



Of Nasty Pictures and “Nice Guys”

The Surreality of Online *Hindutva*

CHRISTIANE BROSIUS

In this essay, I focus on the ways in which the internet, particularly a website, www.hindu-unity.org, set up by the Hindu far right organization Hindu Unity (hereafter HU), becomes a stage for the representation and performance of the crisis of a politicized Hindu identity. I am interested in how the internet as a medium is able to deliver what other media technologies can hardly offer: namely, access for its users to the shared production of affect on a transnational basis, the feeling of participation and empowerment in the making and dissemination of shared myths, identities and histories, as well as fears and desires between various locally-based groups and individuals by means of an imagined networked community (Zook 1996).

Introducing ‘HinduUnity.Org’

The introductory slogan of the portal, framed by the organization’s logo of Hanuman emerging from the map of India on the left and two *trishuls* (tridents) on the right, reads: “HinduUnity.org – Promoting & Supporting the Ideals of the Bajrang Dal”.

The producers of the website openly declare their affiliation with the Bajrang Dal, the youth wing of the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP, or World Hindu Council). The *Bajrang Dal* (The Bajrang Militia) is well known for its often aggressively rhetorical and occasionally violent attacks on alleged threats to Hindu identity. They particularly target Muslims, Christians and symbols of ‘westernization’.

In order to contextualize the production of HU’s visual and narrative rhetoric, it is important to point out that HU (like much else on the web) profits from the density, ubiquity and flow of images on the web: almost everything that is online can be appropriated and framed in a new context, and filled with new meaning. On the HU website we can see bin Laden turned into a voyeur of erotica, and images of Hamas fighters or US military personnel metamorphosed into *Hindutva* soldiers. Here, the images of bin Laden, the erotic figures, the images of Hamas soldiers or American soldiers all have different provenances within the broad digital universe. Their being brought together on to the same web page is

illustrative of the recombinant properties of web culture, which is the environment that HU is embedded in.

We can venture to say that the web provides a place for the creation of a new form of intercultural and transnational iconography, even to those committed to militant nationalism and opposed to intercultural dialogue. In building this dynamic repertoire of images and visual rhetoric, symbols of the threatening Other are 'magically fixed' through the strategies of appropriation, defamation, or humiliation. We are reminded here of a key text by Evelyn Kallen entitled "Hate on the Net" (Kallen, 1998). Kallen distinguishes three interconnected means of using the web as a 'hate-mongering' tool: An 'invalidation myth' defines the target group (e.g. the Muslims) as inferior/dangerous; an 'invalidation theory' provides the ideological framework, arguments and 'evidence' to rhetorically attack minority groups; and finally as 'a platform for organized community action', a hate website urges and provides the communicative means for the 'threatened community' to take steps to aggressively counter or eliminate the purported threat.

The aim of HU is to create both an actual and an imagined virtual brotherhood of militant Hindus, and to claim rights to representation over this homogenized community. The consumers of this vision are otherwise physically out of reach to each other and to the prime movers of HU (social encounters happen predominantly on the net; real world encounters within HU seem rare). The visitors to the HU site can then be seen as an audience responding to the facilitation of a communication platform, responding to projections of Hindus seen and shown as victims, judges, or soldiers. Through various performative strategies, the affective components of the possibility to participate in this world of victims, judges, vigilantes and soldiers, and the urge to 'make an impact' on this world, are evoked. The tenor of all the articles and images available, on and through the HU homepage, is one of ongoing confrontation and crisis: *Hindutva*, for the makers and producers of HU, is the organized, aggressive, cohesive articulation of what it is to be a Hindu today, and is the only way to protect Hindu identity against national and international threats. HU creates credibility, and thus authority, by entangling the visitor in a claustrophobic space, seemingly filled with countless details of "the evidence of the historic and ongoing humiliation, torture and abuse of Hindus". And having done so, it puts forward what it calls "justified" strategies to encounter the cause/s of this crisis.

Even though most of the images, rhetoric and ideological content put on display on a website like HinduUnity are not new, and can be traced back to the writings of *Sangh Parivar* ideologues such as Veer Savarkar or Golwalkar, it is the ways in which the images are presented and combined that constitutes a strange amalgam of virtual reality/actuality, or, as I indicated in the title of this article, surreality. I employ the term surrealism with some deliberation. I use it here in reference to two issues which I find are at stake in the Hindu Right's use of the internet: One is the conscious alignment of two or more different images, each drawn from different 'real' locations or contexts within one composition, creating through the juxtaposition of two already familiar materials a strange feeling of augmented and renewed familiarity that causes a heightened, uncanny sense of reality. The second issue emerges from the idea of montage, and pulls in cultural historian Walter Benjamin's work on media aesthetics and propaganda. Benjamin's notion of the surreal proposed that

