSouza, there is a distinctive mixture of messages communicated by a 'ripped' Ram to the devotees physically present at the procession (deSouza, 2021). The god's powerful physique and tensed musculature corresponds to the aesthetic category of anger (raudra) while his huge muscles make him human-like – a hegemon or patriarch who is able to offer protection to the nation and its citizens.

According to Rajagopal, religious iconography has witnessed an evolution from rounded, serene figures to humanistic depictions in modern art and popular culture in India (Rajagopal, 2001). Comics of the late 1970s, especially *Amar Chitra Katha* founded in 1967 was deeply influenced by overdramatic visuals of western superhero comics. Along with overdramatic battlefield depictions and attractive weapons that resemble those of western superheroes, the most important change was that of the new muscular

look of gods. The toned physique, the long hair and the chiselled face and sharp jawline bore semblance with the physicality of the superhero and ancient Roman and Greek gods. While *Amar Chitra Katha*'s images of muscular gods have stayed as a part of popular culture in India, right wing leaders have concluded that the muscularisation of gods especially of Ram occurred during the Ramjanmabhoomi movement when the narrative of the need for aggressive and muscular figures to protect Hindus against the Muslim other, whose advent to medieval India was as invaders was disseminated among militant Hindu organisations (Sen, 2020). Influenced by Hollywood and superhero comics along with a hypermasculine, aggressive new Hinduism to galvanise Hindus into action against the common enemy, Hindu gods following the election of Modi in 2014 have been modelled to match the anger and machismo of nationalist groups, led by men. Further, Hindu nationalism has gained favour among marginalised caste groups by engaging with micro-local religious icons while sustaining the image of Ram as the chief religious icon of the Hindu religion. Minor characters and local deities such as Sabari (a popular deity among nomadic Dalit communities of northern India) from the *Ramayana* have been invoked and a temple built for the Musahar community to foster Hindutva acceptance of religious and cultural heterogeneity within the Hindu religion. Thus there has been a constant revision in the portrayal of gods by casting aside traditional texts but 'always claiming continuity with tradition' (Rajagopal, 2001).

Designed by a Mangalorean artist in 2016, the Hanuman image perfectly emulates the narrative of toxic Hindu masculinity that is not benign but represents deep frown lines, radiating malicious energy against a black and saffron background. The image dubbed as the 'Angry Hanuman' was quickly co-opted by various wings of the Sangh Parivar – an umbrella term used to refer to the collection of Hindu organisations spawned by the RSS that includes religious militant organisations such as the Bajrang Dal. Bajrang Dal for instance adorned their flags with the image and it was soon used in rallies by other Sangh Parivar organisations including a song themed around the immortal who was no longer the wise problem solver but a destroyer who single-mindedly slays his enemies.

One of the reasons why the Hanuman image frequently appears in both high-end SUVs and sedans and trucks, buses and bikes is because it is able to appeal to the youth of today. Exhibiting posters and stickers of a muscular and aggressive Hanuman is an example of masculine complicity where a majority of India's young population knowingly contribute to the Hindutva agenda by othering the perceived 'enemy'. Faced with socio-economic turbulence due to lack of job opportunities, male members of lower classes and caste groups suffering socio-economic emasculation as bread winners are emotionally manipulated by populist organisations to (mis)direct their aggression towards an enemy other as a way of overcoming anxiety, anger, humiliation, and marginalisation imposed on them due to their class and caste strata. Together with the marginalised are members of the gymnasium going, muscle flexing men flaunting an ostentatious culture of designer label clothes, chunky 'bling' jewellery, expensive mobile phones and high-end cars who together with the class affluence from land acquisition and family wealth aim to gather political clout by supporting the agenda of Hindutva militant organisations that promotes violence, homophobia, misogyny, and xenophobia against the religious, ethnic other.

