A friendly neighborhood Hindu: 
Tempering populist rhetoric for the online brand of Narendra Modi

Joyojeet Pal*, Dinsha Mistree**, Tanya Madhani***

* University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, joyojeet@umich.edu
** Stanford Law School, dinsha@law.stanford.edu
*** University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, tmadhani@umich.edu

Abstract: We present a study of Twitter in Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s political messaging, specifically how he communicates Hindutva, a populist notion of society and statecraft based on Hindu values. We considered the traditional construction of populist Hindutva and examined ways in which Modi’s tweets reinforce these constructions or avoid them. We found that Modi underplays explicit polarizing Hindu speech in favor of a broader nationalist discourse, but that he uses messaging strategically around elections to hint at identity politics. We propose that the affordances of social media allow populist politicians the opportunity to enact rhetorical temperance that performs inclusive leadership, while still appeasing their traditional base through multivocal messaging.

Keywords: Keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword

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1. Introduction

Narendra Modi was elected prime minister of India in the general election of May 2014. His party, the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), won an outright majority of seats in Parliament. This win came at the end of a long campaign fought on the streets and online, and resulted in the biggest mandate for any single party in more than three decades of Indian politics. The election outcome has been credited to a range of factors including cadre mobilization, vote-bank consolidation, targeted interest group campaigning, and a strong anti-incumbent wave (Tillin, 2015). During this election new communication strategies centered the campaign message around Modi himself, using outreach through online channels and advertising instead of direct
interaction with mainstream journalists. This strategy however, has arguably been part of Modi’s move toward a better managed narrative, allowing him to avoid antagonistic contact with mainstream journalists, particularly English-language commentators, in the aftermath of the negative news media coverage of his role in the 2002 Gujarat riots (Sardesai, 2015).

As much research has shown, this move to online outreach has signaled a rebranding of Modi away from his past image as a Hindu hardliner to that of a centrist, development-oriented politician (Ruparelia, 2015), a large part of which has been through tweeting aggressively on issues like technology, development and governance (Pal et al., 2016). However, much work has suggested that the street polarizing rhetoric as well as organization of cadres showed most of the patterns of traditional Hindu vote-bank mobilization that has been typical of BJP campaigning (Chhibber & Ostermann, 2014; Jaffrelot, 2015; Mukerji, 2015). In this paper, we examine how Modi and the BJP balanced the polarizing traditional appeal of Hindutva, to a notion of statecraft based on Hindu values, with the projection of modern, secular leadership. To do this we recorded the timing, frequency, and language of tweets on Hindu-related topics between 2009, the start of Modi’s twitter account, and 2015, a year after his election.

In this paper, we demonstrate how Indian political figures such as Modi portray themselves online, where the viewership is relatively younger and more affluent, and the public nature of discourse dictates that mainstream leaders inhibit or mask certain kinds of speech (Bracciale & Martella, 2017). Research and news reports have consistently shown that Modi’s online circles, including the accounts that he follows, comprise a significant proportion of radical Hindu right-wing voices, suggesting that while the leader himself may directly articulate a different voice, Hindutva — which is a form of Hindu nationalism with anti-Muslim tendencies — is still very much part of his online presence (Karnad, 2017; Pal et al., 2016), with the campaign itself seeking out people with pro-Hindu and nationalist sentiments for online volunteer activities (Chadha & Guha, 2016). To this end, we pinpoint a specific time — January 2013, prior to the run-up to the general election — when Modi’s discourse transitioned from overt Hindutva-themed messaging to Hindu-related messaging that is more typically secular, such as festival greetings.

To understand this phenomenon, we use a “dog-whistle politics” lens from political science, which refers to a form of multivocal communication in which a message has an intended meaning and effect on a specific population, but might pass over the heads of those who could be alienated by it (Albertson, 2015). Research has suggested the use of multivocal communication by politicians: Paul Brass (1997) discussed the use of religious symbols in promoting collective violence, whereas in the Indian case, Cherian George (2016) wrote about the BJP’s use of “hate spin” in provoking outrage. Our study is a systematic analysis of multivocal political communication that sheds light on how innuendo and symbolic reference can be part of a politician’s social media repertoire, and more specifically, how this is manifest in the Indian religio-political zeitgeist.
2. Political Context

Despite the fact that India is officially a secular state, politicians and political parties have long used language and symbols to strategically lessen or amplify religious identities for electoral gain (Varshney, 2001). Narendra Modi rose to power appealing to Hindu-nationalist sentiment, standing on a reputation as a lifelong pracharak (community proselytizer) of the BJP’s parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) — a Hindu chauvinist social organization built around the notion of a Hindutva-based nationhood. Modi was installed as the chief minister of the Western Indian state of Gujarat by his party in 2001, and in 2002 the state suffered one of its worst Hindu–Muslim riots, in which more than 3,000 people were killed. Modi was indicted for his role in the riots, and despite his eventual acquittal, he was banned from entering the United States and was restricted from interacting with officials from various world states. He was referred to by various commentators as the “anti-Gandhi” and as a “textbook case of a fascist” (Deb, 2016; Nandy, 2002). The riots defined Modi’s public persona for the next decade, particularly in the elite Indian media as well as the international press (Sardesai, 2015).

