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**Overseas Friends of the BJP, the Web, and the Power of the State in the  
Diaspora**

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**Overseas Friends of the BJP, the Web, and the Power of the State in the  
Diaspora**

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## **Dedication**

For Lindsey

## **Abstract**

# **Overseas Friends of the BJP, the Web, and the Power of the State in the Diaspora**

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In this examination of the web presence of OFBJP.org, I show first how Overseas Friends of BJP fit into expanded definitions and conceptions of nationalism. The modern nation-state is reaching out beyond its territorial boundaries, bringing in migrants in the diaspora and reorienting their gaze back towards India. It is part of a larger strategy built around dominating cyberspace and exercising power over minds instead of bodies. A critical discourse analysis of OFBJP.org shows the priorities of the organization. It is built around recreating the hierarchy of the BJP and playing on migrants' emotional attachment to India to compel them to donate money and invest in the country in exchange for cultural capital. In doing so, it helps (re)produce a particular vision of India. Meanwhile, its Facebook and Twitter pages seem to be built around communicating the BJP ideology to its own members. It is not necessarily expansionist in the way that other social media projects are, and operates under a philosophy of control that polices what its members write. OFBJP rarely posts about life for Indian-Americans in the United States, and when it does, it is under the rubric of culture, specifically Hindu. The migrants engagement with the political life of India seems to be prized above all else, even as there are indications that there is a willingness to engage with issues in the US. I conclude with a few thoughts on how the Indian state's use of the internet forces us to reconsider previous notions of both cultural and political nationalism.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Overseas Friends of the Bharatiya Janata Party is the overseas arm of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a conservative political party that in recent years has emphasized economic development and cracking down on corruption as its top priorities. Though seemingly counterintuitive, the practice of establishing overseas wings of political parties dedicated to contesting elections within the territorial nation-state is not unique to India. Today, The Democratic Party in the United States has an extensive network of chapters that all fall under the umbrella of Democrats Abroad, and the Republican Party has Republicans Overseas. The Indian National Congress Party has the Indian National Overseas Congress, started in 2001. There are also clear historical antecedents in the front organizations established by Imperial Russia and Germany in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was later perfected by the Bolsheviks/Communists in the 20<sup>th</sup>. Right wing organizations did not typically rely on such groups for political life, instead using established networks of military officers, clergy and religious groups, and others. OFBJP, as we will see, operates as a blend of these two strategies. It is a front organization that is built on networks established by explicitly religious groups like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (which itself uses the cadre system), and this peculiar make-up has distinct consequences for how it projects and presents itself online. Congress, started in 2001.

OFBJP is connected, both historically and ideologically, to a vast constellation of groups dedicated to the ideology of Hindutva, an ethno-religious movement within India

that has sought to define India and its citizens in terms of the Hindu religion.<sup>1</sup> OFBJP in the United States was originally founded in 1992 by Lal Krishna Advani, then president of the BJP, as a way to counter the bad press coverage the party was receiving for its involvement in the “Ram Janmbhoomi” movement. OFBJP was formed not long before the destruction of the Babri Masjid, and its first task was to send out flyers to American lawmakers giving the BJP version of events.<sup>2</sup> In more recent years, the group has been mobilized and, in coordination with OFBJP chapters in the UK, Canada, and Australia, worked to launch an extensive campaign to support the BJP in India’s 2014 elections. Members spent their own money campaigning, and organized *chai-pe-charchas* (discussions over tea), Google hangouts with party organizers in India, calling campaigns to voters in India, as well as yoga events and charity runs.<sup>3</sup> More spectacularly, they were also one of the groups responsible for organizing BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to the United States, where he addressed a sold-out crowd in Madison Square Garden, and events like International Yoga Day, a major initiative of Modi’s, which drew participants from around the world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It’s important to note at the outset that “Hindutva” and the Hindu Right, for which Hindutva stands as a political ideology, does not refer to all Hindus. Rather, it specifically refers to those who use the identity of “Hindu” as part of a larger socio-political project dedicated to the imagining and fashioning of India as an explicitly “Hindu” nation, a distinct tradition within Hinduism that should not be made to stand in for the whole (though that is often part of the goal of the Hindu Right). From Hindutva’s inception in the writings of V.D. Savarkar in 1923, it has been a political project, dedicated to the “Hinduisation” of politics.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Basically, the Ram Janmbhoomi movement stated that a mosque, the Babri Masjid, had been built over the ruins of a Hindu temple and the birthplace of the god Ram. Several Hindu nationalist groups launched a campaign to destroy the mosque and build a new temple to Ram in its place. The movement culminated in a large group of mostly young men demolishing the mosque, and several subsequent riots where a large number of people, mostly Muslims, were killed. A temple has not yet been built, but the movement was responsible for catapulting the BJP to prominence in India, and resulted in their most significant electoral gains up until that time.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Much of this organization was done online. Indeed, the OFBJP is part of a much larger story about the way groups within the Indian diaspora, not just Hindu nationalist or fundamentalist groups, have used the internet to organize themselves and generate new formulations of what it means to be both Indian and American. The result, contrary to what the BJP and its allies might want to project, is far from an undifferentiated monolith, and is shaped by the successive waves of immigrants, the varied responses of nation-states to immigrant communities, capital and technology flows, the ideologies of nationhood, and the vagaries of caste, class, and gender. There have, of course, been numerous studies conducted not only on Hindutva in the diaspora, but how it has manifested itself in online spaces. However, to my knowledge, there has been no in-depth analysis of OFBJP. Most scholarly research tends to focus on cultural associations, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad America, or websites explicitly devoted to shaping the practice of Hinduism amongst certain subsets of the diaspora, like the Global Hindu Electronic Network. In looking at an organization that is tied directly to the political arm of Hindutva, I hope to offer up a new perspective on how Hindutva operates in the West and hopefully generate a more complete picture of the ecosystem that these organizations are all a part of, despite their seemingly diffuse and unconnected nature. How is the nation presented, who is conceived of as a member of that nation, and what is being asked of them? How is the issue of diaspora, of the Indian being physically a part of another nation, approached? How does a rigidly hierarchical organization such as the BJP adapt itself and its operations to cyberspace, where the ability of members to “talk back” is difficult to police?



The web presence of OFBJP is a complex and sometimes contradictory entity, with actions and organization sometimes acting at cross-purposes to stated goals. But today, a website can no longer be viewed in isolation. As social media continues its march towards ubiquity, and as it comes to occupy an increasingly important role in ideology and identity formation, it becomes crucial to look not only at an organization's website, but at its use of social media. Though social media platforms originally billed themselves as places for individuals to connect and as a way of forming an online identity, official organizations and brands are some of the most prolific and sophisticated users of social media. This trend is only increasing, as revenue streams and the so-called "attention economy" have become more defined. Therefore, it becomes crucial to take into account how an organization uses social media if we are to form a complete picture of its online activities and how people encounter it in cyberspace. It is for these reasons that throughout this paper, I refer to OFBJP's "web presence" as a whole, to include both their primary social media channels and the website proper. This also allows for greater specificity, as when I examine the different objectives of OFBJP's website as compared to their social media channels. How do they operate in tandem with each other? Are there issues and items emphasized in one that aren't present in the other? And, just as importantly, how can we use the interactivity afforded users by social media to gauge how the messaging of OFBJP is received?

As we examine OFBJP's web presence, we must also be alert to what is not said, to possible voices of dissent, and to how both the BJP and OFBJP respond to these. In the final section of this paper, I will examine the place of religion in the discourse of OFBJP,

focusing in particular on its relative absence. Though, as other scholars have noted,<sup>5</sup> Hindutva has experienced the most success in the United States by presenting itself as a cultural force, OFBJP seems to have been obliged to follow a different path, emphasizing politics. Social media offers us an opportunity to see not only what OFBJP wants its followers to know and to identify with, but to also see a bit of how those messages resonate with the community. The most obvious location for this is in comments left on Facebook posts or replies to tweets on Twitter. But we can also look at the types of posts that gather the greatest amount of interaction. Using this approach, we will be able to see not only what is important to OFBJP, but what its followers react most strongly to. Do these objectives align?

I will argue that the main OFBJP website is primarily concerned with fundraising, and operates using the discourse of development that has been so successfully deployed by the BJP in India in recent years. Contrary to its mission statement, which suggests an outward focus, dedicated to influencing the perception of India in the United States, its main concern is generating money for the home organization. When it does engage with issues affecting the Indian American community in the US, it most often focuses on the cultural sphere, and in particular the portrayal of Hinduism. Occasionally, OFBJP will stray into politics, but this is usually done with some reluctance, and most often on issues that are still externally focused and impact the Indian nation-state, not Indian Americans

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<sup>5</sup> See, in particular, Biju Matthew and Vijay Prashad, "The protean forms of Yankee Hindutva," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, 3 (2000): 516-534.; Arvind Rajagopal, "Hindu nationalism in the US: Changing configurations of political practice," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, 3 (2000): 467-496.

themselves. While the website proper is devoted to fundraising, the social media accounts of OFBJP are devoted to ideology transmission and shaping the discourse around India, extending the policing of how the Indian state is discussed to cyberspace and mobilizing its followers to assist in this action. In an attempt to fit within the multicultural discourse of the United States and to avoid perpetuating the view in the United States that OFBJP is associated with any extremist or religious ideology, OFBJP makes few overt references to religion in its web presence. This, however, is complicated by the fact that judging Facebook and Twitter posts, these are the issues that resonate most deeply with OFBJP and those sympathetic to its aims.