the effect of a shock transmitted through image consumption brings to a standstill the free flow of associations. The aesthetic shock freezes perception and at the same time heightens our senses; it creates an aura by means of which the necessary critical distance of the viewing subject succumbs to the concentrated transmission of ideologically imbued content. The magical condensation of meaning embodied in images brings the viewed object close to us, renders it as if it were tactile, and makes available to our desires and fears what otherwise remains abstract and distant. Fetishization (which pulls one closer to the object or feeling desired) and xenophobia (which repels and makes more distant the 'other') are thus simultaneously central to the virtual surrealism of HinduUnity (see Mulvey, 1996).

In the context of HU, I am particularly concerned with the ways in which narratives and images of crisis and suffering work on the sensation of the viewer, and how in particular the visitors to the website are addressed as consumers (and agents) of violence as a spectacle. The kind of agency evoked in this context is the almost oxymoronic creation of what could be called an armchair *jihadi* or a console *dharmayodha* (Holy Warrior), who views the violence on display with a degree of pleasure and inner torment, combined with feelings of vulnerability and rage.

Exposures, Petitions and Black Lists: HinduUnity as an imagined "Courtroom"

What does the landscape of links, images and articles on www.HinduUnity.org offer its visitors? The HU homepage provides users with a hundred twenty links and eighty articles on the main index (as of October 2002). At first, we enter a jungle of networks and links, with no recognizable structure. Most of the articles are taken from other sources: newspapers, magazines, other websites, or the *Hindu Vivek Kendra*, an archive dedicated to give the *Hindutva* agenda an 'intellectual' touch. Visual sources are appropriated from other websites, or reinterpreted by attributing new captions on to them, or made specifically for a particular HU 'item'. There are no *Devanagari* elements on the site, which indicates that the majority of HU-visitors belongs to the English educated middle-class, probably many of whom access the site from abroad. Hindu Unity claims to have about 500 members, most of them based in India, the UK and the US. HU aligns itself directly to the promotion and support of the Bajrang Dal (BD), the militant youth wing of the VHP, which has so far only been active in India. HU's chairman, Rohit V (see last section, this article) is an active supporter of the BD. The organization of HU bears similarity to an army corps: Four 'lieutenants' head HU, members are referred to as "*jawans*" (literally "youths", a word used for soldiers in Hindi and Urdu). The language and rhetoric of HU is based on an idealization of weaponry, war and a militarized Hindu identity. Dramatic and sensational infotainment seems to be the underlining rhetorical form and tone of most items on display.

Fittingly, the answer to "Who in your opinion should rule India today?", which features as one of the FAQs on HU's link to "About Us", is that this job should be entrusted to Bal Thackeray (Shiv Sena supremo) or Narendra Modi (chief minister of Gujarat, a former RSS *pracharak* (proselytizer), whose renewed electoral success has been linked to the anti-Muslim pogroms following from the Godhra carnage that occurred while he was chief minister of Gujarat in March 2002). [See articles by Darshan Desai, Subarno Chatterji and Arvind Narrain, elsewhere in this reader.]

Hindus as Victims

The declared motto of HU is "*safaiya*" ("cleansing"). "The greatest threat of all", according to HU, "are Muslims", who are depicted almost constantly as "traitors and killers". The site asks the visitor, "HINDUS! When will you arise and save *Bharat* from bleeding to death? When will you stand up and cleanse our soil of those HINDU KILLERS?"

The site works with and articulates the notion that "the Hindu people, sons of the (Indian) soil, have been paralyzed or unconscious or are too tolerant to counter the purportedly anti-national activities of the Muslim minority". Mohandas Gandhi, for example, is accused of having "paralysed the manhood of India, mentally and physically, to such an extent that they were (and still are) a degenerated, docile, submissive and subservient race on earth". (Both these statements are from the FAQs referred to above.) The honour of the Hindu people is furthermore linked to the notion of the nation as motherland, as a body that can be tortured, humiliated, polluted. These views are indeed imbued in *Hindutva* rhetoric elsewhere; the internet can, however, give such messages and metaphors a particular urgency and actuality.