His purchase within the Hindu right, however, remained very strong, evidenced by repeated electoral victories in Gujarat and growth as a star campaigner for the BJP throughout the 2000s, known for his fiery rhetoric. He gained the popular moniker Hindu Hriday Samrat, or emperor of Hindu bodies (Jaffrelot, 2016), and frequently began public appearances bearing ceremonial Hindu weaponry such as swords or a bow-and-arrow (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Modi at political rallies in Jalhod, Gujarat, in 2013, and Jagraon, Punjab, in 2014 being presented ceremonial weapons

Well before the national campaign of 2014, Modi had invested in a campaign of strategic communication to broaden his appeal (Kanungo & Farooqui, 2008). Starting in 2007, Modi built a
presence online with narendramodi.in, followed by an Orkut page, and thereafter Facebook and Twitter pages in 2009. By the campaign phase for the 2014 election, Modi had an active presence on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, Google+, and LinkedIn, far outpacing his rivals in terms of online footprint. However, his social media communication differed significantly from his and the BJP’s traditional campaign, underplaying party ideology, to focus instead on his own candidacy (Jaffrelot, 2015) and underplaying social conservatism in favor of a good governance and anti-corruption plank (Kaur, 2015).

While efforts on the ground were aimed at consolidating existing vote banks and carefully mobilizing both urban and rural voters (Heath, 2015; Jaffrelot & Kumar, 2015), online, the party, and specifically Modi, made an effort to extend beyond voters who equate Hindu religion with the BJP, by creating a parallel narrative to the traditional outreach (Pal, 2015).

3. Related Work

3.1. Religion and Political Communication

Since the widespread advent of democratically elected nation-states, political movements have continued to interact with organized religion, though this relationship has existed across a spectrum ranging from being thoroughly integrated, as in theocratic democracies, to neutrality, as with liberal democracies, to antagonism toward any expression of faith, as with some communist states. The ideal of the liberal democracy was driven by the notion of a secularization theory, which through most of the mid-20th century predicted the end of organized religion in politics, in favor of enlightened secularism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The Weberian notion of a Protestant ethic promoted the compatibility of church–state separation with capitalist growth (Trubek, 1972), while other religious beliefs and practices were seen as incompatible with competitive enterprise economies (Geertz, 1956), and by extension, with a Western ethos.

These notions have been challenged by the persistence and polarizing growth of religious positions in electoral politics worldwide (Fox, 2008; Norris & Inglehart, 2011), where political candidates must publicly demonstrate their allegiance to a position on religion, like British or Mughal rulers, or in contemporary cases, such as the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi or Bangladeshi immigrants. The second notion of resistance to outside thoughts closely follows this, where the scriptural Hindu polity of the deity Lord Rama, referred to as Ram Rajya, is held up as an ideal for governance. This notion also centers credit for scientific and cultural advances onto traditional Hindu or Vedic (Hindu scriptures) thought. The third notion of Hinduness incorporates other religions with South Asian roots (Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism) into the umbrella of Hinduism, constructing a “central high culture” derived from philosophies with origins in the subcontinent. The final traditionalist notion of Hindutva proposes that national glory eventually requires reverting to India’s Hindu roots, as expressed in the philosophical propositions of Swami Vivekananda, an important ideological figure for the right (Schlensog,
2007), and Vinayak Savarkar, a colonial-period freedom fighter and original proponent of the Hindutva. While these were successfully in election outreach during the early waves of Hindutva-based campaigning, many of the underlying notions are antithetical to an idea of a diverse India and present challenges for leaders positioning themselves as inclusive global figures.

3.4. Hinduism and Social Media

On social media the practice of religion, and in particular the rituals of religious faith, are performative in that they are addressed to human participants (Grimes, 1995; Scheifinger, 2012). Thus, the community and practice of faith are necessarily interconnected. Public-facing elements of social media have provided a space to stage one’s piety rather than engage in dialogue (Howard, 2011). For digital and new media, specifically, religion and its philosophies need not be forthright or obvious at first glance but rather are veiled by subtlety in language and iconography. This notion, referred to as “banal religion,” relates to what seems like an inconsequential aspect of media, symbolizing religion, and thereby eliciting cognition, emotion, or action by its recipient (Hjarvard, 2011). Social media, with affordances for messaging and reacting to messages such as likes, retweets, and forwards, provide a staging ground where banal religion, casual festive greetings, and references to values can be decoupled from claims of polarizing religious exceptionalism.