Such exhibitionism of patriarchal violence is also a reaction to the geopolitical threat from neighbouring Muslim-majority countries and internal threat from the *kattarwadi Mohammedan* (fanatic Muslim) (Kinnvall, 2019, p. 296) and is a backlash against the colonial image of the emasculated, effeminate, and militarily incompetent Hindu male. The ensuing 'clash of cultures' (Hindu–Muslim riots) and colonial discourses of emasculation affects masculinities of the Indian youth since it is their masculinity – the site of privilege that is specifically targeted as the grounds for exclusion from privilege. To stand tall against the enemy, rudeboy masculinities nurtured in familial and communitarian patriarchy have been complicit: that is have knowingly contributed towards politically appropriating the image of Hanuman as expressing aggressive masculinity and saffron, Hindu nationalism. In their bid to uphold the angry image of Hanuman, both the youth and right leaning citizens have through participatory or overt form of complicity argued against the fallacy of emphasising one aspect of his character as the reference point. For them, Hanuman is as much benign, docile and submissive as he is a ferocious warrior, a soldier, a fearsome destroyer whose rage cannot be contained and whose one roar is enough to make the three worlds tremble (*Aapan tej samharo aapai/Teenhon lok hank te kanpai*) according to *Hanuman Chalisa,* a devotional hymn chanted by Hindus in praise of the monkey god. Interconnecting the image of Hanuman with anger, crime, and violence according to Sangh Parivar groups is an attempt by the enemy other to vilify Hinduism and its practitioners and is an indication towards religious intolerance, bigotry, and cultural chauvinism.

A similar trend of both contributory or covert and participatory or overt complicity has been observed in the Ram Navami celebrations wherein Ram is represented with a hypermasculine physique as is the recent trend surrounding depictions of Hindu gods. Scholars over the years have also interpreted Ram's facial expression, addressing him as the 'delighted hero' who with his rosy cheeks, shining eyes and muscular physique is prepared to attack enemies and defend his people, bestowing his followers with a message of warmth and welcome while communicating a threat to opponents (Anand, 2011; Pandey, 1991). This portrayal of Ram as a benevolent protector of the nation along with the recent image of his body builder physique endorsed by Hindutva organisations has caught on the imagination of the public including worshippers and procession goers who believe that their manhood is under threat due to 'lascivious' and 'cunning' Muslims who seek to undermine their masculinity by enticing 'their' women into marriage and thereby conversion to Islam known as 'love jihad[1]'. For the common man, physical strength is a guarantee of communal security and life and both contributory and participatory complicity to the muscular and benevolent protector ensures effective elimination of opponents granting them security. This generates a pattern of complicity among the population that sees Ram as their patriarch and saviour and in turn creates a 'biopolitical[2] divide' (Foucault, 2008) within the population with Ram smiling on those whom he will protect that is those who 'gets to live', and those whom he is poised to attack that is those 'who must die'. As deSouza observes, 'Ram deftly splits the social imagination into people who should feel encouraged by and those who should feel afraid by his presence' (deSouza, 2021, p. 129).

Ram Navami processions are analogous to the contemporary Ram Mandir movement that aimed towards building a collective support towards the construction of a temple in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh on the very site declared as Ram's birthplace. This was a site

where the Babri masjid was located which was demolished in 1992 to realise the dream of constructing a temple. One of the ways in which the Sangh Parivar galvanised support was through a fundraising campaign. Hindus in India and abroad who aligned to the historical evidence provided by Sangh Parivar organisations were encouraged to pay for individual bricks that would be used in the construction of the temple. Here, participatory complicity was achieved through donation and every act of donation was equated to the complicit man's devotion to god and by that logic his collusion with the powers that be. Hindus irrespective of their class and caste in India and of the diaspora were encouraged to pay for individual bricks that would be used in the construction of the temple. For men of the Indian diaspora residing in countries like the USA and Britain, the preservation of their model minority and assimilationist status has entailed 'political incorporation' (Chakravorty et al., 2017) through complicity. To realise vested economic interests and long-term ambitions, many upper caste Indian migrants especially Hindus became complicit in structural injustices against Muslims post 9/11 as they over-emphasised their American-ness whilst maintaining their Hindu identity. Affiliated to Hindu nationalist organisations in India, these influential migrants have been both overtly and covertly complicit in promoting Hindutva nationalism, defending Modi's authoritarian regime in India in the hope of a Hindu cultural revivalism that would privilege upper caste Hindus over religious and cultural minorities in India (Chakraborty, 2020). Such compliance and obedience to state injustices are mainly because as an upper caste, highly-skilled class of migrants, they have been the recipient of caste and class privileges prior to migrations from India and have been conferred with material benefits post their professional success in America.