### **THEORY AND NATIONALISM**

A few words about nationalism in the internet age are in order before we examine Overseas Friends of Bharatiya Janata Party's web presence in greater depth. OFBJP is very obviously an organization that responds to and seeks to inculcate among its members a strong feeling of nationalism, and as such offers an intriguing development in our conceptions of nationalism. In early conceptions of nationalism, such as that proposed by Ernest Gellner, the political and the national unit are more or less the same, with one layered on top of the other. Being primarily a political phenomena, nationalism is therefore confined by the territorial limits of the state. Movement between countries and the possibility that feelings of social and cultural nationalism might exist outside these territorial boundaries were only belatedly acknowledged.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1983.

One of the promises of the internet was that it would break down the barriers that separated us, challenging the logic that underpins the modern nation-state as understood and described by Gellner by facilitating global communication and making the idea of national borders seem increasingly arbitrary. This is the future gestured towards by Arjun Appadurai in his landmark work, *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*. He points to a variety of transnational flows and “scapes” as the new organizing units, rather than the territorially-bounded nation-state. These “scapes,” the dense web of people and ideas and capital moving rapidly around the globe, become more relevant to how we view the world, leaving the nation-state looking irrevocably like a thing of the past.

As we can obviously see, neither of these views ring quite true today. The traditional nation-state is still alive and well, its advocates and adherents having proven themselves more than capable of adjusting themselves to the new, globalized age. Not only that, but the traditional nation-state is now overflowing its borders. As Marie Gillespie points out, it is premature to announce the death of the nation-state, though we must take account of how new media lessens the importance of geopolitical borders and spatial/temporal boundaries.<sup>7</sup> While Gillespie points to how this emphasis on the porousness of boundaries threatens the vitality, significance, and viability of national cultures, we can also envision how these same processes might allow for the ideology of the nation-state to spread and become even more deeply entrenched, especially amongst

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<sup>7</sup> Marie Gillespie, “Transnational Communications and Diaspora Communities,” in *Ethnic Minorities and the Media*, edited by Simon Cottle (Maidenhead: Open University Press): 168.

members of a particular diaspora. A nation-state has never been just territory, or else we would have had them from the earliest days of human society. Rather, the nation-state is an idea, and one often powerfully expressed through culture.

How does the internet work in the construction of that national culture? Benedict Anderson has famously written about the concept of print capitalism and its importance to the nation-state, noting that they help create an imagined community through which people are able to conceive of themselves as part of a nation.<sup>8</sup> Key to this idea is the concept of simultaneity. For Anderson, this simultaneity was best exemplified by the act of reading the newspaper, a community ritual that helped to mark the contours of the nation, with its (literate) members doing the same activity, exposed to the same ideas, at the same time.<sup>9</sup>

Without generalizing too much, we can safely see how this same process can be applied to internet communication. Anderson himself would later expand his ideas to include the concepts of long-distance and email nationalism, wherein diasporic groups actively support political causes in the homeland through new communications technologies (although the other aspects of nationalist feeling remain largely the same).<sup>10</sup> Thomas Hylland Eriksen has developed this into the broader concept of internet nationalism. Indeed, the internet has proven a great boon for nationalism. “Far from being a ‘disembedding’ technology,” Eriksen writes, “the Internet has in fact proven to be a ‘re-

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<sup>8</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalisms, Southeast Asia, and the World*, London: Verso, 1998.

embedding' technology."<sup>11</sup> Identities and national affiliations that may have been lost over time due to the difficulty of communicating across vast distances are retained thanks to the simultaneity of the internet. This makes it far easier to partake in the cultural idea of the nation, from afar. For some, the possibilities of new media allows for the connection of like-minded individuals across the distances and barriers of space and time, with diasporic groups genuinely challenging the territoriality of the nation-state by creating their own, transnational communities.<sup>12</sup> While the original conception of nationalism for Anderson depended on print capitalism and the spread of literature and newspapers, new virtual communities are formed via the spread of interconnected communication tools in the digital space.<sup>13</sup>

In Anderson's view, the main difference between long-distance nationalism and nationalism in general, aside from location, is the growth of more extremist attitudes amongst the members of the diaspora. Freed from the possible repercussions of their actions, members of the nation living beyond its borders are able to endorse policy proposals and funnel money to causes and groups that are more radical than they might otherwise support if they lived in the territorial nation-state. For instance, members of the Tamil diaspora might send money to support the Tamil Tigers, helping to prolong the civil war that until recently had festered in Sri Lanka. Since the members of the diaspora are not affected by the aftermath, their stake in the conflict is mostly ideological. Daniele Conversi

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11 Thomas Hylland Eriksen, "Nationalism and the Internet," *Nations and Nationalism* 13, No. 1 (2007): 7.

12 Karim H. Karim, "Mapping diasporic mediascapes," in *The Media of Diaspora* (Taylor and Francis, 2003): 7.

13 Daniele Conversi, "Irresponsible Radicalisation: Diasporas, Globalisation and Long-Distance Nationalism in the Digital Age," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38: 9 (2012): 1360. .

refers to this process as “irresponsible radicalistaion.”<sup>14</sup> Writing specifically about the case of Hindutva in the United States, she states “The Internet allowed the migrants a safe space to express a jingoistic nationalism that is not recommended in the spaces of corporate America.”<sup>15</sup> What’s more, as Rajagopal has shown, the internet allows small but vocal groups to occupy an outsized proportion of internet real estate, enabling the further spread of more extreme messaging.<sup>16</sup>

Conversi, Anderson, and others all point to the way that more radical members of the diaspora are able to influence events back in the homeland. However, as Christophe Jaffrelot and Ingrid Therwath have shown, the direction of influence is not always from periphery to the center. In fact, in the case of Hindutva groups operating in the diaspora, the reverse is often more accurate. The coalition of groups inside of India dedicated to the propagation of Hindutva ideology known collectively as the Sangh Parivar broadcasts ideology out to its organizational fronts in the diaspora, dictating how they and their members engage with the homeland.<sup>17</sup> This corrective is especially useful when we consider the case of OFBJP, which, more explicitly than most groups, is tied to a central organization in India. We therefore have to switch our view of long-distance nationalism, looking at how the nation-state is extending its ideology out further, beyond its borders, rather than how money and funds from the diaspora are being used to influence events back

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 1361.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 1369.

<sup>16</sup> Rajagopal, “Hindu nationalism in the US,” 4845.

<sup>17</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot and Ingrid Therwath, “The Sangh Parivar and the Hindu Diaspora in the West: What Kind of “Long-Distance Nationalism”?” *International Political Sociology* 1, 3 (2007): 278-295.

home.<sup>18</sup> Nationalising processes, especially using online mediums and involving diasporic populations, is never a simple one-way process. Just as, in the Anderson model, the state is being imagined for and broadcast to its subjects, so are those subjects playing a role in the construction and imagination of the nation.

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<sup>18</sup> Though of course this process is also occurring. The non-profit groups Awaaz and the South Asian Citizens Watch have both published fine reports on how money given for what are ostensibly charitable causes in South Asia are instead funneled into Hindutva projects. For instance, building a school for the purpose of converting members of tribal communities to Hinduism.



## Chapter 2: OFBJP.org, Fundraising and Development

### DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE

Framing theory and critical discourse analysis have both been effectively used to interrogate websites. Erika Polson and Shannon Kahle used them in their examination of ‘Destination UK,’ a special online report established by the BBC and designed to provide an in-depth look at what was being referred to as the “immigration crisis” in the United Kingdom.<sup>19</sup> The goal of the site was explicitly to act as a frame for the national debate on immigration, and as such had already “compiled and organized hierarchically an overall package that makes up its *frame* of the issue as a whole (emphasis in original).”<sup>20</sup> For Polson and Kahle, news media represents an elite form of discourse, particularly because access to it is unequal to all groups or individuals in a society. This discourse analysis, however, is not limited to analyzing and critiquing how various groups are portrayed, though that is an important part. Critical discourse analysis takes a more holistic view of the text presented. In the case of news discourse, this includes who is quoted (members of the decision-making elite or, in the case Polson and Kahle examine, immigrants themselves), where in the story those quotes appear (the inverted pyramid style favored by most news reports dictates that more important viewpoints be placed towards the beginning

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<sup>19</sup> Erika Polson and Shannon Kahle, “Limits of National Discourse on a Transnational Phenomenon: A Case Study of Immigration Framing in the BBC Online,” *The International Communication Gazette* 72, No. 3 (2010): 256.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

of a story), word choice, where active versus passive voice is used, and overall coherence of how sentences relate to each other.<sup>21</sup>

One of the most prominent elements on the website for the US chapter of the Overseas Friends of the BJP is its logo, situated in the upper-left-hand corner. The image is of a saffron lotus flower, a popular symbol in Hinduism as well as the identifying mark for the BJP in India. Because a large portion of the Indian electorate is illiterate, parties are identified by a sign of some sort. These signs allow voters who cannot read to identify the candidate and the party they would like to vote for on the ballot. Since the BJP has been from the first a party aligned with Hindu nationalism and affiliated with the Sangh, this is a fitting symbol indeed. The lotus sits against a saffron background, and is encircled by a band of the same color, on which is written “Overseas Friends of the BJP.” Beneath the lotus, the United States flag and the Indian tricolor are joined, given equal weight, though both subordinated underneath the lotus flower. The implication is that national allegiance is secondary to allegiance to the party, and given the religious nature of the lotus flower and heavy use of saffron, itself a color with a great deal of religious significance and that has been adopted by used liberally by Hindutva, that party allegiance is also bound up in notions of Hindu culture and identity. Indeed, they are inseparable from each other, everything bound by a band of saffron.