The multivalence of Hinduism, together with its lack of unified practices, has made it harder to carve a unified narrative online, in much the same way that Hindu identity politics has been hard to capture in the political sphere. Early work on Hindu practice online suggested it was distinct from Hindu practice offline in its focus on describing the faith, providing interpretations, and explaining ritual, rather than providing a means for the affiliation of adherents (Scheifinger, 2012). More recent work, particularly on the use of WhatsApp, suggests that social media have indeed become a means of affiliative practice, including actions such as forwarding messages with pictures of Hindu gods, sending group greetings for festivals, and sending daily messages with Hindu parables (Venkatraman, 2017). These practices parallel “likes” for imagery or texts on Facebook and Twitter, creating a public visual culture of religious affiliation.

The community aspect of Hindu faith has long had political undertones. Some of the earliest Hindu-related coalescing online was in the diaspora and had loose RSS roots (Lal, 1999; Rai, 1995). Even though its leadership (which through much of the 1990s was dominated by octogenarians) was muted online, the BJP was an early leader in building a following online because of the Hindu community online (Rajagopal, 2000). This community helped to (1) create markers of affiliation, such as the use of “Bharat” to refer to India or “Sanatana Dharma” to refer to Hindu practice (Brosius, 2004); (2) promote a notion of Hinduism as timeless, pluralistic, and victimized by invaders and aggressive proselytization (Gittinger, 2008); (3) raise opposition to cow slaughter and interreligious marriage as being issues of Hindu concern (HJS, 2014); (4) highlight contributions of key RSS ideologues such as neo-Vedantic preacher Swami
Vivekananda (Mathew & Prashad, 2000) and freedom-fighter Savarkar (Therwath, 2012); and (5) highlight diasporic enlightened global citizenry as aligned with fundamental Hindu values that stand for modernity and individual achievement (Chopra, 2006). By the time Modi started tweeting, there was already a language and markers for identity politics that enabled polarizing politics to be played out in nudges rather than shouts.

4. Methodology

We used systematic coding methods to arrive at the thematic descriptions for Modi’s tweets, following which we conducted a deeper analysis of individual tweets.

4.1. Coding Methodology

We coded 9,040 tweets from the Twitter handle @narendramodi from Feb. 2, 2009, the first tweets from the account, up to Oct. 2, 2015. We hand-coded each tweet with up to four subjective themes and an additional regional code if the tweet pertained to a specific geographic region. Two primary coders and one arbitrator, each of whom had expertise in identifying and coding cultural, religious, and political references in India, coded all tweets. The initial coding scheme was freely generated from a sample of 100 tweets, each separately open-coded by the three coders.

To create our final analysis dataset, we used the arbitrator’s judgment for the final coding of each tweet. We chose not to use intercoder reliability techniques such as Cohen’s kappa (Cohen, 1968) because these are not valuable for multi-label coding. To establish the quality and reliability of the coding, we initially asked the two primary coders to label 994 of the 9,040 tweets. The average percentage of agreement for all 994 tweets was 0.58, with 84.5% of the tweets having at least one theme in common and 43.9% tweets having at least two themes in common, suggesting high inter-coder reliability.

At the end of the coding process for the entire dataset, we had a total of 129 themes. We identified eight themes for individual religions — Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism. In addition, we identified six other themes that were relevant to social-conservative political issues for the Hindu right in India. These included four themes that were structurally relevant to Hinduism and topically related (caste, Dalit, tribals, spirituality) and two themes that were politically related (Hindutva and Vivekananda). While Hindutva tweets were directly political or relating to a political figure, tweets themed for Swami Vivekananda were largely his quotes.

Most of our analysis was discursive, and the use of statistical analysis was restricted to descriptive statistics of the instances of Hindu-related themes. We used in-depth qualitative coding by experts instead of a sentiment analysis, to capture more nuanced information about how the messages were crafted and what they might signal to consumers of the tweets. For instance, one set of tweets has the characteristic of praising the normative underpinnings of
Hindu society. In Figure 2, from April 2011, the tweet is explicit in promoting a vision of society using the notion of Ram Rajya, the term used to describe the rule of the Hindu deity Lord Rama. The April 2012 tweet in Figure 3 is not a call to action in the same terms but is still a very specific callout to upper-caste Hindu tradition. Tweets also signaled personal piety or affiliation with Hindu figures or spaces, such as tweets in Figures 4 and 5.

