

Media and ICT Systems, Globalisation, Militarism and Fundamentalisms

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The ICT systems, seen as a global 'open space' for information, have been a driving force for globalisation. Do these technologies promote global integration or segregation? Can they be used to advocate peace or militarism? Two aspects of their origins should be remembered. First, they were essentially funded by the U.S. government as part of military technology; and second, they were meant to be the cutting-edge precursor and reason for neo-liberal globalisation that dissolves national barriers for the free flow of finance, technology and information.

In fact, one of Mikhael Gorbachev's reasons for *glasnost* and restructuring was the fear of being cut off from new ICT systems. It was thus after the Soviet collapse that the ICT systems took on their more 'open and global' force (penetration, as they call it in the industry) and ushered in what the Americans call a unipolar world that has re-enforced militarisation, patriarchy and fundamentalism.

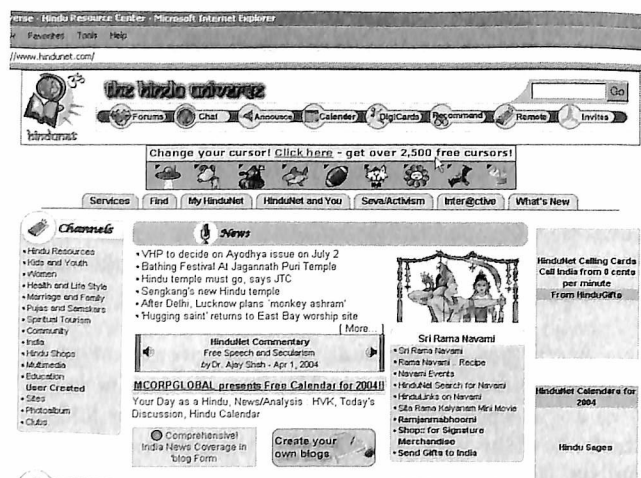
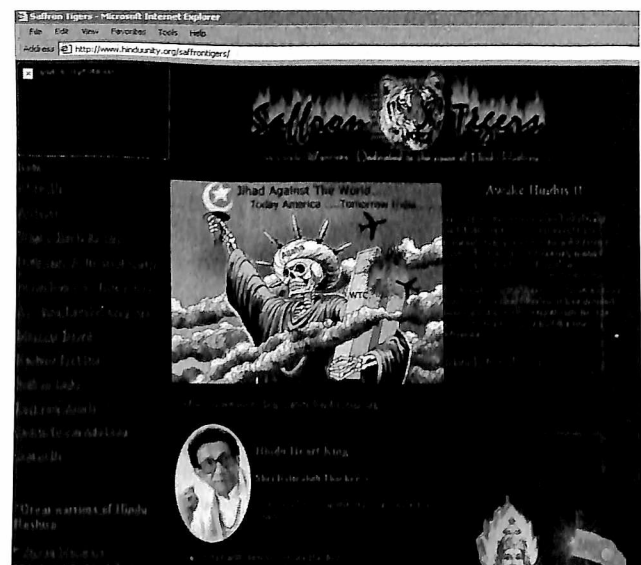
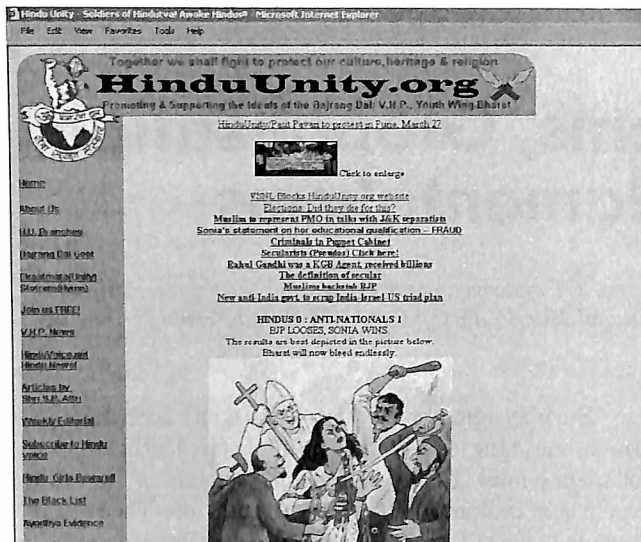
While many of us are delighted by being able to develop alternate networks through e-mail and the Internet, the largest users of the ICT systems continue to be military and surveillance groups now being increasingly privatised such as the San Diego-based Science Applications International Corporation, which occupies the 294th slot in the Fortune 500 list of largest companies. This dot com company works primarily on surveillance for U.S. spy agencies.¹ It collects information by monitoring phone calls, e-mail and any electronic communication. Its programme Tera Text processes two billion documents every four seconds by identifying patterns and connections between names, terms and ideas. This is a classic example of the convergence of media, telecom and computing in enhancing corporate power, demonstrated by the controls of the financial markets.