The rest of the site is set against a blue background. A login box for members sits in the top-right-hand corner, and immediately underneath it are options for using social media accounts to login, suggesting an interconnectedness between the various online

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<sup>21</sup> Polson and Kahle, “Limits of National Discourse on a Transnational Phenomenon,” 257.

personas of the people who will be using the website. Pinned to the far left side of the screen are the links to OFBJP-USA's social media profiles. They include Facebook, Twitter, and Google+. The YouTube icon actually goes directly to Prime Minister Modi's YouTube, this despite the fact that OFBJP has its own YouTube account where it occasionally uploads videos. I'll be discussing these profiles in greater detail later, with particular attention paid to Facebook and Twitter, the most popular platforms.

Beneath this login is the site's main menu. One of the most important features of any site, the menu is what dictates the range of options available to the user. It organizes the information available on the site, and arranges it in such a way that the web developer believes will be most beneficial to the user or, alternatively, what the developed wants to steer the user towards and the tasks that they want the user to complete. According to the tenets of critical discourse analysis, it privileges certain actions and information over others, and bounds what is thinkable, doable, and achievable within the space of the website.

In the case of OFBJP.org, the menu options are "Home," "About OFBJP," "About BJP," "Join OFBJP," "Events," "Follow," and, set apart from the rest with a different color background, a link with the call to "Make a Donation." The BJP and other Sangh organizations are rigidly hierarchical endeavors, a feature that is amply borne out in the submenu items of the OFBJP site. Of the six pages listed under the heading "About OFBJP," four of them go to pages containing information on the leadership of the BJP and OFBJP. These are labeled "Executive Committee," "National Council," "National Committee," and "Chapter Coordinators." In addition, there's also a link to the President's

Message, bringing the user to a brief statement from the President of OFBJP in the United States. The lone link not devoted to elucidating the leadership structure of the organization is the link labeled “Objectives” (although, of course, the laying out of objectives for the rest of an organization to follow is on its own a rather direct affirmation of power).

After the main menu, the dominant feature of the site’s homepage is a slideshow that scrolls automatically through a series of photos. Given that the slideshow occupies such a prominent spot on the homepage of the site, we can use it to determine the priorities of OFBJP itself. Items that are valued, that are deemed to be of importance to the organization and that the organization wants their members to be aware of and concerned with, necessarily take pride of place. For OFBJP.org, that means Narendra Modi, the BJP’s electoral victories in India, and protests against any slights to Hinduism in the United States. Even within this, however, a hierarchy is present, with certain topics given more weight than others. As of April 6, 2017, five out of the ten photos in the slideshow were of victory parties held by various OFBJP chapters after the BJP won numerous seats in Assembly elections and other local contests. All of them lead to the same press release, put out March 21, trumpeting the BJP’s “Stupendous Victory.” Also in the slideshow are three images of Narendra Modi, one addressing a joint session of the US Congress and link to the video of the address, one photo collage showing Modi at home and abroad, and a link to Modi’s personal site. The final two images are related to hate crimes, though of a nature different than what one might at first expect. These images will be explored in greater depth later in this paper, but suffice it to say that for now, the clear emphasis of the images in this

slideshow, indeed, one of the main focal points of the website in general, is on the BJP in India and its triumphs.

The other prominent element on the homepage is the menu next to the slider. The links next to the slider are “Become a Member,” “India Development Foundation of Overseas Indians,” “Indian Student Registration with Govt of India,” “India MYGOV,” which leads to a monthly newsletter from the central government in India, “Pravasi Kamal,” which roughly translates to “amazing migrants” and links to (some) OFBJP press releases, and “Indian Consulates in the US.” Previous iterations of the homepage also included a tool that allowed people to quickly donate to OFBJP, though that seems to rotate in and out of the lineup.

The one seeming outlier here is the Indian Student Registration link. The others relate directly to OFBJP and their mission, while the link for Indian students has no apparent relation to OFBJP. On November 17, 2015, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that according to the US Department of State and the Institute of International Education, the number of students from India studying in the United States had risen in fall 2014, breaking a three year slide. According to the report, 132,888 Indians were set to study abroad in the US that year, the second most of any country besides China.<sup>22</sup> Being able to register with the Indian government and access help navigating that process would be a top priority for any Indian student in the United States. This is also a key demographic for the BJP: the young, educated, Indian abroad. After all, the GHEN, an early and extremely influential

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<sup>22</sup> Last accessed November 22, 2016: <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2015/11/17/why-indian-student-numbers-in-u-s-are-on-the-rise-after-three-year-decline/>.

Hindutva hub, was first started by an Indian graduate student studying in the United States.<sup>23</sup> This constituency has therefore played a crucial role in the growth of the BJP amongst diaspora populations.

Looking at all of these elements, the emphases of the site seems to be on fundraising and facilitating the transfer of money back to India (the large donation button, prominent link to IDF-OI, and the invitation to “Become a Member,” which comes with a fee, all function as clues in this regard. In addition, considerable effort has been spent explaining the hierarchical structure of BJP and OFBJP, a reflection of the discipline that Sangh organizations have sought to foster. Finally, there are press releases and information from the government itself, which will also align with some of the mission of social media. We’ll begin by examining some of the financial flows at play here and the developmental mission that they fit into.

### **OFBJP.ORG AND THE DEVELOPMENTAL AGENDA**

We need only look so far at the emphasis on development throughout the OFBJP.org site. It recurs as a key theme, echoing the official platform that Narendra Modi ran on in 2014, when he promised to bring his “Gujarat Model of Development,” where he served as Chief Minister, to the entire nation.<sup>24</sup> The emphasis on development and pledges to crack down on corruption obscured what Modi was perhaps most famous for: his role in

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<sup>23</sup> Vinay Lal, “When Hinduism Meets the Internet,” *Times of India*, January 20, 2013, accessed November 27, 2016, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/all-that-matters/When-Hinduism-meets-the-internet/articleshow/18097148.cms>.

<sup>24</sup> Last accessed November 22, 2016. Originally published April 14, 2014: <http://www.narendramodi.in/the-gujarat-model-3156>.

the 2002 Gujarat Riots that resulted in over a thousand deaths, with the vast majority of those killed being Muslims.<sup>25</sup> Modi was widely viewed as being complicit in the event, and existed as a pariah on the international stage. The United States Department of State denied him a visa, depriving him of the opportunity to journey to the United States and appeal to his supporters in the diaspora in the run up to the 2014 elections. In the end, OFBJP and other organizations were more than capable of raising funds themselves, relying, at times, on some exceptionally creative technology to skirt the geographic limitations imposed on them.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, it is significant that in the lead-up to the 2014 elections, Modi and the BJP opted to follow the pattern established by the Jana Sangh back in 1965, focusing attention on their economic development platforms rather than using overtly communal rhetoric.<sup>27</sup>

The obvious emphasis in these links is on monetary donations, as evidenced by two calls to donate. The quick donate tool is red, a color long associated with action and commonly used to grab attention. According to the site, funds donated using this tool and

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<sup>25</sup> This is based off the official number reported to the Indian Parliament. Estimates by other researchers states that at least 2000 Muslims were killed in the rioting.

<sup>26</sup> Dean Nelson, "'Magic' Modi uses hologram to address dozens of rallies at once," *The Telegraph*, May 2, 2014, accessed April 29, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/10803961/Magic-Modi-uses-hologram-to-address-dozens-of-rallies-at-once.html>.

<sup>27</sup> I should note that I was especially curious to see what the site looked like during election time, and attempted to use the Internet Archive to view previous versions. However, the site's code was written in such a way as to prevent it from being archived. This was done by the insertion of a robots.txt, which tells the web crawlers that are used by the Internet Archive and search engines such as Google not to access certain pages within a website (In the case of OFBJP.org, this instruction was applied to its entire domain. It was clearly intentional, since written within the code was the message "go away"). Normally, sites allow their pages to be crawled, because that is the easiest way to be indexed by a search engine, and thus potentially discovered by an interested web user (that many search engines ignore these directions is besides the point). It's an easy way for the site to maintain a significant public profile. It is, of course, foolish to argue about what is not there, but we can reasonably conclude that OFBJP.org is not particularly interested in bringing in outside users. It is meant for internal users, those within the community who already know about the organization.

the one in the header, labeled “Make a Donation,” both go directly to OFBJP. The other tool, labeled “Give Back to India,” brings the user to a page describing the India Development Foundation of Overseas Indians (IDF-OI), a non-profit registered by the government of India. The organization was originally established by the United Progressive Alliance as a way for members of the Indian diaspora to fund development projects in India. The BJP has since taken it over and launched an online portal through which members of the diaspora are able to donate to several of the government’s flagship projects, including Clean India and a “rejuvenation” of the Ganges, the clear Hindu cultural significance of such a project laid out clearly in the marketing for it.

Sushma Swaraj, India’s Minister of External Affairs, has been particularly crucial in this process. She narrates a video promoting IDF-OI and encouraging donations that is featured prominently on OFBJP.org. The video opens with an English-speaking narrator inviting the viewer to think back to his or her childhood and to the simple pleasures of village life. A montage is then presented of children running along dirt paths, floating paper boats down clear streams and playing games, laughing. Women in brightly-colored saris follow after them, keeping a relaxed but watchful eye. It’s a childhood idyll invoking the sounds, sights, and smells of a dream world, the kind that only exists in the realms of memory tinged with nostalgia. And, the narrator reminds the viewer, it’s still there. Everything that the migrant has lost, that simple life, is back in India, waiting for their help. Waiting for them to invest in their village and develop it. Don’t forget it. Don’t leave it behind. The frame then switches to Sushma Swaraj, speaking Hindi in pointed contrast to the narrator’s English (though her part does include English subtitles), who explains the



IDF-OI program and how it is working to develop these villages through various schemes. The video deploys the image of a tree, planted in foreign soil, with one on each major continent, but with the roots all reaching back to India. No matter where in the far-flung Indian diaspora you reside, the video says, you can always reach back to the homeland through IDF-OI. You can save your village.