Figure 2: Tweet proposes governance based on “Ram Rajya”

Figure 3: Tweet references Hindu tradition at a caste gathering

Figure 4: Tweet signals affiliation with a Hindu religious leader
4.2. Tweet Classification

The religion-related tweets included any mention of a topic specifically pertaining to one or another religious sect. The eight world religions represented in the tweeting of Modi are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Examples of Tweets by Religion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Sample Tweet Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Some glimpses from Mahabodhi Temple. Feeling very blessed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>My speech at the function to celebrate the elevation to Sainthood of Kuriakose Elias Chavara and Mother Euphrasia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>I consider myself blessed to have closely interacted with Pujya Pramukh Swami Maharaj for years. He has deeply inspired me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Sufism is an integral part of India's ethos &amp; has greatly contributed to creation of a pluralistic, multi-cultural society in India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judaism</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>A picture of my meeting with Jewish leaders in New York City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jainism</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Samvatsari greetings. May this day further the spirit of harmony in society. Michhami Dukkadam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhism</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>The life &amp; ideals of Guru Gobind Singh ji inspire eternally. He epitomised ultimate courage &amp; a spirit of sacrifice. I bow to him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoroastrianism</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Navroz Mubarak to my Parsi sisters &amp; brothers. Praying for a wonderful year ahead, filled with joy and good health</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the broader set of Hindu-related topics, we explain inclusion criteria as these require an understanding of Indian social and cultural issues for thematic categorization. The categories are as follows:

- **Caste (12)** — Reference to the Hindu caste system, a specific caste population or the notion of casteism. An example tweet: “Attended a gathering of the Patidar Samaj at Sidsar. Sharing a video.” Here, Patidar Samaj is a specific caste category.

- **Dalit (6)** — Reference to the Dalit population or figures central to the Dalit movement. An example tweet: “3 members of 1 family got Bharat Ratna quickly but no Congress Govt. thought of Bharat Ratna for Babasaheb Ambedkar. This speaks volumes.” Here, Ambedkar is a key figure for Dalit rights.

- **Hindutva (42)** — Any reference to figures associated with the Hindutva ideology of a society and polity based on Hindu values. An example tweet: “Launched 2 albums of poems by Veer Savarkar, which were written by him on walls of his jail cell in Andaman & Nicobar.” Here, Savarkar is a key to the ideologue of Hindutva.

- **Spirituality (74)** — Any reference to spirituality or quasi-religious figures outside. An example tweet: “Met Mata Amritanandamayi Devi. She showed keen interest in Namami Gange initiative.” This refers to Mata Amritanandamayi, the spiritual guru.

- **Tribals (40)** — Any reference to indigenous communities or persons, including scheduled tribes. An example tweet: “Maganbhai Ninama, a Class IV Karma Yogi in Secretariat belonging to Adivasi community inaugurated Swarnim Sankul 2.” Here, the term Adivasi, referring to tribal peoples, is used.

- **Vivekananda (365)** — Any reference to nationalist spiritual leader Swami Vivekananda or events/initiatives in his honor. An example tweet: “A few heart-whole, sincere, and energetic men and women can do more in a year than a mob in a century.” This is a quote from Vivekananda.

### 5. Results

In all, about 3.8% of all tweets were specifically about Hinduism, 5.7% were about any religion, and 8.5% were Hindu-related, including themes such as tribal peoples, spirituality, Hindutva, Vivekananda, caste, and Dalit.

#### 5.1. Timing and Frequency of Hindu-related Tweets

In Figure 6, we compared the frequency of Hindu-related themes versus general religion themes in the tweets. Both categories include the Hinduism theme; religion-themed tweets include all those from Table 1. We see in the timeline that early in Modi’s tweeting, a far higher proportion of his tweets were Hindu-related but that after 2013 this proportion consistently remained in single digits. Between August 2012 and December 2012, the Hindu-themed tweets represented a consistently high share of the total tweets. An explanation for this is the timing of these tweets.
during the peak campaign period of the December 2012 Gujarat election. At the time, Modi was standing for state election, and in Gujarat he was already well-established as a far-right politician, and the state had only voted for right-wing governments at state and national levels for over two decades. Narendra Modi won the 2012 state election in Gujarat single-handily.