The *Hindutva* Activist as Witness for the Prosecution

HU's rhetoric is embedded in a "survival discourse" (Rajagopal/Bojin, 2002). Throughout the homepage, alleged Hindu suffering, often defined as genocide, and Hindu militancy are related to each other, the latter held out as the unavoidable consequence of the first. Here, Hindus don't appear so much as passive victims but as what we might call witnesses for the prosecution, with a cause to argue in a momentous trial. The list of contents of articles available through the home page includes "exposing evidence of Islamic aggression and brutality" ("Slit the throat of 2 Hindus", "Hindu Slave in exchange for car", "11 Hindus burned alive in Bangladesh by Muslim mob" or "Muslims gang rape Hindu girl"). There is ongoing 'exposure', mainly of the underlying threat of Islam and Muslims towards Hinduism and Hindus, and ever so often, each instance of 'exposure' claims to have visual evidence ("Warning Graphic Content. See how Hindus are ruthlessly murdered in Kerala") to back its allegations.

While there is no shortage of evidence in the modern world of acts of violence committed by Muslims on others (just as, needless to say, there is no shortage of evidence of acts of violence committed by Hindus, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs, Communists, or Nationalists of any description, or even animal rights activists), this 'gallery of horrors' on the HU site is exclusively Islamic. In doing this, the HU website mirrors the visual rhetoric of its enemies, be they Muslim fundamentalist groups who rely on the same kind of images – of raped women, disembowelled bodies, destroyed houses, torture and humiliation from Kashmir, to Gujarat, to Chechnya to Palestine – to make their point. Furthermore, the evidentiary authority of this 'proof' is often susceptible to manipulation of its content, if not of the information that can be circulated or suppressed about the content. For a long time, the HU site prominently ran a plainly doctored video grab of a Chechen execution of a captured Russian prisoner, obviously 'borrowed' from a Russian supremacist militia website. What is more interesting, however, is that despite a disclaimer pointing to its provenance, the image was discussed on one of the message boards on the site as if it were something

that had happened in an Indian context. The conscious, semi-conscious, or unconscious blurring of locations, contexts, actors, agents and realities, through juxtaposition and transposition of the elements of one image or testimony to another, enables the suppleness and 'flexibility' with which these pieces of evidence adjust to the demands of a 'desired' truth.

What this 'witnessing' makes possible is a mobilization of the feelings of vulnerability and rage which are sought to be translated into concrete online action. Like much internet-centric activism, HU too makes ample use of the form of the online petition. There are any number of petitions, from protests against obscure scholarly references to beef eating in Vedic times, to petitions against the actor Shahrukh Khan for his refusal to engage in anti-Pakistani rhetoric, to petitions against the possibility of Salman Khan (another film actor with a Muslim name) playing the part of Ram, to petitions against the persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh, Kashmiri Pandits in Kashmir, petitions protesting the innocence of Dara Singh (a Bajrang Dal militant in Orissa accused of murdering the Australian missionary Graham Staines and his children), and petitions against a book that is deemed insulting to the Hindu deity Ganesha. It is unclear as to what exactly happens once a petition is signed. It is, for instance, unlikely that a signed petition is handed over to the Bollywood idol Shahrukh Khan. But this question might even be of secondary importance. Rather, the opportunity to protest, unite, form solidarities and exert pressure on particular agents becomes a fascinating instance of the rituals of community formation, and an important instrument of being seen to have acted together on a concrete issue. Petitions suggest personal interaction and scope for participation, and the taking of a stand together with other like-minded people whom one may have never met, or may never meet, but who are, for all intents and purposes, very real presences in the world of the petition signatory. However, petitions lack the flair of anonymous denunciation of elements deemed threats to the *Hindutva* cause. This inflicting of humiliation is at the heart of online Black Lists (see below).

The *Hindutva* Activist as Judge

The fact that the internet is a media that enables interaction 'from below' justifies the use of the term 'democratic media'. However, this gets complicated when 'democratic participation' is only a layer under which particular interest groups undermine any sense of a civil society. On HU, this becomes evident with the repeated appeal to netizens to denounce and report 'suspects' and 'anti-Hindus' on to the 'Black List' and to demand jurisdiction in response to their purported 'crimes'. In this case, participation is evoked by suggesting that the Black List is the register of an alternative tribunal and that the participating netizens its judges. In fact, however, the list aims at consolidating a sense of community centred around common hate figures, and at intimidating and threatening the 'criminals' – should they visit the list (not impossible, as names do show up on Google searches) – as well as cautioning those who could become 'suspects' or 'criminals' in the eyes of Hindu Unity. Here, for instance, is the declared aim (given in capitals on the site) of the Black List on HinduUnity.org:

"THIS PAGE EXPOSES THE EVIL FORCES THAT ARE AGAINST THE HINDU PEOPLE: EACH OF THESE PERSONS AND OR ORGANIZATIONS HAVE BEEN GUILTY OF LEADING EFFORTS AGAINST OUR MOVEMENT. THEIR CRIMES ARE CRIMES AGAINST THE HINDU

PEOPLE: KNOW YOUR ENEMIES! KNOW WHO WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DOWNFALL OF BHARAT!"