The rise of supersoldier, superhero movies in Bollywood

Given the number of supersoldier and superhero films that Bollywood has produced in the recent past, it is important to examine the socio-cultural impact of such films and the possibilities they represent. In the west, especially in the USA, the superhero film genre has been criticised for comprising ideological representations that support a certain status quo – in this case a moralistic aristocrat with a superiority complex about Western civilisation (Arnaudo, 2013; Collins, 2015; Eco, 1964/2011; McAllister et al., 2001; Moore, 2003). Just like its western counterpart, superhero and supersoldier movies in Bollywood too have learnt to glorify militarism, unilateralism, and right wing fantasies about criminality. According to Aravind:

> The cinematic portrayal of the army and [superheroes] especially in the latter half of the twentieth century and the twenty-first century, are compelling reflections on contemporary ideologies of masculinity. They map men, manhood, and manliness, prescribing dominant social values and perspectives. (Aravind, 2023, p. 90)

The failure of politicians has left citizens yearning for fantasy heroes to uphold belief systems and maintain the status quo. However, a nation's myopic tendency towards superhero politics also denotes the rise of right wing politicians such as Trump in the USA and Modi in India since both positioned themselves as the superhero, the patriarch who can save the nation from the enemy other. Bollywood spy, supersoldier, and superhero movies have also exhibited a majoritarian narrative. Cases in point that address

concepts of nationalism, patriotism, and Hindutva are the big budget superhero film *Brahmastra Part One – Shiva,* spy thrillers such as *Code Name Tiranga*, *Mission Majnu*, *Uri: The Surgical Strike,* and the Telugu historical action film, *RRR*.

Unlike superheroes of the west who are known to resolve socio-political conflicts fighting Hitler in World War II, participating in the American Civil Rights Movement and as symbols of hope during the Great Depression, the Indian superhero, spy, and supersoldier films have endorsed disinformation, propaganda, and patriotic excess that have directly or indirectly influenced political behaviour and agendas and everyday lives of ordinary people. Within the militaristic ecology, the figure of the soldier furnishes a hyper-masculinist symbol that feeds into the gender ideologies and public memory shaped by Bollywood. The gun-toting, patriarchal man, spouting love for country and family, eager to protect femininity is superimposed onto the very idea of masculinity in quotidian life (Aravind, 2023).