![Figure 6: Peak times of Hindu- and religion-related tweets](image)

Figure 6: Peak times of Hindu- and religion-related tweets

However, we see that Hindu-related tweets dropped in the period after December 2012. This move away from potentially polarizing topics that appeal to the base, coincided with the campaign period for the 2014 general election, which Modi fought nationally among a much more diverse voting population. At the time of this transition in messaging, Modi had not been identified as the BJP’s candidate for prime minister. The rise of Hindu-themed tweets in 2012 was related in part to Modi’s extensive use of quotes by Swami Vivekananda and his naming of an initiative after him.

5.2. Content of Religion-themed Tweets

Festival greetings can be considered a relatively secular, non-polarizing form of engagement with religious content (Brass, 2006), or what has been called banal religion (Hjarvard, 2011). We found that the incidence of festival greetings was higher for the smaller religions in numerical terms (Jainism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism), whereas for Buddhism and Sikhism there was a much higher likelihood of the tweets having non-festival themes, as we see in Table 2. Tweets themed for Sikhism had a higher probability of having political themes, and tweets themed for Buddhism had a much higher incidence than other tweets of relating to foreign affairs, history, and tourism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religions</th>
<th>Percentage of coded (sub-group within “Religions”)</th>
<th>Percentage of coded (sub-group within “Religions”) with</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoga</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jainism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judaism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoroastrian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tweets in the entire sample</td>
<td>“Festival”-coded messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>9.4%***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>50.0%***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>49.0%***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>34.0%**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jainism</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>81.8%***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judaism</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>83.3%***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhism</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>9.7%***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoroastrianism</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>100%***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** Chi-squared test comparing festival-theme intersection with general tweet sample, significant at the .01 level

5.3. Multivocal Messaging: The Articulation of Hindu Affiliation in Tweets

We now examine the articulation of Hindu-related content in Modi’s tweeting through the four Hindutva tenets from Hansen’s work.

5.3.1. Nationalism as a Construction of ‘We’

Modi’s tweets in this sample surrounding the integration of a collective “we” among Hindus did not project an outright disdain for Muslims or any other religious group, but rather centered on the fervent promotion of Hinduism and spirituality as major components of nation-building and progress. On Sept. 30, 2010, Modi hailed a court decision, that vindicated the Hindu nationalist movement, to destroy the Ayodhya mosque and replace it with a Hindu temple (Figure 7).
This tweet, explicitly celebrating the victory of the Hindu nationalist perspective, refers to the mythological figure of Ram, the hero of the Ramayana, as a “mahapurush” (great man) of “Bharat” the mythological name and preferred terminology for “India.” We see the specific language as demonstrating Hindutva identity. Moreover, the reference to “Ram Janmabhoomi” (birthplace of Ram) as vital to “national unity” also signals polarization — the term directly refers to a Hindutva position that is antithetical to Muslims because it alludes to the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque. The Ayodhya issue, however, was not raised after 2012 in Modi’s tweets.

In Figure 8 we see an example of a quote from Swami Vivekananda referencing the Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu religious and philosophical text. The tweet outlines the Hindu notion of Dharma and attempts to construct it as a pan-Indian subscription by insinuating that those who follow the Gita and its teachings “feed the national life.” The quote interestingly omits a fragment of the original text, which reads “feed the national life without looking for results” and has a relatively secular tone. Without this portion of the quote, the tweet sends a stronger message about the importance of religion in nation-building.
In these tweets from the pre-national era in Modi’s politics we see the use of explicit Hindu symbols, but their presentation has pan-Indian values. The “we” in these cases is by extension those who share the same views as these figures. We also see more combative stances toward Muslims. In Figure 9, Modi refers to the state of Assam as being invaded by Bangladeshi Muslims. He inverted the concept of “we” and attributed the government’s position as one of foreigners (Muslims) run by foreigners (Sonia Gandhi, who has Catholic Italian ancestry) and for foreigners (in this case for Bangladeshis, and beneficiaries of foreign direct investment, or FDI).

![ Modi tweet Sept. 21, 2012](image)

5.3.2. Resistance to Western Thoughts and Figures

Figure 9 is at once a means of othering Muslims and attacking foreign direct investment. Resistance to concepts from the West has traditionally been a tricky point for the BJP because the party tends to have pro-market economic positions. An example of this irony is seen in an early Modi Facebook post from 2011 (Figure 10).

![ Modi post via Facebook on Nov. 28, 2011](image)

Modi’s separation of modernization from Westernization in his claim of economic and industrial modernity, a pillar of Modi’s plank, was not incompatible with his social positions on the West. The use of indigenous knowledge and philosophy in Modi’s tweeting generally frames Indian traditional thought as superior, without explicitly calling the West culturally inferior. The term’s co-presence with the call against Westernization indicates the leader’s willingness to embrace the language of Westernization without diluting his values. A more direct example is a
tweet from 2013 in which he offered a direct shout-out to a spiritual sect, the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), but at the same time took a larger Hindu chauvinistic position proposing an evangelical propagation of Hindu spiritual beliefs for *Vishwa Kalyan* (salvation for the world). See Figure 11.