The video implicitly contrasts the goodness and purity of Indian village life with the migrant's current location, wherever that may be. It is clearly aimed at the moneyed sets of the diaspora, playing on a particular kind of guilt: that they live outside of India in comfort while the "home" they left behind still contends with alarmingly high rates of poverty and severe deprivation.<sup>28</sup> As Matthew and Prashad have identified, it is a version of long-distance nationalism, one most often assuaged through remittances.<sup>29</sup> The state uses the emotional pull of childhood to reaffirm its claims on members of the diaspora and redirect their gaze and their money back towards India. As such, it fits in perfectly with the BJP's and OFBJP's larger emphasis on development.

This vision of India is also a gendered one. Partha Chatterjee has already written at length on how the Indian nation was inscribed on women's bodies as a response to colonialism. While men entered and contested the colonial state in the public sphere, culture was sequestered and made into something private, and therefore outside the ambit of British rule. Women were included in this private sphere, charged with protecting and embodying "authentic" national culture, even as men had to necessarily make compromises

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<sup>28</sup> Matthew and Prashad, "The protean forms of Yankee Hindutva," 519.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

in the public realm.<sup>30</sup> This same binary relationship is reenacted in the video for IDF-OI. Throughout, very few adult men are featured. Women in traditional dress are shot in loving close-up, as are children, while men are almost entirely absent, included in wide shots if at all. India, it seems, is a land populated entirely by women and children, in need of men, thriving in the diaspora, to protect them and the Indian way of life. This lack of women is echoed in the rest of OFBJP.org. Women do not figure prominently in the leadership or many of the images on the site. When they do appear, it's usually in connection to a cultural activity, such as a partnership with VHPA on how to raise children.

It is important to note here that previous rhetoric surrounding overseas Indians portrayed them as part of “brain drain” who abandoned the nation and the developmental project to work in the diaspora.<sup>31</sup> India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru proclaimed technology and science to be the guiding principles of modern India and crucial to its development.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, taking that knowledge and deploying it elsewhere was tantamount to betraying the nation. Slowly, however, the state opened up more routes for overseas Indians to invest in India. First came the category of Non-Resident Indian in 1975, which brought with it the opportunity to invest in certain industries in India. As the economy continued to liberalize in the 1990s, the Indian state eventually opened up all sectors to NRI investment and offered them expanded rights. Recognizing the large

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30 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993): 121.

31 Madhavi Mallapragada, “Home, homeland, homepage: belonging and the Indian-American web,” *New Media & Society* 8, 2 (2006): 210..

32 Rohit Chopra, “Global primordialities: virtual identity politics in online Hindutva and online Dalit discourse,” *New Media & Society* 8, 2 (2006): 190.

community of people worldwide who traced their cultural roots to India even if they were not technically Indian citizens, the Indian state introduced the Persons of Indian Origin designation in 1999.<sup>33</sup> All of these moves were to make it easier for wealthy members of the diaspora to invest back in India. Reflective of this outreach movement to the diaspora, the video treats living overseas as the culmination of a dream for young Indians, a reward for studying hard. If it is a betrayal, it is only a betrayal of the self, for forgetting one's roots. For the motherland, it is repaying a debt. Though the final goal is monetary, the language used is often calibrated to appeal to cultural concerns. In her appeal, Swaraj states that giving to IDF-OI is not just a donation, but a way "to connect to your roots" and a "way to demonstrate your emotional attachment to your country."

The video also makes the case for technology being crucial to the growth and future of the nation. Midway through the video, as Sushma Swaraj is expanding on the projects that overseas Indians can donate money towards, the scene switches to a school in Gujarat that is identified by the English-speaking narrator as a "game changer." We then see close-ups of students typing in a computer lab and performing chemistry experiments. The school, we are told, has been funded by overseas Indians, giving other students the ability to chase their dreams. In his work, Rohit Chopra has examined the crucial role technology has played in the rhetoric surrounding the Indian nation-state, particularly as it's deployed by adherents of Hindu nationalism.<sup>34</sup> In formulating this analysis, Chopra uses the concepts of fields and capital as developed by Pierre Bourdieu. In this view, the social world is

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<sup>33</sup> Mallapragada, "Home, Homeland, Homepage," 210-211.

<sup>34</sup> Rohit Chopra, "Global primordialities: virtual identity politics in online Hindutva and online Dalit discourse," *New Media & Society* 8, 2 (2006): 188.

constructed of various “fields,” be they cultural, political, economic, or otherwise. Those who operate within these fields accrue and exchange “capital” — in a variety of forms, not strictly monetary — in order to advance their interests. Whatever the dominant group is in a certain field will dictate the logic of that field, and hence what kind of capital will be most valuable. In the case of India, the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru championed the technological field in a bid to rapidly industrialize the country (and in continuation of strategies of resistance developed in the fight against colonialism). Since any field is situated within others, and forms of capital can be exchanged and traded between fields, those who already had advantages in caste and class and who had access to education and the English language came to dominate this new technological field.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, technology and the nation were intertwined from the beginning, and situated at the apex of this new technological nationalism were the same upper-caste Hindus who had dominated the independence movement. Though the current proponents of Hindutva would no doubt recoil at the idea they were carrying on one aspect of Nehruvian nationalism, the fact remains that excellence in technology has come to be an integral part of Indian nationalism as articulated by the BJP, and other groups and competing views of the nation are forced to take part in this discourse online.<sup>36</sup> Combined with this was a strain of anti-colonial thought that sought to establish technology, heretofore the domain of the colonizers, as something intrinsic to Hindu thought.<sup>37</sup> This process created a tripartite conception of the Indian nation and its citizens that combined Hinduism, valorization of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 189.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 190.

technology, and nationalism. The cultural capital of Hinduness has therefore been combined with the globally valid currency of technological capital.

This twin emphasis on roots and “giving back” to India is also apparent on the page for Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD). PBD, or Non-Resident Indian Day, was originally started by the government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a BJP politician who served from 1998-2004 (and 13 days in 1996) as Prime Minister of India. It is run under the auspices of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs. Its purpose, according to the PBD website, is “to strengthen the engagement of the overseas Indian community with the Government, reconnect them with their roots and celebrate their achievements and contributions.”<sup>38</sup> This year’s theme was “Redefining Engagement with the Indian Diaspora,” though it is unclear exactly what that redefinition would be, besides as handy marketing lingo. However, here we see an emphasis on engaging with youth, with an entire day of the convention devoted to the concerns of “Young NRIs” who are able to register for the conference at a reduced rate. The idea is to reinforce a sense of community, constructing a space where attendees can “interact with young POIs and NRIs from all across the world.” Not only that, but they will also have the opportunity to meet with “Young Resident Indians.” Many scholars have commented on the fact that homeland politics is most important for first generation migrants, with successive generations feeling less and less of a pull towards the “homeland.”<sup>39</sup> This would appear to be an effort to counteract that effect and use a state-sponsored holiday as a way to keep young NRIs involved politically. The idea is also

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<sup>38</sup> Last accessed November 22, 2016: <https://pbdindia.gov.in/about-pbd>.

<sup>39</sup> Karim, “Mapping Diasporic Mediascapes,” 3.

reinforced that the Indian community is a global one, but with roots in the territorial expression of India, the motherland to which they all can make their annual return. The event also becomes a way of keeping the Pravasi Bharatiya rooted in Indian culture, as they peruse Indian handicrafts and stroll through the cultural bazaar. Not only that, but because this is a state-organized event, they become “rooted” in a particular vision of the Indian nation.

Key to that vision of the Indian nation is the concept of development. Borrowing the lingo of Silicon Valley, the poster focuses on start-ups, and in particular the ecosystem and policies surrounding them in Karnataka, the state where this year’s conference was held. The tone throughout is that of a networking event, a way for overseas Indians to come to India and discover how they can give back to their home country and simultaneously find their next investment opportunity. Though seemingly marketed towards the entire Indian diaspora, the implication is clear: they want those members of the diaspora who have the funds to travel to India and to invest in “development” there. In return, they receive a reconnection with their cultural “roots,” and become among the most visible members of “global India,” ambassadors to the rest of the world and instrumental in the shaping of perceptions of India. Indeed, the Overseas Indian is most useful when it is his or her money that finds its way back to India, while the culturally-rooted self remains abroad, raising India’s prestige on the world stage.