Such systems are replicated in many countries. In India, one of the leaders in ICTs, most of us get three types of spam e-mail. The first is entitled something like "Are you a true Indian?" or "Traitors of India," etc. The second type is generally a sex/porn site-related message or advertisement for Viagra, etc. The third is a commercial. This is neither coincidental nor unrelated. It is in keeping with the dominant ideological onslaught of our times that reflect the intersecting ideologies of globalisation, militarisation, fundamentalism and patriarchy.

"Media and ICT" has special meaning for fundamentalist groups—they want to go back to 'tradition' but want to use the latest technology to do so. In India, Hindu nationalist groups that comprise the Sangh Parivar²—the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal, Durga Vahini, and the Bhartiya Janta Party at the helm of the outgoing ruling coalition³—use ICT and media at various levels.

Chauvinist nationalism is premised on the idea of an Indian nation identified primarily with the majority Hindu religious community. The Sangh family has at its base the ideology of Hindutva, which uses aspects of the Hinduism to collapse religion and culture as primary to a Hindu identity and nation or Hindutva. The Sangh family wants to carry out this project of homogenisation by 'liberating brethren' from their cultural enslavement and using militant force for their cause. The Internet is increasingly used by the Sangh Parivar affiliates to propagate its message that used to be given in their traditional early morning *shakas*. *Shakas* are branches organised at the grassroots level where training of cultural nationalism is given to cadres.

At the topmost (national) level, the coverage of party issues by public and private TV networks and newspapers are assessed daily at the RSS headquarters and at the home of the senior minister. Per the narration of journalists, the group calls key players to influence the stories. It cultivates "friendship" with some journalists who then become privy to important stories and receive news



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'leaks.' Throughout, there is an attempt to keep these relationships subtle.

The mass organisations of the Sangh Parivar, especially the more militant wings like the Bajrang Dal, the Shiv Sena and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, run a large number of special websites where the main theme is the construction of a Hindutva nation. Cadres committed to Hindutva send out mass e-mail. These websites and messages generally contain:

- (1) a picture of India with either Hindu religious sites or symbols;
- (2) press clippings on Muslims' involvement in violence against Hindus and Christians' conversion to Hinduism;
- (3) threats to known secular figures who oppose Hindutva policies;
- (4) glorification of the Army; and
- (5) messages about women in Hindutva.

Websites and mass Cyber-messaging from Hindutva e-groups like hinduunity.org, saffrontigers.org or hindunet.org systematically put out stories that highlight the Indian Muslims and the Christians as the 'other.' These minorities are linked to religions and cultures alien to Hindutva Hindu culture and therefore anti-Hindu and anti-national.⁴ Veer Savarkar and M.S. Golwalker, revered as the progenitors of the RSS ideas of Hindutva, believe only those who regard India as both their *pitribhu* (fatherland) and *punyabhū* (holy land) can be Hindus.⁵ All others are thus excluded from citizenship. All other religious groups are viewed as outsiders that came to India to "rob and plunder."⁶ A theory of citizenship is thus created on the Net. With this, the large Indian diaspora can regain identity and contribute to this virtual and chauvinist nationalism via the Net.

A number of websites are run by non-resident Indians (NRIs) in North America. These websites argue that although conversions were forcibly carried out, the "converts" remained loyal to foreign religions and nations. The Indian Muslims are special targets because of the country's long-standing dispute with Pakistan, considered India's main 'enemy' in public consciousness. The Sangh Parivar repeatedly stresses that Muslims were responsible for the past excesses of Mughal feudal rulers that destroyed Hindu temples and violated Hindu women in order to destroy Hindu culture.