![Modi tweet Jan. 6, 2013](image)

Modi also referred to Hindu saints as foundational to the nation in a later tweet (Figure 12). In this tweet, Modi asked his audience to view national progress in the same light as they would a deity and insinuated that it was necessary to “continue their work” in order to preserve their vision and please the saints. Modi used “Bharat Mata” in place of “India” and suggested that saints from “our” traditions and culture are instrumental to the nation’s progress. The call for “upholding the identity” celebrates the Hindu right’s traditional refrain of equating Indian national culture as rooted in Hinduism but, more importantly, as something that needs to be upheld, and thus continued. Modi refers to an abstract notion of the world/West rather than speaking to any specific community. His tone suggests that India’s spiritual superiority offers a means for repairing the corresponding missing spirituality elsewhere.
5.3.3. Hinduness as an Umbrella for Religions

Modi’s tweets about both Buddhism and Sikhism promoted a notion of union with Hindu philosophy. While the tweets on Buddhism were ostensibly outward-facing (in that the Buddhist population in India is not a significant vote bank based on religious issues, except where also Dalit), the tweets on Sikhism were more directly political. As we see in Table 2, less than 10% of the Sikhism-themed tweets were explicitly about Sikh festivals and were instead on a range of political and religious issues, which suggests a deeper engagement with the Sikh community than cursory festival greetings (Figure 13).

In March 2015, after Modi became prime minister, he verbalized a Sikh religious incantation, but this appeared with Modi in a head-covering outside the Golden Temple, suggesting his embrace of the Sikh faith. Modi later made several specific callouts to figures central to Sikhism, including key gurus, and hailed their contributions to Indian society (Twitter, June 19, 2015). Similarly, Modi expressed support of a Hindu high culture in a tweet on May 18, 2012 (Figure 14), in which he proposed a “Vishnu circuit” along with the traditional “Buddhist tourism circuit” for Thai pilgrims visiting his home state of Gujarat.
Here, he referred to Vishnu, an icon in syncretic Buddhist beliefs but central to Hindu religious practice. Most Buddhist-themed tweets in his feed are not about festivals, but are in the context of building or continuing strong bonds between Buddhists and Hindus. Modi was also strategic in using Buddhism as a foreign affairs bridge with neighboring Asian nations, an example of which was a dialogue with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, which Modi referred to on Twitter in 2014 (Figure 15).

In general, Modi has avoided similar handshakes with either Christianity or Islam. The exception in discussing Islam is in Modi’s use of what are increasingly considered marginalized populations within mainstream Islam, for example Dawoodi Bohras, who he has been known to call out as supporters during his speeches, and Sufis, the mystical branch of Muslims who
practice devotional elements that resemble Hindu practices (Beck, 1998). Modi released a string of tweets about his meeting with delegates promoting Sufi music, a genre that is deeply rooted in Islam the same way Ayurveda and yoga are rooted in Hinduism. As we see in Figure 16, the Islamic devotional aspects of Sufism are not central to the messaging, but the cultural intersection is.

Figure 16: Modi tweet Aug. 27, 2015

5.3.4. Traditionalist Notions of Hinduism

Modi perpetuates the idea of Hindu traditionalism and its benefits to Indian society by directly correlating progress with living a life that incorporates elements from ancient Hindu scripture. In tweets, he references Vedic traditions that he positions as vital to the progression of Indian society. In Figure 17, a tweet from Modi in 2009 references Ashok Singhal, the head of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP; World Hindu Organization), which was at the forefront of the Babri mosque demolition, and calls out Sanskrit, the classical language historically taught to upper-caste Hindus, as a national treasure. While there is little doubt about the cultural importance of the Sanskrit language, calling out its centrality to Indian culture is a common Hindutva trope.

Figure 17: Modi tweet April 26, 2009

In the same vein, Modi elevates a push for worldwide recognition of Ayurveda (Figure 18), a form of Indian traditional herbal medicine, and after becoming prime minister he announced an International Yoga Day. These tweets tied into a broader sentiment around the appropriation of Vedic practices such as Ayurveda and yoga by other parts of the world without due credit.
In Figure 19, we see an expression more often associated with a Vedic exceptionalism. *Aapano Vedic Vaarso*, translating roughly to “Our Vedic Verses,” draws connections between Hindu (Vedic) text and solutions to terrorism and global warming. This tweet was part of a larger body of work on Vedic science, which proposes that ancient Indian scriptures have solutions or prescriptions for a range of social problems, including aerial flight and plastic surgery (Schlich, 1995).