According to Novak, films not only provide with people the ability to rely comfortably on the fact that good overcomes evil, enabling audience to distinguish 'us' from 'them', and allies from adversaries, but also helps expand the scope of understanding their national identities within much wider geopolitical narratives without even being aware of it (Novak, 2021). Films based on national security and geopolitical conflicts focus on imaginative threats that India faces from terrorists, Muslims, medieval history, security threats neighbouring countries. These threats are simple tools for Bollywood filmmakers and often represent an inverted version of geopolitical discourses of the factual Indian foreign policy. Often times the conceptualisation of the imaginary threats in films tends to overlap with practical geopolitics. For instance, post 26/11 in India when 10 heavily armed terrorists entered India, Bollywood focussed on threats like terrorism, cyberterrorism, human trafficking, border security, and radicalism thus aligning itself to the nation state's geopolitical paradigm. These include The *Attacks of 26/11* (2013) which unravels the story of Kasab, the only terrorist who survived and was caught by the police. The film also captures the horrors of the attack and the resilience of the city and its people. Another film *Phantom* (2015) portrays the trials and tribulations of a court martialled army officer and an American security agent as they attempt a mission at capturing and killing 26/11 suspects while *Baby* (2015) represents an all-out war on terrorism reflected in the first few scenes and alluding to corrupt religious leaders and their fanatic followers. Films like *Airlift* (2016), a rescue thriller where Akshay Kumar assumes the role of a one man army who despite facing odds manages to evacuate 170,000 Indian expatriates stuck in Kuwait after its invasion by Iraq in 1990 and the 2012 spy thriller *Agent Vinod* where actor Saif Ali Khan's character fights rogue ISI colonels and terrorist groups in Pakistan, Russia, and Morocco is an example of how imaginary threats are determined by time and geopolitical space. Lately films like *Uri – The Surgical Strike* (2019) – a dramatisation of the surgical strikes into Pakistan occupied Kashmir in 2016, *Bhuj: The Pride of India* (2021), *BellBottom* (2021), and *Shershah* (2021) that narrated the story of Captain Vikram Batra who died a martyr in the 1999 Kargil war have all transformed important national holidays such as Independence and Republic days into money making festivals. Propagating jingoistic and nationalistic propaganda and earning rich dividends, these are the most watched films in India where citizens are taught that patriotism towards their country is impossible without vilifying India's strategic opponent – Pakistan.

Unlike films from the early 2000s such as *Refugee, Veer-Zaara, and Jodhaa Akbar* that revolved around narratives of Hindu–Muslim unity, films like *Samrat Prithviraj* (2022) exhibits a saffronised history wherein the Hindu king Prithviraj Chauhan is shown to have killed the Muslim enemy Muhammad Ghori contrary to non-divisive history that points towards Ghori having been killed by his men. Similarly *Padmaavat* (2018) and *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior* (2020) both project a Manichean narrative of evil represented by the Muslim rulers and their allies against the noble Hindu Rajputs and the brave commander of Shivaji – Tanhaji respectively. This was done by stereotyping and vilifying Alauddin and Udaybhan's masculinities in *Padmaavat* (2018) and *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior* (2020) against the Hindu masculinities guided by moral responsibility and patriarchal duty. Even the 2023 supersoldier, Shah Rukh Khan starrer film, *Pathaan* equates religion to nationalism subtly where the plot revolves around the abrogation of Article 370 and its justification through the celebration of militarism and the Indian army who through their strong sense of justice and morality is able to safeguard India's democracy that is showcased as vibrant, non-violent and tolerant to both Indian filmgoers and to the world.

Often times such kinds of superhero and supersoldier films and historical dramas are showcased in mobile theatres across different states before elections to represent the political party's uncompromising stance on terrorism and to promote and consequently demand complicity to nationalist propaganda through army glorification for electoral gains. Tasked at furthering the Hindu nation making project also means that Bollywood filmmakers embrace genres that match the BJP's tastes: dubious historical epics that glorify bygone Hindu kings; action films about the Indian Army; political dramas and bio-pics, dutifully skewed. These productions all draw from the B.J.P.'s roster of stock villains: medieval Muslim rulers, Pakistan, Islamist terrorists, leftists, opposition parties like the Indian National Congress (Subramanian, 2022). Such films have had considerable impact on the film goers mind especially young people who are susceptible to propaganda, misinformation, and fake news. Those watching such films are expected to align with the Hindu ideology. Failure to do so results in them being at the receiving end of radicalisation, fanaticism, extremism, intolerance, and prejudice.