One of the most interesting parts of the PBD is the date it is held on every year: January 9. It was chosen to commemorate the day Mohandas Gandhi, whom the website refers to as “the greatest Pravasi,” returned to India after spending years abroad in South

Africa. As Vinay Lal points out, this appropriation of Gandhi's memory is curious, not only because the RSS and other members of the Hindu Right in India, with which the BJP is allied, has an adversarial relationship to Gandhi's memory and legacy (even going so far as to celebrate Nathuram Godse, Gandhi's assassin), but also because the idea of the PBD and the valorization of the NRI is a clear manifestation of the globalizing trend present in today's capitalist society, a trend that the ideas of Gandhi himself were often in opposition to. As Gandhi realized, the march towards a more globalized society would entail the acceptance of certain modes of thinking as universal. Undoubtedly, these modes of thinking would be Western in origin, centered on growth and development and all the other ideas that undergird the modern nation-state.<sup>40</sup> Lal goes on to demonstrate how the image of Gandhi himself has been used by modern-day politicians as a form of cultural capital in India's dealing with the world. Lumped in the vague spirituality of yoga and other aspects of Hinduism, the idea of Gandhi has become a way for Indian politicians to assert the moral superiority of their country over others, even as they champion policies that Gandhi himself no doubt would have found abhorrent, such as when India developed its own nuclear weapons. In the end, by making Gandhi into a symbol of the NRI and globalized India, he becomes one more easily commodifiable good, his ideas useful only as far as they allow India to build its standing in the world as a modern nation-state.<sup>41</sup> The same can be said of other attempts to burnish brand India, particularly events like "International Yoga Day." Though Modi and the BJP insist that yoga is non-sectarian and can be appreciated

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<sup>40</sup> Lal, "Hinduism, the Diaspora, and the Anxiety of Influence," 24-25.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 26-27.

regardless of religious background, the fact remains that it is historically associated with Hinduism, and that by linking yoga with India, it is reinforcing the idea of India as Hindu.

Many of these tensions are expressed in the term “Integral Humanism,” a key part of the BJP approach to economic development that supposedly separates India from the strategies followed by other industrialized countries, and something that appears prominently on the OFBJP site. The term was first coined in 1965 by the Jana Sangh, a Hindu nationalist political party and the precursor to the modern-day BJP.<sup>42</sup> It is broadly Gandhian in its outlook, with a strong focus on *swadeshi*, manifested as an emphasis on Indian manufacturing of goods, a key rallying cry of the independence movement, and a call for morality in politics. Broadly articulated, the idea had as its main goal the foregrounding of the human being in economic discourse in contrast to the materialism of capitalism and the technophilia of communism. However, it differed from Gandhian thought by placing these human subjects in strict subservience to the national whole, doing away with the ideas of autonomy and skepticism of state power that Gandhi favored.<sup>43</sup> The most significant aspect of the adoption of “integral humanism” was that it allowed the Jana Sangh to soften its approach and place its ideas within a Gandhian framework, making it appear softer and more spiritual instead of communal. The switch paved the way for an electoral breakthrough for the Sangh, and it is a strategy that has been followed ever since.

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<sup>42</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999): 84-85.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 85.



## ORGANIZATIONAL DISCIPLINE ON THE WEB

As has been alluded to elsewhere in this paper, the BJP and other organizations grouped under the umbrella of the Sangh are extremely hierarchical, with a premium placed on unquestioning obedience. This is partly reflected in the site's emphasis on organizational structure, devoting a significant amount of its real estate to BJP and OFBJP leadership at various levels. This disciplinarian streak is even more explicit in the Frequently Asked Questions section of the website.

The "FAQ's" page of OFBJP.org begins by laying out the benefits of membership, the importance of membership fees, and answering some more specific questions about what exactly OFBJP is and its activities. However, at the bottom of the page are two questions aimed at governing the behavior of its members. The first asks "Can I start my own activity or task?" The answer states that:

Every member of OFBJP must abide by its constitution, laws, and discipline. Any activity or task must be initiated with full knowledge of of the local chapter or national team. Every activity of OFBJP must be a team activity and should involve other active members for positive outcomes. *Not abiding by the rules of OFBJP constitutes indiscipline (emphasis added).*<sup>44</sup>

When members first join OFBJP, they check a box stating that they subscribe to OFBJP ideology as well as one stating that they agree to the "terms and conditions." In both cases, these are basically the tenets laid out in the mission statement of the organization, agreeing

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<sup>44</sup> "FAQ's," Overseas Friends of the Bharatiya Janata Party, accessed April 16, 2017, <https://www.ofbjp.org/home/faqs>.

to uphold the doctrine of the BJP and to spread its message in the United States. The combination of all of these makes it clear that members are not to act individually. They must only act in accordance with OFBJP party leadership, which itself takes its cues from BJP in India. It is discipline above all else.

The last question on the page takes the concept of discipline and applies it to the internet. It asks “What is expected from OFBJP members?” The first portion of the answer is obvious: that they attend OFBJP events whenever possible. It goes on to state, however, that members “Maintain the discipline of the of the organization and not indulge in any improper behavior like writing emails or on social media that tarnishes the image of the organization or its office bearers/members.”<sup>45</sup> What exactly tarnishes the image of OFBJP is left unexplored. Still, this shows the emphasis on discipline extends even into cyberspace, showing that OFBJP recognizes how important its web presence and the conversation that surrounds it is to its organizational goals.

How does this play out online for OFBJP? Rajagopal has already observed that the vaunted discipline of the RSS is not emphasized to as great a degree in the diaspora. During a brief stint at a Hindu Swayamsewak Sangh (the US version of the RSS), Rajagopal noticed that it was difficult to force well-heeled white collar professionals to perform much of the grueling physical labor that marked the RSS in India, where the membership was often drawn from the ranks of lower classes.<sup>46</sup> Did OFBJP have any more success? It is impossible to determine that from looking at OFBJP.org, since the opportunities for

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Rajagopal, “Hindu Nationalism in the US,” 481.

members to interact with what is on the website are limited. Instead, we must turn our focus to social media, where we can glean a few hints as to the reception of certain items amongst the followers of the OFBJP, paying particular attention to what generates feedback, whether that be in the form of likes, shares, retweets, replies, or comments.

## Chapter 3: Social Media and Nurturing an Ideology

### DEFINING AND APPROACHING SOCIAL MEDIA

Scholars have argued that understanding how the internet is used to construct shared imaginations of identities is a crucial analytical concern, especially in the study of diasporas.<sup>47</sup> In their examination of the use of Facebook by the Uyghur diaspora, Nur-Mohammad et al have emphasized that this identity construction takes place in an environment free from state control.<sup>48</sup> However, this ignores the fact that the state is able to use social media as well. Continuing the argument raised by Therwath and Jaffrelot when they ask what kind of long-distance nationalism is at play here, we cannot afford to ignore the ability of the state and organizations based in the homeland to extend their reach beyond the geographic borders of the nation-state and influence those in the diaspora. Physical territory, while still vitally important in nationalist ideology and in the ideology of Hindutva in particular, does not preclude attempts to dominate virtual territory. While a great deal of scholarly attention has been given to the role certain websites have played in this process of virtual territorial expansion, comparatively less has been paid to social media, and how it is used to strengthen a particular discourse or expand ideological reach.

Furthermore, as Natalia Rybas and Radhika Gajjala have pointed out, we should be cautious not to view the virtual and the physical world as in a binary relationship, as one being “real” while the other is “only virtual.” Networks that are expressed virtually are

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<sup>47</sup> Rizwangul Nur-Muhammad, Giles Dodson, Evangelia Papoutsaki, and Heather Horst, “Uyghur Facebook Use and Diasporic Identity Construction,” Paper presented at IAMCR 2013 Conference, Dublin, Ireland, June 25-29, 2013: 5.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

most often the manifestation of networks already in existence offline, and actions taken in these online environments have repercussions offline. Even more importantly, the online world is not free of wider structural forces like class, race, caste, or gender.<sup>49</sup> In the years before and after the new millennium, as internet access in the United States grew and the original dot com gold rush was in full swing, breathless prose about the revolutionary potential of internet communication was prevalent.<sup>50</sup> But contrary to the idea that a person could be whoever he or she wanted to be, and that they were now free of these forces and could reach their fullest potential, the whole meritocratic myth of the internet, the truth is that the very structure of the internet and access to it is dictated by these wider forces. This trend will only grow with the spread of social media and the “personalization” of the web. It has already become almost impossible for the average internet user to achieve true anonymity, making the distinction between online and offline worlds even more blurred. This is what makes social media such a useful tool in research: it is the site on the internet most connected to offline events.

Before getting too deeply into the analysis of OFBJP’s social media presence, it would be helpful to clarify what exactly is meant here by social media, and outline some features of social media logic that will be useful in my analysis. We can start by establishing what exactly it is we mean by social networks and social media. Though often used interchangeably, they actually refer to two distinct processes. danah boyd and Nicole

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<sup>49</sup> Natalia Rybas and Radhika Gajjala, “Developing Cyberethnographic Research Methods for Understanding Digitally Mediated Identities,” *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 8, 3 (2008), <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0703355>.

<sup>50</sup> It still is today, but it seems to be more tempered, at least in some circles, with an acknowledgement of its pitfalls as well.

Ellison define a social network as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.”<sup>51</sup> This definition offers us a starting point for thinking about social networks. However, as pointed out by David Beer, boyd and Ellison place undue focus on the individual, without considering the myriad wider issues that influence social networking sites. This includes infrastructure, capital, marketing and advertising rhetoric, and, most importantly for our purposes, how third parties and other organizations use social networking sites.<sup>52</sup>

Social media is the content that is produced and shared within these social networks. According to Dhiraj Murthy, who attempted to lay out some preliminary steps towards how to view Twitter through a sociological lens, what typically distinguishes it from other media is that it is produced by “ordinary” people (instead of professional journalists) who then share it within their social networks.<sup>53</sup> This is a useful distinction to make, since it emphasizes the openness and accessibility of the medium and hints at some of the rules for how information might spread, even though it still ignores media produced by organizations that are neither professional journalists nor “ordinary” people. Murthy does, however, make the point that instead of staying within their own social networks,

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51 danah m. boyd and Nicole B Ellison “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (2008): 211.