The underlying thread in these traditionalist views is proposing the centrality of Vedic knowledge in Indian ethos. While this knowledge is undoubtedly an important part of Indian culture, Vedic scriptures and the associated bodies of knowledge were both exclusionary and at the heart of the systems that privileged upper-caste Hindus. Such calls thus continue to inordinately appeal to a Hindu conservative right.

6. Discussion

The four core values in the traditional Hindu nationalist movement — nationalism as a construction of “we,” resistance to Western thoughts and figures, Hinduness as an umbrella for religions, and traditional notions of Hinduism — revolve around the notion of nation-building in a post-colonial climate and, therefore, make efforts to paint Hindus as victims. This attitude prevailed through the 2000s, as Modi first rose to national power as chief minister of Gujarat (Mehta, 2010). Hindu nationalists sought sympathy and strength by building a community that found solidarity in adopting philosophies from Hinduism to guide political action, by framing
the religion as a driver of innovation and of India’s cultural advantage over the West and its superiority over other religions like Islam (Nanda, 2003).

Modi does not target a specific group or portray an enemy against Hindus; his language on Twitter is collectively engrossed in and supportive of these Hindu ideas and symbols, thereby constructing a “we” group — Hindus — and showcasing his lack of acknowledgment of those who oppose the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and do not follow the Gita. Similarly, Modi conveys the traditional Hindu nationalist idea of opposing the West by propping up Hinduism’s influence on Indian progress, as demonstrated by his tendency to challenge those who doubt the power of that influence — in tweets referring to “saints” who have paved the way for modern India.

Modi’s closest adherence to traditional Hindu nationalist movements’ and organizations’ core values, however, is in his consistent use of Hinduism as an umbrella for other religions like Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Historically, the Hindutva movement has attempted to garner support and sympathy from a larger population by painting Hindu suppression as similar to that of the other religions as well. Modi, while not actively portraying Hindus and followers of these other religions as victims, highlights a close relationship among them when he references them in his tweets. His use of Sikhism in more politically charged tweets rather than simple festival references, as he makes for Jainism and Buddhism, is significant because it demonstrates his attempts to forge a kinship with a religion that has strived to carve out a distinct identity apart from Hinduism, by expressing solidarity and support on a less frivolous level.

Twitter’s ambiguity, abbreviation, and accessibility work in Modi’s favor when he doles out his political messages and thoughts to his audience. Religiosity on Twitter does not follow hard and fast rules; there is no proper etiquette in expressing devotion or championing spirituality in online spaces because language online is not policed. However, Modi optimizes this online freedom using carefully calculated tweets. In his attempts to maintain a delicate balance among his various personas, Modi’s use of Twitter is measured and careful, and it derives advantage from platform features that restrict dialogue. His success in navigating his Twitter persona while appealing to his audience has allowed him to maintain support and popularity.

Modi’s tweeting does not have the abrasive polarization of politicians like Donald Trump or Geert Wilders who resort to open insult and mockery of constituents that their campaigns plan to other. Even in his pre-2014 tweets, Modi used common verbiage that both his followers and detractors could read for their intent but that were not written in overtly aggressive language. In this, they were clearly polarizing and only mildly dog-whistling because all sides knew what the tweets meant.

However, the post-2014 Modi is more interesting for his multivocality. In our sample of tweets, Modi’s language and style toward political rebranding underplayed Hindutva, turning instead to Hindu greetings, messages about places or artifacts of Hindu interest, and mentions of nationalist figures including Deendayal Upadhyaya, Shyamaprasad Mukherji, and Sardar Patel,
who may or may not explicitly fit the RSS mold but were nonetheless seen as antagonistic to the first Prime Minister Nehru, who had a view of a pluralistic, secular India. By avoiding direct RSS figures, who would be more polarizing, but by continuing to refer to these figures, Modi offers dog-whistle-style Hindutva references.

During this same period, he tweeted extensively on “good governance” (Ruparelia, 2015) and promoted a form of high-tech populism by using technology buzzwords and aspirational language to align his political message with an ethic of modernity (Jaffrelot, 2013; Shah, 2011). With the changing themes, the tone of content also changed, and a softer, wiser leader using feel-good slogans (Kaur, 2015) and positive social media messaging emerged through well-crafted tweets (Pal, 2015). These contrasted with the picture of the regional strongman that dominated Modi’s news coverage. These not only ran contrary to the idea of a Hindutva leader, they indeed gave supporters the ability to claim that this was a different Modi.