The politics of anxiety: masculinity, biopolitics, and belongingness

The nation state is made up of three components masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation, and masculinised hope. Within the nation state, there are those that enjoy positions of masculine power as heads of social hierarchies and as epitomes of authentic masculinity and then there are those who aspire to participate in majoritarian politics in fear of marginalisation and erasures especially those men who are othered because of their minority gendered identities, religious ethnicities, disprivileged castes, and working class status. Right wing organisations in the past few years have been able to gather a complicit audience through the dissemination of iconographies of muscular Hindu gods and cinema on superheroes and supersoldiers to create an aspirational aura around these national masculinities; to emphasise the ethnocultural and religious nationalism these icons signify and the right wing viewpoint they promote. Complicity has been further established in India through an assimilationist idea of 'unity' – the case in point being Prime Minister Modi's pet project – the institutionalisation of the 'Statue of Unity' – the world's tallest statue of India's first deputy prime minister, Sardar Vallabhbhai

Patel also known as the 'Iron Man of India'. The statue according to historians and political scientists is an attempt to reimagine India's nationalist historiography around Patel, taking the emphasis off the secular, socialist first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (Davis & Gamble, 2020). In doing so, the statue constructs a hypermasculine idea of India centred on an ordered, majoritarian, business-led vision of public space in Modi's India. For BJP and RSS organisations, the statue is a great nation building project since the figure of the 'Iron Man' symbolises toughness and evokes a non-pacifist willingness to use force to unify the nation. In doing so, the statue helps to reimagine India as a state in which the sense of unity is subtly connected to assimilation, rather than the Nehruvian discourse of secularism and unity in diversity (Davis & Gamble, 2020, p. 304). The assimilation of citizens emphasises participation and contribution to hypermasculinity, symbolic of the Hindu nationalist emphasis on the masculinised and militarised focussed on strength and iron as symbolised by the statue. The Statue of Unity is thus a pertinent example of the physical manifestation of Modi's nationalist project. Assimilation or adherence to a radical nationalist ideology has created an anxiety around masculinity (especially after the institutionalisation of the Statue of Unity and media and iconographic circulations of masculinity that centralises the perpetuation of hegemonic male power) where men question 'how to be that kind of a man who secures and protects his nation' (Davis & Gamble, 2020, p. 292). Hence to align oneself with the Hindutva nationalist project, a man needs to demonstrate his manliness. Foucault's theory of biopower and biopolitics is useful to understand how and what kind of politics is exercised when one does or does not align to the Hindutva nationalist, assimilationist project (Foucault, 2008). The Hindutva project through its dissemination of the archetypes of masculinity namely – a Hindu soldier (as represented in Hindi superhero and supersoldier films) and a warrior monk (signified by a muscular, aggressive and a devoted Hanuman) have given way to segregational politics whereby a man to be marked as masculine must be an authoritarian type who sustains patriarchy and is engaged in the 'othering' of marginalised men and women as well as show conformity to authority from above (Connell, 2005, p. 18). Any deviation from the patriarchal regimes of power culminates in their 'othering' by hypermasculine visual media and other apparatuses of Hindutva patriarchy, which either concludes with their (metaphorical) death (since biopower decides who has the right to leave and who does not) or with masculine anxiety that is anxiety of not being a man enough resulting in violent manifestations of masculinity and excessive emphasis on manliness. The only other way to claim one's masculinity lies in the performance of participatory (overt) and contributory (covert) complicity to both benefit from and legitimise hegemonic structures.

Acting together in moral complicity

Taking into account two instances where men engage in both participatory and contributory complicity, this paper aims to establish that an act of complicity is not an independent, freestanding act all on its own. Complicity cannot be assessed entirely on its own independent merits, it must also be assessed on the basis of the other person a hegemon, or a popular ideology, or a hegemonic organisation's wrongdoing or 'moral demerits' to which it contributes. A complicit masculinity's participation and contribution to the hegemonic masculinity's agenda when measured on the basis of consequences is violent since men once marginalised and emasculated have attempted to ameliorate their

positions by contributing to the Hindutva organisations' agenda of promoting communal hatred and hate speech. Complicit men's contribution in Hindutva cultural symbols of power and privilege ridden in hyper-muscular images of Hindu gods and in superhero and supersoldier films when assessed on the basis of the degree to which it contributes towards promoting Hindutva binary of the self and the other have also had lasting impact in terms of Muslim lynching over the consumption of beef and enforcing vigilante action in the form of the CAA-NRC citizenship bill.