In their militant cultural essentialism, the Sangh Parivar not only targets the 'other' but also homogenises the 'majority' community itself. For example, the movement clusters distinct religions like Jainism, Buddhism

The aggregate effect of such communalism, however high-tech, is to encourage discrimination and fear based on an imagined threat. Right wing forces in civil society have to be fought by progressive forces within civil society.

and Sikhism as mere offshoots of Hinduism. The purpose is to homogenise the divided and plural Hindu traditions, assimilating or marginalising the minor and multiple traditions into a false version called Hindutva that never existed at any time in history. The Sangh Parivar keeps such tensions rife, especially as an electoral strategy to mobilise and 'unify' the caste- and class-divided Hindu community, which they believe can become cohesive only when confronted by an enemy nation with internal linkages.

The gender policies and implications of the Hindutva construction that intersect with ideas of a militant Hindutva are evident. Since selected aspects of traditional Hinduism are integrated with modern political needs, the Hindutva ideology re-enforces patriarchal Hindu practices. For instance, the Sangh Parivar argues that although Hindu women were 'pure,' 'evil practices' came into Hinduism when the 'foreign invaders' came.⁷ With this, Hindu women were forced to use the *pardah* (veil). It is in this context that the Sangh Parivar constantly warns against 'Muslim virility' as opposed to Hindu cowardice.

Veer Savarkar, founder of the RSS, described India as "the super-strong Aryan motherland" that is guarded by the Hindu god Shanker with his trident, and asked "exhorted young patriots to develop their manliness and keep their fervour at the highest pitch."⁸ The mother cult is now repeated in BJP pamphlets and websites, [similarly] the arguments of leaders like L.K. Advani's that the advance of this mother-cult-based nationalism is the only way to advance the Indian nation is echoed in all the websites.⁹ The Sangh Parivar argues that it 'honours' women and gives them equality. Such homogenisation of women and portraying them as the primary carriers of a culture that valorises militarist Hindu nationalism cast

both genders in traditional roles: the men are the protectors and the women, the reproducers and nurturers of the family and the nation who should be honoured. Those who challenge such roles and even dare to marry outside the religion are victims of attack now waged by e-mail stalkers.

The statements of Sangh Parivar leaders, ideologues and cadres reflect the basic tenets of the Sangh philosophy of cultural nationalism, militarism and masculinity. The other part of this theory can be explained in Savarkar's words: "Our real national regeneration should start with the moulding of man, instilling in him the strength to overcome human frailties and stand him up as a real symbol of Hindu manhood."¹⁰ Underlying these tasks is the message of a re-assertion of Hindu manhood, which is constantly present in documents, speeches and web messages. For instance, RSS writers argue that the dormant Hindu man needs to be awakened: "The lion of a man who has been caged for centuries has become oblivious of his own manhood."¹¹

The official website of the Bajrang Dal calls upon the five-lakh cadres and other "warriors of the Hindutva revolution" to protect Hinduism against its historic enemies.¹² To counter this constructed enemy threat, volunteers at Bajrang Dal camps are given training in firearms, martial arts and wielding the knife. The websites are full of pictures of these camps in Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Maharashtra, with invitations to join the training. The purpose of these, as one trainee put it on the Bajrang Dal website, is "to beat those who do not respect Hinduism."

The consequence of such propaganda and training camps on Muslims and Christians in Gujarat has already been clear. The mobilisation of communities along communal lines led to genocide of the minority community, as we witnessed in Gujarat where besides the 2,000 killed and property of the minority community destroyed, women became targets of gendered violence. The violence against women was an attempt to humiliate the entire minority community since women signify the 'honour' or *izzat* of the community as a whole.

Virtual and Real Militia?

Cultural essentialism as evident in cultural nationalism severely affects women. Women become easy victims of the conflict. Women activists report widespread and extreme forms of sexual and gendered violence against women and young girls.¹³ The rampaging crowds were told not to spare the women. The use of the myth and reality of rape is an old wartime tactic. It is the oldest method of

dehumanising the object. The enemy would be best hurt if 'their women' were dishonoured through bodily abuse. All these were steps for a militarised Hindutva.

The gendered carnage was in step with long years of planning and propagation of Sangh ideology. The Sangh outfits have long used Gujarat as a test case for a Hindutva agenda and concentrated in the region. In 1998, the same forces attacked Christian missionaries and nuns. Before and during the conflict, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad openly distributed venomous leaflets that called for economic and social boycotts of Muslims. Gender tension was an underlying theme in almost all pamphlets, whether they addressed commerce, building the Ram temple or security. These continuously referred to 'thousands' of rapes by Muslim youth of Hindu women, and the Muslim men's deceit of Hindu women through Indian history. They called upon Hindu men to unite and avenge the Muslims' wrongs on the Hindu (from the Lodhis to the Mughals). Hindu men were told "to keep a watch on your girls" and "save them" with the help of Hindu organisations.¹⁴ The most consistent theme of these pamphlets was the sanctity of Hindu women and the threat posed to them by Muslim men. Today, the e-mail and Internet are used for such purposes in much larger numbers.