52 David Beer, “Social network(ing) sites...revisiting the story so far: A response to danah boyd & Nicole Ellison,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (2008): 523.

53 Dhiraj Murthy, “Towards a Sociological Understanding of Social Media: Theorizing Twitter,” *Sociology* 46, 6 (2012): 1061.

which typically consist of people whom they are already familiar with offline, users of social media often are more likely to connect and consume media from people who share their interests.<sup>54</sup> OFBJP, as we will see, operates both within a social network and as a producer of social media.

How does social media itself work? What logic underpins it, and what are some useful analytical categories for describing its contents that can supplement the traditional tools offered us by critical discourse analysis?

Social media logic describes how these social networking sites process information and channel social traffic, working to produce a frame for reality. José van Djick and Thomas Poell have outlined some of the key features of this logic.<sup>55</sup> The two key features for my purposes are programmability and popularity. Programmability refers to the ability of social networking sites to steer their users' energies in certain directions. Certain items may be promoted or interactions encouraged. Users, of course, may follow these programmed routes, or they may consciously choose to ignore or defy them, exercising considerable influence over what they see as well.<sup>56</sup>

David Altheide and Robert Snow, the scholars who developed the original idea of media logic, drew attention to mass media's ability to shape public opinion by privileging some voices over others.<sup>57</sup> Social media platforms, which originally held the promise of being a more democratic arena of ideas, has over time developed its own ways of measuring

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> José van Djick and Thomas Poell, "Understanding Social Media Logic," *Media and Communication* 1: 1 (2013): 4.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>57</sup> David Altheide and Robert Snow, *Media Logic*, (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1979).

popularity and privileging certain voices over others. This is often accomplished through algorithms and other programmatic alterations, for example, the algorithms that determine the content of users' Facebook newsfeeds and the trending topics section of Twitter. What makes social media unique is the ability of groups of users to manipulate these popularity rankings and draw greater attention to a particular cause or voice.<sup>58</sup> It is a strategy that OFBJP has attempted to use in its social media efforts.

There are, of course, numerous approaches one can take to examining internet texts and phenomena. Ingrid Therwath has had particular success looking at Hindutva sites as part of a larger network system, showing how websites aligned with Hindutva practice strategies of discretion, obfuscating the ties that bind them together to make it appear as if they are all acting independently, as a vast, spontaneous outpouring of Hindutva feeling amongst the diaspora.<sup>59</sup> Others have opted for a more granular approach, examining in greater depth a few particular web texts. Victoria Bernal examines in great depth three websites associated with the Eritrean diaspora over a period of about a decade. Though she did interview readers of the site, her primary concern was the online public sphere, examining the central themes and issues that appeared over the course of several years.<sup>60</sup> It is not an example of the entire Eritrean online community as it is an examination of the “boundaries and connections between online activities and wider circuits of Eritrean

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<sup>58</sup> Djick and Poell, “Understanding Social Media Logic,” 6-7.

<sup>59</sup> Ingrid Therwath, “Cyber-*Hindutva*: Hindu Nationalism, the Diaspora and the Web,” *Social Science Information* 51, No. 4 (2012)

<sup>60</sup> Victoria Bernal, *Nation as Network: Diaspora, Cyberspace & Citizenship* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014): 26.



experiences.”<sup>61</sup> In describing how the Eritrean state was able to exercise power over members of the diaspora, she proposes the idea of “infopolitics,” building on Foucault’s biopolitics and Mbembe’s necropolitics. “The transmission of power through spaces beyond the nation reminds us that sovereignty must be exercised not only over bodies but also over minds,” she writes. The infopolitical state manages, authorizes, censors, and disseminates information, and in doing so, often through the creation of a climate of violence and a resultant trend towards self-censorship, exerts its power and becomes embodied in its political subjects.<sup>62</sup> What’s more, citing Das and Poole, she views diasporas as “margins of the state” where the “conceptual boundaries of the state are extended and remade.”<sup>63</sup> Information management therefore becomes central to the exercise of power, playing a crucial role in the state’s ability to exert sovereignty over the diaspora.

My own analysis will take elements from these approaches. In examining the web presence of OFBJP, I will follow Bernal’s example in confining myself to the examination of a discrete set of web properties. At times, due to the hyperlinked nature of the web and the fact that the OFBJP exists within a larger ecosystem, I will be compelled to draw comparisons and examples from other sites, particularly those that are aligned either organizationally, monetarily, or ideologically with the greater Sangh Parivar and other Hindutva organizational bodies. As Bernal points out, the internet is an information-driven medium, but information itself is not a neutral resource. It is constantly being shaped and

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 5.

molded, and cyberspace is where people and organizations attempt to frame these debates and dictate the terms of discourse.

### **CREATING THE IDEOLOGY**

Social media has long blurred the boundaries between public and private life. It both asks users to reveal more and more of themselves at the same time as it offers a way to broadcast those revelations. Using the logic of programmability that is built into the platforms of Facebook and Twitter, we can see that accounts used by organizations are meant to be as public as possible. As Murthy points out, Twitter is built on connecting to others with common interests.<sup>64</sup> Although it has an option to make an account private, very few people take advantage of it. Facebook, because its primary focus has been on joining online and offline networks, has also offered greater options for privacy. Anybody can follow anybody on Twitter, while on Facebook, users have to mutually agree to be connected. That is, except in the case of public pages, which are what Facebook requires official organizations to use. Anybody is able to like a public page and receive updates from that page in their newsfeed, the scroll of Facebook posts that appear when a user logs into the service and is personalized to the user via an opaque algorithm.

All of this is to say that the social media accounts of OFBJP are publicly accessible and are followed by substantial numbers of people (as of this writing, 947 on Twitter and 16,370 on Facebook). OFBJP also has accounts on Google+ and YouTube, though both of these have significantly fewer followers and the last time either of them was updated was

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<sup>64</sup> Murthy, "Towards a Sociological Understanding of Twitter," 1060.

in 2014, when Narendra Modi was first running for national office. Even with these abandoned properties, the social media audience of OFBJP is significant, and the accounts can be powerful tools to raise the profile of BJP and attempt to fulfill the stated mission of the organization: “projecting a positive and correct image of India and its people in the U.S. and foreign media, and correct any distortions in the media's reporting of current events taking place in India.” This, after all, is a stated priority of the main party in India. According to a recent article in *Hindustan Times*, the BJP government is now considering the establishment of an official digital channel to tell the “India story” and counter “the anti-India narrative in foreign media.”<sup>65</sup> So what is happening with the social media accounts of OFBJP? How exactly are they used?

Contrary to what might be expected, the BJP uses social media to communicate more with its current members than it does with the greater public. Any broader engagement that is depicted through these social media accounts seems to be done with the primary goal of solidifying in-group sentiment than with correcting distortions in the public image of India. According to the hierarchical breakdown on the National Committee page of OFBJP.org, social media and the website are categorized as “internal communication,” not external. The newsletter, press releases, and advocacy all fall under the domain of external communication. Furthermore, these two avenues of communication are handled by two different teams, limiting the amount of overlap.

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<sup>65</sup> Smriti Kak Ramachandran, “Govt mulls digital channel to tell ‘India story’ to the world, counter foreign narrative,” *Hindustan Times*, April 8, 2017, accessed April 8, 2017, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/govt-mulls-digital-channel-to-tell-india-story-to-the-world-counter-foreign-narrative/story-2TQsXI7LySmrLCjE3kMCfK.html>.

This distinction is born out in the posts themselves. While the occasional press releases of OFBJP are targeted towards and distributed to mainstream media outlets (they have been picked up by outlets like CNN), the Facebook and Twitter posts seem to have a different audience. They do not seek to give a “correct” view of India to an outsider so much as they look to spread their own particular ideology and give the correct view of events in India to their own members. In being the conduit through which many in the diaspora experience India, OFBJP’s social media reinforces a particular view of the state to those in the diaspora. As Aksoy and Robins note in the case of members of the Turkish diaspora, a person’s perception of their country from abroad is heavily determined by what media is consumed. By watching the news or scrolling through social media, a user can get a particular impression of life back home, one that may be completely at odds with lived experience. Reality and reportage are collapsed and equated.<sup>66</sup>

Where other Facebook pages associated with groups like the HSS and the VHPA feature images of smiling children and photos from recent events, the OFBJP accounts are filled with posts from both everyday Indian citizens (none of whom are obviously from the diaspora) and high profile figures praising the BJP’s move towards demonetization, a controversial action wherein the government discontinued high-value rupee notes in an apparent attempt to flush out black money and force more Indians to open bank accounts and adopt online banking. Whereas other news outlets have called into question the

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<sup>66</sup> Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins, “Thinking Across Spaces: Transnational Television From Turkey,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 3 (3): 363.

efficacy of this maneuver and criticized it for the general havoc it has wreaked on Indian markets, none of these perspectives appear in OFBJP feed, except as targets.

The OFBJP Facebook and Twitter pages delight in skewering the BJP's opponents, especially Arvind Kejriwal. Kejriwal is the current CM of Delhi and the head of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which campaigns specifically against governmental corruption. In 2014, he ran for a seat in the Lok Sabha against Modi, but lost. He has been a thorn in the side of the BJP for a few years now, especially at a time when the previous *bête noire* of the BJP, the Congress Party, is in disarray. The OFBJP has made posts accusing Kejriwal of corruption, renegeing on promises, being blatantly hypocritical, and making treasonous statements. These incessant attacks, broadcast out to the diaspora, both reinforce where the gaze of the NRI should be directed (back towards India, not the United States) and colors the perception of Kejriwal, painting a picture of the BJP and Modi as the only ones willing to make the hard choices to fight corruption. Any complaints from their opponents are portrayed as proof of their own corruption.