More than 100 persons are currently listed here, ranging from what the HU netizens call 'P-SECS' ('pseudo-secularists') – an epithet often used by *Hindutva* sympathizers to characterize liberals, usually Hindus, opposed to militant or extremist Hinduism – to Communists, Christians, and Muslims. These names are often accompanied by photographs, addresses, phone numbers and e-mail addresses.

The alleged legitimacy for doing this is that all those individuals are said to be part of a larger anti-Hindu conspiracy that has to be addressed in order to avoid further national deterioration. To name a few examples: social historian Vijay Prasad is called "...a bastard and traitor" for having written anti-*Hindutva* articles, and he is warned that "the Soldiers of *Hindutva* are watching you Vijay! Please visit him and call him at..." Historian Romila Thapar's crime is that she is "...distorting the true history of India". Other 'criminals' are Pervez Musharraf, Syed Ahmed Bukhari (the Imam of the Jama Masjid, Delhi), Sonia Gandhi and Osama Bin Laden.

Several penalties are demanded on the Blacklist: for having painted the Hindu Goddess Saraswati in the nude, the painter MF Husain, defined as "destroyer of Hinduism", is asked to paint an insulting picture of the Prophet Muhammed, and a call is issued for the destruction of all his work (supporters of the Bajrang Dal have on more than one occasion physically attacked his work by entering galleries in Mumbai and, most recently, in Surat). The actor Shahrukh Khan is found guilty for being pro-Pakistan and pro-terrorism for arguing that every terrorist must have a reason for his/her deeds. The verdict pronounced on him is: "This criminal needs to be sent back to Pakistan". (Ironically so, considering Shahrukh Khan's antecedents are in Delhi.)

The Black List is a safe zone to denounce anyone without needing to provide real credible evidence, while allowing the denouncer to remain anonymous. The Black List might lead eventually to actual, and less virtual, threats or intimidation to the people defined in it as "criminals"; as of now it seems mainly to be an engine of hate mail. But most of all, the list creates a space of vicarious empowerment for those pointing their fingers at people they consider to be 'suspects' and 'traitors'. The planting of rumours and suspicion and the use of hate speech is a powerful strategy of self-empowerment. Denunciation and the spectacle of the humiliation of the 'other' fuel a pleasure that comes from a feeling of power and control. This pleasure derives from an accusing gaze, speech-act or gesture that can expose another's vulnerability by the suddenness and surprise of its execution. The 'criminals' are placed on a virtual pillory and can be intimidated and humiliated in what has the semblance of a public space.

Often, the accused are out of reach for the accusers. The sudden intimacy and closeness that emerges when any person can harm a seemingly 'untouchable' authority figure, such as a film star or a prominent public person, produces its own twisted satisfaction.

The Making and Unmaking of Heroes and Martyrs: *Hindutva* Posters

Even though Hindu Unity is predominantly a site with articles allegedly producing 'evidence' for the suffering of the Hindu people at the hands of Islam (anti-Christian and anti-American rhetoric is present, though it features to a much lesser degree), explicit and imaginative

visual display (accessible through prominently featured links) plays an important role on the site as well. The images, like the rest of the content, respond to the categories of Hindus as victims, as well as active avenging agents.