The aggregate effect of such communalism, however high-tech, is to encourage discrimination and fear based on an imagined threat. Right wing forces in civil society have to be fought by progressive forces within civil society. The next logical step, therefore, is to militarise civil society and create a male militia in every home. The VHP and its youth wing, the Bajrang Dal, which has a 300,000 cadres, have been at work on precisely this for years. They have distributed *trishuls* (swords symbolic of a holy war) in the thousands with a clear message that these are to be used for the protection of religion. According to an interview of Bajrang Dal's vice president, in Gujarat alone, 65,000 such *trishuls* have been distributed amid much pomp.¹⁵ Training camps for martial arts have been organised while the women's wing openly advertise similar camps for women and children in the newspapers. The self-description of some women that have finished such training is that they "felt empowered."¹⁶ The meaning of "empowerment" transformed from securing equal rights to being armed and militarised.

Such propagation of a security threat creates a false consciousness. People in a conservative and segregated society are aroused by false issues, instead of the real issues of development, equality and plurality. The message on the websites of the Hindutva advocates concentrate on

safeguarding the Hindu nation's security. In "protecting their women" from the enemy, Hindu men are asked not only to safeguard their own women as property but also to kill, humiliate or rape the 'other.' The "warrior" in them is constantly being roused. For that matter, the construction of the Hindutva identity is expressed in physical/sexual—mainly manly—terms. The crisis of identity is represented as a crisis of masculinity. In this kind of militarisation and in a context of militia formation, the tendency is to dehumanise women and reduce them to sexual objects. Women, nation and religion—the basic ingredients for the creation of a militia—are welded together and expressed in terms of sexuality. Rape is an initiation rite for the vigilante to become part of the group. This is not a new phenomenon; it is a case of history repeating itself.

Empowerment and Masculinity

A look into a website run by the Chief Minister of the State Narendra Modi, who is a RSS *pracharak* (ideologue), reveals his commitment to the cause of militant Hindutva. The site has posted select fan mail to the Minister, including one that states: "Thank you for saving Hindus. But you are not doing enough, we will not be satisfied until you send your *sena* (militia/ army) out to Muslim countries like Pakistan [and] Afghanistan to rape Muslim women, [and] kill and burn Muslims." Yet another fan mail thanks Modi for his good work: "Hats off to the *Asli Mard!*" (real man).¹⁷ In parliament, outgoing Prime Minister Vajpayee said: "If the Chief Minister hailed by many as a conquering hero is removed, there will be a strong backlash."¹⁸ The construction of the masculine as warrior has been a constant theme in the Sangh discourse. The entire leadership blamed the English language press that played a stellar role in exposing the genocide while the local press that provoked sentiment against the minority were officially thanked and congratulated by the RSS Chief Minister.¹⁹

Women have very specific roles in promoting Hindutva, whether at the time of the Ram Janam Bhoomi campaign²⁰ or now, with Gujarati women supporting the men in a variety of ways. The websites of Bajrang Dal and Durga Vahini exhibit photographs of a woman's holding a sword while travelling from Jharkhand to Ayodhya; of women cadres' training to jump through hoops of fire; of women during target shooting practice—representations of the militarised Hindu woman's masculinity. Cultural codes and gender stereotypes become sharper during periods of conflict or nationalism, and there is therefore greater need for progressive movements to monitor such media that induce hate crimes.

The Internet provides the forces of fundamentalism a faceless mode of exchange. They do not feel alone in their hatred; instead, the Internet provides a feeling of belonging to the mainstream community. With these constructions, myths overtake reality and cover up the complexity of truth. Media is subject to manipulation, as we saw in Iraq, and as in the case of Gujarat. And because media also drives politics, the need to make ICTs and media socially responsible becomes more urgent. The regulation of websites that incite hatred toward other communities or individuals is as necessary as the regulation of pornographic ones.