Kejriwal is far from the only target of OFBJP. A tweet from October 27, 2016, does a fairly good job of encapsulating the long list of enemies of the party. It includes Congress and its allies (including the AAP), "presstitutes," a derogatory name used by many on the right to deride the mainstream media, which they feel is unduly biased against them, communists and liberals, and the "corrupt political establishment." Modi here stands as an anti-establishment figure, with the weight of the rest of the political sphere and the press allied against him. Indeed, throughout the social media presence of OFBJP, Modi is portrayed as a huge and imposing, larger than the party to which he belongs. He is above

the system, and the lone crusader in the fight to change it. The OFBJP Facebook page regularly shares posts from a page called “India Against Prostitutes” and posts clips portraying the BJP in a positive light from Indian newspapers. Another post on their Twitter feed features a stereotypical drawing of a Muslim and the claim that the Muslim community does not want a Uniform Civil Code so that they can continue the practice of having four wives and triple talaq for divorce. Still another lists several riots that had taken place since 1969, along with who was in power at the time. Of course, the Congress Party was shown as in power for all of them except the 2002 Gujarat Riots, which the BJP and its supporters frequently claim is the only one that the media focuses on. The post goes on to claim that the 2002 riots were initiated by Congress leaders. All of these posts serve to further the BJP narrative in the diaspora. In the case of the post about the Gujarat Riots, they will marshal a seemingly overwhelmingly amount of evidence against the established historical narrative, in many cases building their own “online archives” that can be accessed quickly and used to further whatever point needs making.<sup>67</sup> This has resulted in a vision of Indian history that, in its use of statistics and sources, has all the appearance of fact.

Few posts have focused on the actions of the Indian American community in the United States or their concerns, and fewer still seem to be directed towards people who are not already sympathetic to OFBJP, what we might consider the mainstream. Rather, they seem to be calibrated to appeal to an internal audience. For one thing, the posts are in a

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<sup>67</sup> Sahana Udupa. “Archiving as History-Making: Religious Politics of Social Media in India,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 9 (2016): 212-230.

mixture of Hindi and English. For another, they make use of a variety of signs and symbols that would be unfamiliar to an outsider. In November, a few were about the US election. Other posts have included photos of OFBJP meetings, the 2016 India Day Parade (in which Baba Ramdev, an extremely popular religious figure in India and an influential supporter of the BJP, participated), and of the protests mentioned at the beginning of this paper. However, most of the focus is still on the political situation in India and on what the BJP has done for the Indian economy. When religious communities and communal politics are mentioned, it is usually in the context of trying to expose the Congress Party or the AAP as being not as secular as they would like to appear, or to denounce Islamic terrorism and Pakistan's involvement in harboring terrorists. The result is that OFBJP's social media accounts come to represent a mouthpiece of the party for its United States constituency, but to them only, and not necessarily to a wider audience. They function primarily as a way to cement and spread the ideology of the BJP amongst targeted segments of the Indian diaspora and orient them back towards India.

This reorientation is coupled with what appears to be a deliberate silence towards the politics of the United States. Besides the pro-forma congratulations of Donald Trump on his electoral victory and an odd reposting of video of Trump touring one of his hotels, OFBJP has been mostly silent on US political issues. This is even the case when one would expect them to take a strong position, as in the case of Trump's rhetoric threatening the H1-B visa program, which provides work visas for highly skilled workers. Trump has warned the tech companies who are the primary beneficiaries of this visa system that they need to start hiring American workers for these positions, and has hinted at making changes

to the H1-B program, including drastically reducing the number of visas available and raising the amount that an employee on an H1-B visa must legally be paid, making them less attractive to companies.<sup>68</sup> As Amitava Kumar and others have shown, much of the support for Hindutva politics in the United States is drawn from middle-class technology workers who first came to the US on H1-B visas.<sup>69</sup> Threatening the H1-B visa program is a direct threat to the primary constituency of OFBJP, yet on this, a legitimate political issue that could significantly impact its members, there have been no posts on Facebook or Twitter, nor any press releases. We cannot discount that OFBJP might be working behind the scenes to appeal to lawmakers, but if they are, they are not broadcasting the news online.

#### **MULTICULTURALISM AND RELIGION IN OFBJP SOCIAL MEDIA RHETORIC**

Though they are the most prevalent, political content and attacks on other parties and figures in India are not the only kinds of posts on OFBJP's Facebook and Twitter pages, nor are they the most successful. Far less common, but more appealing to their audience, are posts about Hinduism and actions taking place within the cultural sphere. Rajagopal, Matthew and Prashad, Parita Mukta, and others have commented on the emphasis placed on the cultural sphere by Hindutva and Hindu Nationalist advocates in

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<sup>68</sup> To be sure, there are several legitimate problems with the H1-B visa program, the most significant of which is that it ties immigrants to the company sponsoring their visa, artificially restraining their wages and limiting the mobility. In essence, they become a captive labor force, unable to leave for a better environment without losing their visa. Of course, Trump's argument is rooted in nativism and white nationalism, but there is a strong case for a revamping of the H1-B program.

<sup>69</sup> Amitava Kumar, "Temporary Access: The H1B Worker in the United States," in *Technicolor: Race, Technology and Everyday Life*, ed. Alondra Nelson, Thuy Linh N. Tu, and Alicia Headlam Hines (New York: New York University Press, 2001): 76-88.



India. Mukta has drawn attention to how the British policies of “multiculturalism” and “diversity,” while well-intended, have opened up an opportunity for Hindutva groups to position themselves as the voice of the Indian community in the United Kingdom.<sup>70</sup> Rajagopal has explored how religion became the vehicle of cultural reproduction in the US, giving birth to a more syncretic view of Hinduism that cut across competing sects.<sup>71</sup> Hindu nationalism itself, he points out, began to gain a more significant following in India in the days after independence, when Nehruvianism’s lack of a cultural ideology made it more appealing by comparison.<sup>72</sup> A similar process is at play in the contemporary United States, with the cultural foundation of Hinduism providing an ideological foundation. Identifying as a member of a religion that was part of an “ancient civilization” allowed Indian migrants living in India to bypass the racial hierarchies that dictate much of life for minorities in the US and instead embrace the rhetoric of religious pluralism.<sup>73</sup> This is combined with the deliberate efforts of Sangh organizations to build a following in the diaspora, offering their own interpretation of Hinduism to migrants who have found themselves in a strange land where their own cultural touchstones are more or less unknown. This problem became especially acute when their children went to school and faced questions about their cultural practices. Their parents, often left without an answer, turned to explanations provided by the VHPA and other Hindutva organizations.<sup>74</sup> All of

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<sup>70</sup> Parita Mukta, “The Public Face of Hindu Nationalism,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, 3 (2000): 453.

<sup>71</sup> Rajagopal, “Hindu Nationalism in the US,” 471.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 482.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 472.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 473.

this combines to paint a picture of why the cultural sphere is so important for those who are part of OFBJP's constituency.

We now return to the photo slideshow mentioned earlier in this paper. Eight out of the ten photos in that slideshow were of OFBJP victory parties or Narendra Modi. More interesting, perhaps, are the other two images, sandwiched in between jubilant OFBJP members and Modi being applauded by then-Vice President Joe Biden and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan. One is a low-quality stock image of a stop sign with "Hate!" scrawled underneath the original's blunt imperative. The other is a photo of a rally held outside the White House, with people holding signs that appear to say "Indian American Awareness Rally...Against Hate Crimes." When I first saw these images, I assumed that they were posted in response to the recent shootings in Kansas, where a white man shot two Indian-Americans who worked at the nearby Garmin headquarters, yelling "Get out of my country." Since it was the first hate crime to result in a fatality in the US since Trump took office, and because the shooter was clearly influenced by the rhetoric of Trump and white nationalist groups, the incident received a great deal of coverage. The Hindu American Foundation, another organization with ties to the Sangh Parivar, arranged a meeting with the governor of Kansas after the shooting to talk about what was being done to deter further hate crimes.

This is not what OFBJP did. At least, it is not what they have chosen to draw attention to in most valuable real estate they have on their website. In the photo of protesters outside of the White House, it is unclear what, exactly, the goal of the protest is. The photo is small, and it is difficult to make out what is written on the banners. Where most of the

other photos on the site lead to press releases of some kind, this one does not. Elsewhere on the site, there are posts stating that this protest was in fact in response to the surge in hate crimes seen across the United States over the course of Donald Trump's campaign and subsequent election. Still, the fact that these posts are not linked to the photo in the slideshow suggests that this event is secondary in importance to the BJP party in India.

The final image in the slideshow also relates to hate crimes, though of a different nature. This image leads to a press release on an episode of Reza Aslan's television show *Believer*, which debuted on CNN with an episode about followers of the Aghori sect of Hinduism. The show highlights the Aghori practice of consuming human flesh and their place within the wider ecosystem of the ghats used for cremation in Varanasi. Though the cannibalism aspect drew an understandable amount of ire, the reaction amongst various groups like OFBJP and the Hindu American Foundation seemed just as perturbed by Aslan's statement that the Aghori sect was formed in reaction to Brahmanical Hinduism's oppressive caste system. The specific reason for this objective is not included the statements themselves, but the erasure of caste from any mention of Hinduism and its historical practice has been a long-term project of groups like HAF, which led a crusade to have a California textbook changed because it promoted a distorted view of Hinduism by mentioning things like caste and gender disparities. The result, of course, is a whitewashing of history.