The HU homepage carries a link entitled "*Hindutva* posters". Except for one, all of the twenty-two displayed are made by Rahul Y, a student in the USA and active member of HU (more on him below). The images are plain, sticker-like, and include titles such as "Hindu Jew Unity", "Ram Temple Poster", "Fist Poster", "Shiv Sena Poster". The titles themselves speak of traditional *Hindutva* themes of facing the 'Muslim' threat together with Israel, building the Ram temple at Ayodhya, consolidating the community, and promoting the political agenda of militant Hinduism. Let me draw your attention, however, to a selection of poster montages that show the Muslim stereotype evoked by the Hindu Right in a new avatar, closely related to the imagery that began to circulate through television and the world wide web after September 11, and began to shape a new, transnational iconography of the 'Threat of Militant Islam'. In many ways, September 11 enabled the rhetoric of *Hindutva* to strengthen and feed the stereotype of the dangerous 'anti-(Indian) national' with new material of the 'anti-western Muslim'. Suddenly, the *Sangh Parivar*, previously almost consistently anti-American because of their preference for *swadeshi* ('self reliant' nationalism) and anxiety about the 'westernization' of Hindu culture, drew a new axis of power where it could place the Hindu alongside other purported victims of Islamic terror, particularly Americans and Israeli Jews. Members of the *Sangh* could now reinforce their claim that Muslims were essentially aggressive and dangerous not only to India, but to world security. This is an important development: it needs to be understood that the demonization of Muslims through aggressive, stereotypical images in an Indian context had become increasingly difficult to state and sustain in public after the demolition of the Babri Mosque in December 1992, and the widespread violence against Muslims in India that followed. The spectacle of 9/11 and the subsequent media spin of the 'War against Terror', as well as the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, altered that picture considerably. There was a new confidence with which the image of the 'Muslim Aggressor' could be foregrounded. Further, the escalation of the 'second' Intifada in Palestine, parallel to the rise of militancy in Kashmir, allowed for a multiplication of 'cross-references' of images and contexts, and more importantly, for points of ideological and communicative contact between militant Jewish extremist groups and members of the HU community. This is evident both from the prominent links to websites related to Jewish extremist groups such as Kahane.org, the Kach Movement and Masada200.org, as well as the supporting interventions by interlocutors who claim to be members of Jewish extremist groups in the "Soldiers of *Hindutva*" message board on HU. The common denominator on which this alliance with militant extremist Jewish groups is based is an understanding of both Hindus and Jews as a 'Chosen People', with sacred homelands 'encroached upon' by threatening forces (Muslims) and a long history of suffering and persecution. (What this glosses over – and it is not as if the more erudite *Hindutva* enthusiasts, even on HU, are unaware of this; in fact they do refer to it occasionally on the message boards, with a twinge of embarrassment – is the rather different circumstances of *Hindutva's* search for allies in the 1930s and 1940s, when the supreme

leader of the RSS, Golwalkar, was not at all unsympathetic to the project of the 'Final Solution' in Germany; he called it an instance of a manifestation of "Race Pride at its Highest". See *We, or, Our Nationhood Defined*, by M.S. Golwalkar, Bharat Publications, Nagpur, 1939.)

The New Muslim Stereotype

As we have already pointed out, the iconography of victimization in these posters is also paired with slogans and images that call for a "*Hindutva* Revolution" to be articulated along the lines of a holy war. That a Hindu '*Jihad*' should have to rely on the images of Muslim *jihadis* to fuel its own resources of aggression is part of the irony of the visual culture of contemporary fundamentalism. But let us examine how *Hindutva* holy warriors visualize their 'enemy'.

The first image is entitled "Osama Poster". It displays a Pakistani flag burning at the edges. Written on this emblem in red is "KILLING IN THE NAME OF ALLAH". Positioned at the centre of this image is a photograph of Osama bin Laden, looking towards the left where three white pin-up girls stand exposing their almost-naked bodies to the viewer (and to bin Laden). Below his photograph we can read the following legend: "Osama bin Ladin (Busy taking care of American Business)". While bin Laden is looking at the seductive sirens, a bullet hits his head; red spots tinted over the photograph suggest the spilling of his blood over the otherwise mild and peacefully smiling face. And, as we trace the source of the bullet to the right of the montage, we see another photograph of what looks like an American soldier lying on the ground aiming a gun at bin Laden. Again, with the help of image manipulation software, the saffron Hindu flag is fixed onto the soldier's weapon, thus mythically metamorphosing and indigenizing the gun, its holder (and the beholder). Furthermore, the image carries the words "SOLDIERS OF HINDUTVA", and "*Jai Hindu Rashtra*" ("Hail to the Hindu Nation").

What we find here is a surreal combination of Osama bin Laden depicted both as lascivious Muslim and an avid consumer of western pornographic imagery. (Another poster has him eyeing not nearly-naked women, but dollar bills.) A subtle feeling of dread is evoked through the deliberate association between the decadent Arab sheikh, the terrorist posing as messiah and the target of the hybrid *Gl-Hindutva* warrior. The pleasure of looking, in this case, arises from watching a villain being eliminated without his foreknowledge, even as he is engaged in his most decadent pursuits.

The stereotype of the Muslim as a mindless, machine-like tool of *jihad* is also evident in a very disturbing link to a website called "Israel Storm" (<http://israelstorm.cjb.net>), which says on its home page, "This web site was built by a Hindu who supports the cause of Israel". Israel Storm (besides providing clearer evidence of collaboration between the Hindu and the Jewish Far Right) is of interest because of a section on it called "The Nursery of Terror". This is a photo album with pictures allegedly depicting the transformation of young boys in Palestine into suicide bombers. Each image carries a cynical comment. Take, for example, the image of the Muslim woman fixing a packet of dynamite on a young boy's belt, possibly her son. He stands patiently, wearing a *kaffiyeh* (a Palestinian check scarf) and a full-face black mask. The subtitle reads: "For the last time, Abdul, I am not dressing you up like Batman". This line suggests a 'misunderstanding' between mother and son, the latter thinking he is preparing for a children's costume party while he is in fact 'dressed to

kill' himself and others. The dramatized innocence of the child, unaware of his immediate death, is heightened by his mother's mindless readiness to sacrifice him, to use him as a weapon. Other pictures underline the coming of age of future terrorists, and it seems that this particularly pathological fascination with the abuse of children and the making of 'infant terrorists' is meant to demonize the enemy even further.