There is a need for laws that will pave the way for a socially responsible media. Just as child porn sites have been made illegal, sites that inculcate hatred against another community on grounds of religion, caste, or ethnicity should be banned. Unregulated sites that use technology to abuse others can cause violence and lead to a resurgence of sexism, militarism and social conflict. It is therefore important that progressive groups look into this issue urgently and work out ways to curb such sites without allowing a misuse of censorship laws. In addition, social movements, the peace and women's movements, and progressive and secular movements need to learn the creative use of ICTs and multimedia to counter propaganda and explain their worldview. ♪

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Footnotes

- ¹ One official said, "We're everywhere, but almost never seen." See <<http://www.corpwatch.org>>.
- ² The Sangh Parivar is a loose "family" of organisations, including political parties, which promote the ideology of Hindutva, a nationalist movement based around the Hindu religion that has its origins in the late nineteenth-century independence struggles against the British Empire. Sangh is translated as 'Group' and Parivar as 'family'
- ³ The coalition, consisting of the BJP and 13 constituent parties, faced an upset defeat in the May 2004 elections to the Lok Sabha led by Sonia Gandhi.
- ⁴ Besides the ideologues of the Sangh Parivar, almost every issue of the official journal repeats this. The argument is that not only did Muslim and Christian invaders bring political subjugation and cultural depredation; those who converted to these religions severed themselves from Indian culture and "one homogenous nation [was]

divided under sectarian labels..." Ramesh Patange, "The Struggle for Akhand Bharat," *Organiser* 46, No. 2, 1994, Independence Day special, pp. 41-43.

- ⁵ V. D. Savarkar, *Hindutva*, (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1923); also M.S. Gowalker, *We and Our Nation Defined*, quoted in A.G. Noorani, *The RSS and the BJP: A Division of Labour* (New Delhi: Leftword Books, 2001), pp. 18-39.
- ⁶ The ideas of the RSS were shaped by the writings of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, who argued that every one who has ancestral roots in India is a Hindu, and that Hindus collectively make up a nation. This, according to him, is Hindutva. V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969).
- ⁷ "The Rise of Women Power," <<http://www.hindunet.org>> See also <<http://www.chanakyaparishad.net>>.
- ⁸ V. D. Savarkar, "Hindi Sundari," quoted by Harinder Srivatava, "Hind Sundarar Ti and Priyakar Hindusthan—Savarkar's Hymns to Motherland," *Organiser* 45, No. 36, April 10, 1994.
- ⁹ L.K. Advani's Presidential Address, BJP pamphlet no. 66 (Bhartiya Janta Party Office, New Delhi), n.d., p. 6.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18
- ¹¹ Ramesh Patange, "The Struggle for Akhand Bharat," *Organiser* 46, No.2, 1994, Independence Day special, pp. 41-43. See also, <<http://www.hinduunity.org>>.
- ¹² See <<http://www.hinduunity.org>>.
- ¹³ Syeda Hamid, Malini Ghose, Farah Naqvi et al, *How Has The Gujarat Massacre Affected Minority Women? The Survivors Speak, Fact Finding by a Women's Panel* (New Delhi, Fact Finding by a Women's Panel, April 16, 2002), pp. 4-20; See also All India Democratic Women's Association, *State Sponsored Carnage in Gujarat* (New Delhi, CPIM, March 2002): 5-15
- ¹⁴ Translation of a Gujarati leaflet circulated in Kalol and other areas of Gujarat, Appendix 2, Chenoy et al, *Gujarat Carnage*, p. 35.
- ¹⁵ *Outlook*, March 10, 2002.
- ¹⁶ *The Hindu*, May 30, 1999.
- ¹⁷ Samples of fan mail at <<http://www.narendramodi.org>>.
- ¹⁸ Prime Minister's Speech, quoted in B.G.Vergheese, "Farewell to Rajdharma (Governance Ethics): Centre's Record of Shame in Gujarat," *Times of India* editorial, May 23, 2002.
- ¹⁹ K.M. Chenoy, S.P. Shukla and others, *Gujarat Carnage 2002, A Report to the Nation*, April 2002.
- ²⁰ The Ram Janam Bhoomi campaign was a movement led by the BJP to demolish a 16th century mosque that they argued was built on a temple that was considered to be the birthplace of a Hindu God Ram. This campaign led to communal violence between the Hindu and Muslim communities at many places and was backed by Hindu right wing propaganda that labeled Indian Muslims as 'outsiders'.