At this point, it is important to ask whether complicit men at a given time feel morally accountable for 'reasons of conduct' that is the manner in which they act around other people; whether they reproach themselves for a harmful conduct when neither their victims nor their onlookers reproach them; and whether they hold themselves accountable for harm caused to the minority other by dint of their complicit characteristics (Kutz, 2000). This can happen only when men are able to acknowledge their own internecine complicity with structures and histories of systematic social violence and perform solidarity to support the marginalised and subordinate other. Berger has used the term 'complicity' to imply solidarity. Berger exemplifies complicity as a proxy for community and camaraderie when he narrates his experience in a foundry where he witnessed kinship, coordination, and support among workers to wade through the risk involved in their work (Maughan, 2015).

Masculinities in India lying at the intersections of caste, class, religion, culture, and ethnicity have thrived on complicity. Except for those men in power, performing hegemonic masculinities, everyone is subjected to humiliation if they are unable to emulate the qualities of superiority that is physical strength, colour, caste, class, religious, cultural and ethnic superiority and suppression of emotions. To enjoy privilege and consequently oppress the other, complicit men not only play an active role in legitimising masculinities but also contribute towards shaping lesser men. However, this is not to say that masculine categories are rigid in nature. In a given context, men who are otherwise marginalised can perform complicity by empowering hegemonic men and consequently enjoying privilege from their affinity with the hegemon. However as observed by Berger (1983), the logic of complicity despite its negative and debilitating influence can be translated into self-conscious enactments of solidarity through camaraderie, empathy, and kinship. Such acts of solidarity through complicity can only happen when complicit men begin to question representations, labels, and stereotyped categorisations by critiquing Hindutva cultural symbols of power and privilege; by rejecting posters exhibiting images of hypermasculine Hindu deities and supersoldier and superhero films. The only path of the complicit collective against radicalisation, fanaticism, extremism, intolerance, and prejudice could be a struggle for alternative narratives, norms, and codes of behaviour in which privileges of masculinity and power are confronted and exposed. Collective social responsibility and solidarity through complicity can only be evoked when men learn to acknowledge that masculine categories are precarious and the pressure of masculine performance will create perpetual emasculation anxiety among men. Complicity to a hegemon today may have repercussions when an alternative power is on the rise.

Notes

1. An Islamophobic conspiracy by Hindutva organisations and activists that accuses Muslim men of seducing, enticing, abducting, and marrying Hindu women for conversion to Islam.

2. Formulated by Foucault, biopolitics is a framework that explains how the state mechanisms of power that ideally should administer and foster life, guaranteeing health and productivity of populations is currently pushing them into precarious living situations and conferring upon them the status of 'living-dead' (Foucault 2008).

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Notes on contributor

Debadrita Chakraborty is a Charles Wallace Fellow and an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, UK. Her primary research lies at the intersections of Cultural Theory, Gender and South Asian Literary Studies. She has published articles and essays in the fields of South Asian culture, politics and literature, graphic fiction, gender studies and diaspora studies in reputed journals including *Gender, Work and Organization* and *Wasafiri* and volumes titled *Graphic Novels as World Literature* and *Living Theories and True Ideas in the 21st Century Reflections on Marxism and Decolonization*. She has also published a co-edited volume titled *Right-Wing Politics: Interdisciplinary Reflections on South Asia* and is currently co-editing volumes on Graphic Medicine and Masculine Friendships in South Asia.

ORCID

Debadrita Chakraborty http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2926-0677

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