The *Hindutva* Holy Warrior

The stereotype of the avenging Hindu emerges as if from the very ground of the image of the hated enemy. HU promotes a distinctly different 'type' of Hindu in the figure of the 'Soldier of *Hindutva*', an almost mythical figure, or Terminator-like being, who arises in response to the alleged suffering of the Hindu majority, no longer willing or able to witness the humiliation of his people, religion and country, finally ready for combat in defence of Hindu pride (see below).

The second set of images from the poster collection on HU that I would like to consider is poster montages. The first amongst these is taken from the successful film *Mission Kashmir*. The protagonists of the film are shown wearing full-face masks; only their eyes, focused on the viewer, are visible. This image, used for advertising the film, has been modified here for the purpose of *Hindutva* propaganda: the foreheads of the two men have been marked with a *tilak*, which in this case is a sacred symbol applied by a wife, sister or mother to sanctify and protect a husband, brother or son as he sets forth to do battle. A machine gun has been inserted, again superimposed with the universal mantra 'Om'.

Again, this iconography merges distinct worlds: the glamour of film stardom, the revival of the patriotic genre in 1990s Bollywood, and the desire to find a visual vocabulary capable of expressing an adequately heroic icon of the Soldier of *Hindutva*, dovetailed into the Indian nationalist rhetoric of keeping Kashmir in India at all cost. It also manages to create an identification between the armed forces' personnel fighting to retain Kashmir, and the *Hindutva* Militant. The text on this poster reads: "Are you ready to fight for the Hindu *Dharma* in Kashmir? Join the soldiers of *Hindutva* at www.HinduUnity.org and become part of the Hindu *rashtra* movement". Browsing a website, becoming part of an online community, downloading and printing a poster, fighting a distant war, and protecting the faith – all these moves merge into a single click of the mouse.

The caption of another *Hindutva* poster reads: "We must not turn our heads, as our own people are being massacred and kicked out of their homeland. Help by supporting Hindu groups or by taking action yourself. Hindu militancy is the only way to defend our religion, our country, and our people!" On this poster we see masked, black-clad combatants holding up machine guns against the rising sun, on which is superimposed an 'Om' sign. The surreal content of the image becomes apparent when we consider that the design template for this poster is most probably taken from the images of Palestinian (Hamas and other) *fidayeen* militants who customarily dress in black and mask their faces. The 'alliance' here, between *Hindutva* and what could well be Hamas, is purely formal, but it reveals a fascination with the ritualized display of a martial aesthetic and heroic bodies so well cultivated in the iconography of the Palestinian uprising (as well as Sikh martyrdom, see next page).

Watching Torture: Consuming Violence

The website is replete with images of violence. While the violence meted out by the 'enemy' is meant to spur the Holy *Hindutva* Warrior to action in vengeance, the violence held out as a threat by him, and the promise of annihilation held out to all those who come in the way, is an affirmation of his power. There is, as I have pointed out before, nothing novel in this; the iconography of 'resistance' and 'just causes' is monotonously similar everywhere.

But why do people need to consider violence and absorb violent imagery in order to feel empowered? Asked in another way: "Why is the iconography of suffering so dominant in the context of empowerment?" In her latest book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag explores the iconography of suffering in representations of Christian martyrs which, she argues, "are surely intended to move and excite, and to instruct and exemplify". Furthermore, she states that it "seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked" (Sontag, 2003: 36). The voyeuristic pleasures of watching bodies undergoing torture is difficult to tackle. Writes Sontag, "There is shame as well as shock in looking at the close-up of a real horror" (ibid.: 37). And later in her essay she adds, "Photographs of suffering and martyrdom of a people are more than reminders of death, of failure, or victimization. They invoke the miracle of survival" (ibid.: 78). The miracle of survival, of those who witness and mourn the dead, is also the burden of survival and memory, something that is emphasized in rhetorical questions such as, "Do you want history to repeat itself?"