The message from the leader, however, is often at odds with the public who consume it. Research and news reports have consistently shown that Modi’s online circles, including the accounts that he follows, include a large proportion of radical Hindu right-wing voices, suggesting that while the leader himself may directly articulate a different voice, Hindutva is still very much part of his online presence (Karnad, 2017; Pal et al., 2016), with the campaign itself seeking out people with pro-Hindu and nationalist sentiments for online volunteer activities (Chadha & Guha, 2016).

Modi continues to perpetuate the notion that Hinduism’s history is rooted in innovation; his tweets consistently attempt to inform policy and lifestyle with evidence of his own spirituality and religiosity. Traditional Hindu nationalist electoral strategy has employed the construction of an us-versus-them narrative. Modi has arguably found success in conveying the same sentiments without resorting to overt polarizing aggressiveness, particularly in the run up to the 2014 campaign and thereafter. Such an approach would have alienated that segment of the electorate that does not traditionally vote on Hindutva, but also offered a poor picture of the right’s ability to present an acceptable global leader. While the pre-2012 Modi wrote several tweets that acted as thinly veiled sectarian appeals, the untrained ear would have to listen hard for the dog whistles. That action has moved to a layer of effective labor from armies of online supporters who speak the old language of Hindutva, and aggressively troll his detractors (Sardesai, 2015).

Modi balances incorporating characteristics of Hindu nationalism with maintaining his professionalism and appeal on Twitter; this balance is enabled by Twitter’s character count limitation, which does not allow him to clarify his statements. Unlike in speeches, Modi does not have to fully explain his meaning on Twitter, which leaves his thoughts subject to multivocal interpretation by the public and the mainstream news media, whose only contact with him is through Twitter. Modi realizes full well that his online platform is a key source for the news media and audiences; he strictly limits his contact with the press, and his Twitter, therefore, constructs what most people see as the closest truth to his behavior, policies, and thoughts rather
than that of the news reporters, who do not have access to him. To this end, Modi’s actions on Twitter — the rate of his tweets and the subjects he tweets about — are closely monitored and deliberately ambiguous to allow individuals from liberal, moderate, and right-wing ideologies, as well as the press, to construct interpretations of his messages as they see fit.

7. Conclusion

We archived all of Modi’s tweets during this period, and we provide the first methodical analysis of an Indian politician’s campaign communiqués on his self-described preferred form of public outreach. Not surprisingly, when Modi positioned himself to run in the 2014 general election, his tweets no longer backed Hindutva with the same resonance. Nonetheless, Hindutva supporters recognized several positive signals that would probably go unnoticed by the broader national electoral constituency.

Analyzing the online language of leaders who polarize their vote-bases will become increasingly important to understanding how they maintain their popularity among voters with different ideologies and lend weight to their own party’s core messages. While the tenets of Hindu nationalism project a contentious viewpoint and often rely on singling out an enemy group — such as the West or Islam — their influence on Modi is apparent in his tweets. Hindu nationalist movements and right-wing parties like the BJP have used their four core tenets — nationalism as a construction of “we,” resistance to Western thoughts and figures, Hinduness as an umbrella for religions, and traditional notions of Hinduism — to emphasize the necessity of national unity and strength in post-colonial India. However, this vision is exclusive to Hindus with the motivation to form a higher culture comprising religions that right-wing nationalist parties deem fitting to their idea. As the BJP grew in popularity, first winning control of the national government in 1996, and eventually winning a political majority in the 2014 election under the leadership of Narendra Modi, the party’s dedication to these tenets remained steadfast. But, given the now vast national and global attention Modi has received, he cannot explicitly express his nationalistic allegiance to Hinduism without alienating his moderate voter base. Conversely, he cannot simply ignore his core group of conservative supporters by neglecting Hindu nationalistic messages. It is here that social media offer their most valuable affordances to politicians, like Modi, who need to negotiate the benefits they receive from polarization with the value of keeping up the right appearances.

References


**About the Authors**

**Joyojeet Pal**

Joyojeet Pal is an Associate Professor at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. His research focuses on the use of social media by political actors in various parts of the Global South. He holds a PhD in City and Regional Planning from the University of California at Berkeley.

**Dinsha Mistree**

Dinsha Mistree is a Research Fellow and Lecturer in the Rule of Law Program at Stanford University. His research focuses on governance and the political economy of development. He holds a PhD in Politics from Princeton University.

**Tanya Madhani**

Tanya Madhani is a Business Analyst at Domino’s Pizza Inc. in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Her work focuses on data warehousing, information management, and UX/UI research and design. She graduated with a B.S. in Information from the University of Michigan.