Evidence of attraction in looking at other's pain in order to arouse feelings of both compassion and anger (revenge) are found in captions of another set of web pages visualizing Sikh martyrdom on HU. Accompanying the images, we can read detailed descriptions of torture such as, "Sikh mothers watch while 300 infants speared to death", or of martyrs being "boiled alive", "sawed alive" or "cut joint by joint". The introductory text appeals to the viewer to pay reverence to the heroic martyrs: "Here are numerous pictures of great Sikh martyrs being tortured to death. ... People of *Bharat* should never forget what these mighty Sikh lions have gone through to protect our religion, our culture and faith". The burden of survival is to fulfil the aims and dreams of the dead, which, according to HU, can only be achieved by avenging them in "retrospective self-defence".

In the introduction to this article, I referred to the visitors of HU as potential consumers of violence as spectacle, who experience pleasure and fear, rage and vulnerability from watching or witnessing the torture of others from a safe distance. In this context, I can imagine that looking at some of these images is an almost subcutaneous experience. It gets under your skin. However, at the end of the day, it remains essentially a virtual experience, creating only a temporary inner storm and regular upsurges of the desire to make an impact, be it by means of signing petitions, or by getting a print-out of a 'Soldiers of *Hindutva*' sticker. Yet this does not mean that the anti-Muslim feeling underlying the majority of images should not be taken seriously. They are designed with the express intention of having a 'real' or direct impact on actual contexts. However, the impact is bound to evoke complex routes: from desire to utterance, upload, log-in, download, signing, posting, forwarding, to getting out on the street, or sitting behind closed doors, waiting for life to walk in and give the Holy Hindu Cyber Warrior the chance to be a hero.

Remote Control Patriots

The appeal to defend the 'motherland', and the faith that is staged in the material discussed above, also derives from the experience of living abroad, of wanting to nurture connections to 'roots' in the homeland. Two key figures involved in the production of this material on HU are closely associated with the Bajrang Dal while living (it is not clear if they are permanent or temporary residents) in the USA. The first person is named as Rohit V. He is the chairman of Hindu Unity and declares himself to be a staunch supporter of the Bajrang Dal. He was born in New Delhi in 1970 into a family with strong RSS ties. Rohit V joined the Bajrang Dal before 1992, but was excluded from the organization after the demolition of the Babri Mosque on 'disciplinary probation'. In 1994, he rejoined the BD again. Today, he lives both in the state of New York and in India. He considers the HU website to be his contribution to the cause of *Hindutva*.

The man and brain behind the *Hindutva* posters is Rahul Y. Rahul Y is also president and webmaster of the *Hindutva* Brotherhood and the Kashmiri Liberation Army (hereafter HB+KHLA) website. Like Hindu Unity, HB+KHLA (<http://www.geocities.com/hindutvapics>) offers its visitors 'participation' by means of a 'Black List' and a message forum.

Interestingly, along with the Black List, the HB+KHLA list also has a list of *Hindutva* leaders which features, along with 'Great Leaders' such as Ramchandra Paramhans, Pravin Togadia, A.B. Vajpayee, L. K. Advani and Bal Thackeray, a long list of district and neighbourhood level leaders and organizers all over India. Prominent amongst them are people that the site names as having "contributed to the *jawan* uprising of Gujarat, March 2003", "organizers of the Gulberg liberation operation that resulted in the bringing to justice of Ehsan Jafri" or, "contributor to the operation Naroda Patalia [sic], and the distribution of swords to activists for self defence". Clearly, the HB+KHLA site takes very seriously its mission to 'inform' about what it calls the "causes of and solutions to Muslim + Christian Problems". A certain penchant for a hip DIY *Hindutva* tactical media aesthetic (Shiv Sena Springing Tigers, and Kalashnikovs with Om inscribed on them) dominates this site, and many icons are available for download as posters or car stickers, embellished by slogans such as "Hinduize the Politics, Militarize the Hindus", and "*Gaurav Se Kaho, Ham Hindu Hai*" ("Say with pride that we are Hindus"). There is also an extensive gallery of photographs of "*Hindutva* in Action".

Rahul Y is not shy in revealing his identity on his personal website. His lack of reticence is quite different from the majority of *Hindutvavadis*. He tells us that he also calls himself "*Hindu Souljah*" or "Indiaman", that he was born in 1982, lives in Illinois and studies Information Systems Technologies; that his hobbies include "listening to Hindi music and remixes, rap, and techno, playing basketball and soccer, dancing, designing websites, playing computer games, programming, and hanging out with *desi* (Indian) friends" – a 'nice guy', a regular all-American youth even. On the photos he has displayed on the website, we find a good-looking man sporting a trendy beard and a habitus that reminds one of rap music videos. However, for some reason, none of the pictures shows him smiling. He is concerned and dedicated. His *desi* friends love Hindi movies, sports, and fusion music, carry nicknames such as "*Desi Gangsta*", "Bengal Bad Boy", or "*Chhota Babu*" (<http://rahul.hindujagran.com/rahul/friends.htm>). The latter lives in Australia where he teaches Economics at a college, but he is also the chairman of HB+KHLA, of which Rahul

is the president. Rahul Y's declared intention is to uplift India's international image as a backward culture and to increase the intellectual quality of *Hindutva* representation.

In his profile, Rahul continues: "I like to read books that deal with Hindu nationalism, Indian politics, Indian history, and computers. I am a member of the Indian Students Council, *Vishwa Hindu Parishad-America* (World Hindu Council of America), and regularly take part in activities by Hindu Swayam Sevak Sangh".

In the last thirty years, both the RSS and the VHP have become very active among Indians abroad and shape much of the institutionalization of transnational Hindu nationalism. To a great extent, the grassroots and training camp activities of the RSS and VHP abroad are important in order to keep physically 'in touch' with the ideas of *Hindutva* doctrines, and to enable young participants to develop feelings of solidarity and loyalty.

But the internet also provides a strengthening of bonds, a new kind of personal relationship that comes to life through nicknames, family photos and discussion forums, and through initiatives such as Rahul Y's homepage. The photographs of SSV camps, accompanied by comments, leave the impression that the camp is most of all about fun and friendship, like any other summer camp, with cultural nights and talent competitions, and the feeling that "together we are unstoppable..."

Among those pictures, one photograph caught my attention: Rahul and some of his friends attending a mid-west HSS training camp (c. probably early 2000) pose in front of an HSS banner and framed and garlanded posters of RSS leaders Hedgewar and Golwalkar, as well as a poster of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India). They pose as if they are performing a rap song, of the kind of *Desi Crew* lyrics put on the site elsewhere:

"Desi pride is my mind,
Desi blood is my kind,
So step aside and let me through,
Cuz it is all about the *desi* crew,
Desi luv is all around,
For my fellow *desis* never let me down,
Show your pride and say it's true,
Cuz *desi* blood flows through you"

The surreal mixture of Savarkar's glorification of the Hindus as a people and a race (*jati*) in the lyrics, the evocation of the Black Panther movement of the 1970s and the commodification of Afro-American ghetto culture through MTV, poses an interesting question with respect to how symbols of western consumer culture, Islamicate and anti-racist movements, and notions of racist superiority can be peacefully appropriated in order to shape a 'new Indo-American' pop-patriotism.

Here, a diasporic Hindu identity emerges that can, without contradicting itself in the view of its bearers, both claim reference to a 'pure Hindu culture' and a hybrid mixture of symbols taken from other cultural domains. The surrealism of HinduUnity is thus also located in the playful creative variability in identity-making, where the Soldiers of *Hindutva* can also be (gangsta) rappers of *Hindutva*.

By looking at the rhetorical forms, technological features and social motivations involved, I have tried to discuss some of the tactics used in and through HU to legitimize

violence, and shape the internet as a platform for action.

I do not believe that these are the trivial pursuits of a few 'nice guys' with nothing else to do, however 'regular' they may seem. Yet the answer to the politics of hate that they deploy lies only in creating more resources, and in greater depth, that can challenge the majoritarian and violent agenda that has come to characterize *Hindutva*. Rather than demanding the censorship of a site like HU, we need to further investigate the fact that the world wide web will remain a dynamic social space in which agents will employ a dense network of visual and narrative strategies in order to create in the netizen the desire, anxiety and pleasure of belonging to imagined and networked communities such as that of *Hindutva*. If online *Hindutva* is to be confronted, and possibly challenged, it will require a serious attempt to grasp the complexity of the ways of being, and the virtual and actual spaces that online *Hindutva* weaves together.

NOTES

1. Bajrang is one of the names of Hanuman, the monkey god, who in the epic *Ramayana* is portrayed as Ram's faithful companion-in-arms, and as a brave, if occasionally reckless warrior.
2. Literally, the 'Organization Family' - the cluster of various interest groups and mass organizations, including the dominant political party in the ruling National Democratic Alliance, the Bharatiya Janata Party, that are affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh, a self-styled 'Cultural Organization' that broadly expresses and shapes the ideology of the Hindu Right
3. These references are to the role played by local level leaders of the *Hindutva* movement who are named and celebrated in the HB+KHLA web site for their active roles in contributing to some of the most notoriously violent episodes (the murder of Ehsan Jafri, former member of Parliament, members of his family and neighbours in the Gulberg Society massacre in Ahmedabad, and the Narora Patiya killings) during the the systematic pogrom of Muslims in Gujarat, March 2002, in response to the Godhra carnage.

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