It is significant that a protest against a TV show and hate crimes against Hindus (not that the murderer in this instance knew that they were Hindus, only that they were brown-skinned) should be one of the few instances in which OFBJP actually engages with

the circumstances of Indian-Americans. The organization seems to only involve itself when Hindu cultural life is threatened, and to steer clear of American politics as they manifest themselves in the lives of Indian-Americans. Even then, posts related to Hindu cultural life are few and far between, scattered amongst articles praising Modi, denouncing his opponents, and applauding whatever moves the BJP is making at the time in India. However, when they do appear, they tend to generate a substantial amount of engagement by OFBJP's followers. While most posts on OFBJP's Facebook gain between 5 and 10 likes, a post from US Representative Tulsi Gabbard (who is a practicing Hindu and has her own ties to the BJP) garnered 59 likes as of this writing. Another post showing pictures of an OFBJP-organized protest in New York City was liked 40 times and, perhaps more importantly for sharing OFBJP's version of events and of Hinduism (though not the Indian nation), was shared 15 times.<sup>75</sup> This means that the post was included on the timelines of 15 other Facebook users, and given greater prominence in the newsfeeds of those who were connected to those users.

Indeed, the sharing functionality of Facebook and Twitter make these ideal platforms for spreading the OFBJP and BJP ideology and shaping perceptions of India. After all, since, as Gajjala has mentioned, our online networks are often recreations of our offline networks, and many, if not all, of the followers of OFBJP accounts are no doubt

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<sup>75</sup> I should also note the inclusion of the hashtags #HinduLivesMatter and #HinduHolocaust in some of posters. The idea of a Hindu holocaust is a fairly well-established one that has figured in online Hindutva rhetoric for several decades now, and has here been adapted to the age of hashtag activism. #HinduLivesMatter is interesting because it explicitly piggybacks on the Black Lives Matter movement, and shows the continued use of the discourse of multiculturalism to forge a protected place in American society. It's also significant that the identity of choice is religious, rather than racial, exemplifying how by and large the Indian community in the United States has historically attempted to sidestep racial hierarchies.

connected to others who are not members of OFBJP, it would make sense to leverage these accounts to push out BJP perspectives on current events or to raise awareness for issues that affect Indian-Americans. It would enable them to greatly increase their digital footprint and reach those outside of the organization. This does not seem to be the preferred strategy. As mentioned before, social media communication is categorized as “internal communication,” and much of the content seems geared towards those who follow Indian politics rather closely. It is mostly clips in Hindi from news shows, obscurely specific memes, and attacks on other politicians — in short, things calibrated to appeal to and reinforce the beliefs of the group’s members.

So while religion is not the main focus of OFBJP, it is one of the issues that its members engage most with, suggesting that it is important to them at the same time as it is mostly referred to obliquely, if at all, by OFBJP itself. This is likely due to the use of strategies of online discretion that Ingrid Therwath outlined. In her mapping of many of the most prominent groups connected to Hindutva in the United States, she demonstrated how certain major organizations with high visibility have over the years played down the degree to which they are connected with other, more extreme organizations. On the internet, this manifests itself as eliminating hyperlinks between the two sites.<sup>76</sup> Major groups were especially cautious about who they were publicly associated with after two reports were released by non-profit groups that detailed how money given to the India Development and Relief Fund and Sewa, another developmental organization, were

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<sup>76</sup> Therwath, “Cyber-Hindutva,” 568.

actually funding RSS activities in India instead of going towards relief efforts.<sup>77</sup> The revelations around RSS funding sources and the resulting scandal caused many groups abroad to change their names and be even more judicious in what image they presented to the public. For example, there are no obvious links connecting OFBJP.org with the sites of VHPA or the HSS, two of the other major Sangh-affiliated groups in the United States.<sup>78</sup> Taken together, this means that OFBJP does not post a great deal about religious issues, despite their effectiveness, because they do not need to. Other organizations address that issue instead, leaving OFBJP free to focus on politics in India.

It just so happens that those other organizations that do focus on Hinduism generate higher levels of engagement, but at the cost of opening themselves up to some of the more extreme views of their members. The Facebook page for the Hindu American Foundation is a useful counter-example. While few of the posts on the OFBJP Facebook page have comments on them, and the ones that do appear are simple and usually reaffirm the message of the original post, almost every post on the HAF page has comments. These are often highly critical of the organization. One, in response to a post about efforts to end hate crimes in the US, implores the Foundation not to “become a tool of the Democratic party.” Another, in response to a post about Hindus wearing the hijab and protesting alongside Muslims in the United States, came with the comments “I strongly condemned those Hindus who would like to raise their voice to support Muslim in America (sic)” and “Another pathetic example of how some Hindus are ever-so-pacifist (or shall I say self-

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 568-569.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 569.

identity-unconscious) and promote a religious sign that has nothing to do with us and a religion itself that enjoys much appeasement already in US, shame !! (sic, again)”

Comments on OFBJP’s page are never this antagonistic. Indeed, this may partly be the result of OFBJP’s focus on discipline in the online sphere, barring the posting of anything that could be seen as insulting to the party or its leaders. This move helps protect them from the criticism that seems to be leveled at Hindu American Foundation. However, it would also seem to limit engagement with and spread of their message. Judging from the response that posts about the protests against *Believer* garnered, it seems that there is a willingness amongst its members to engage more with cultural issues in the United States. Because OFBJP has not posted anything about politics in the United States, there is no way to tell from looking at OFBJP’s web presence alone how this absence is interpreted by its members, or if there is a desire for greater engagement with United States’ politics. OFBJP has managed to neutralize both the most dangerous and most powerful aspect of social media, essentially turning it into an extension of their newsletter. This keeps the organization safe from criticism, but it also means that the technology is not being used to its fullest potential.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

In this examination of the web presence of OFBJP.org, we have seen first how Overseas Friends of BJP fit into expanded definitions and conceptions of nationalism. The modern nation-state is reaching out beyond its territorial boundaries, bringing in migrants in the diaspora and reorienting their gaze back towards the motherland. It is part of a larger strategy built around dominating cyberspace and exercising power over minds instead of bodies. A critical discourse analysis of OFBJP.org shows the priorities of the organization. It is built around recreating the hierarchy of the BJP and playing on migrants' emotional attachment to India to compel them to donate money and invest in the country in exchange for cultural capital. In doing so, it helps (re)produce a particular vision of India. Meanwhile, its Facebook and Twitter pages seem to be built around communicating the BJP ideology to its own members. It is not necessarily expansionist in the way that other social media projects are, and operates under a philosophy of control that polices what its members write. OFBJP rarely posts about life for Indian-Americans in the United States, and when it does, it is under the rubric of culture, specifically Hindu. The migrants engagement with the political life of India seems to be prized above all else, even as there are indications that there is a willingness to engage with issues in the US.

What, then, does the example of OFBJP's web presence ultimately add to our understanding of the ideas of state, diaspora, and nationalism in the Indian context? For one, it shows us that the Indian state is highly adept at using its existing networks in the diaspora to spread its own particular brand of nationalism. This nationalism fused the political with the cultural, and often found itself most forcefully expressed in cultural terms.



This is partly due to the BJP's connections to the Sangh Parivar, and their use of the already well-developed network that the RSS and VHP had nurtured over the years. Building on the foundation of *shakhas* and cadres already in place, the BJP was able to appeal to a group of Indians abroad who were already familiar with its brand of Hinduism. Indeed, OFBJP's *raison d'être* is to perform damage control for the BJP in the US after the destruction of the Babri Masjid, a particularly tragic example of the power of cultural nationalism when bent to the will of a political party.

The difference, at least in the US, is that OFBJP's brand of nationalism has had to adapt itself to its multicultural environs. The discourse of multiculturalism and pluralism opens up a space for religion as a salient identity marker, one that allowed Indian Americans an opportunity to elide some of the racial identifiers that typically are affixed to minority populations within the United States. Matthew and Prashad have examined the ways in which multiculturalism and the policies that flow from it create a space where more orthodox and conservative traditions and leaders are able to stand in for the entire cultural community, becoming de facto spokespeople and representatives of what is typically a very heterodox tradition.<sup>79</sup> It allows for the tradition to be homogenized and closed off, conceived of as a separate, discrete unit, separate from the greater body politic. Helping this process along was the Western tendency to view "India" as a place of extreme spirituality.<sup>80</sup>

Taken together, the end effect is a form of nationalism amongst segments of the

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<sup>79</sup> Matthew and Prashad, "Yankee Hindutva," 524.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

Indian population in the United States that conceives of itself in cultural terms, not necessarily political. This was certainly the case when scholars first started examining the phenomena of Hindutva in the United States and the West more generally. However, as we have seen with the example of OFBJP's web presence, there has been a concerted effort by the state to turn this cultural nationalism into a more traditional, political nationalism. Perhaps we can credit this to India's much-hyped though yet-to-be-realized arrival as a superpower. Over the years, the idea that India has earned a spot at the top of the global pecking order has gained traction, both within India and without. The BJP seemingly is attempting to use the massive and increasingly influential Indian diaspora as a way to project and flaunt its own power.

One of the original and still one of the most important ways this political nationalism finds its expression is monetarily, as the state and various political parties appeal to the diaspora for funds. This is abundantly clear in the focus on donations and development that permeates OFBJP.org. These are not just for the BJP, though. It is also cannily combined with the sense of cultural nationalism that the Sangh carefully nurtured for decades. Now, members of the diaspora are able to donate to India and purchase a sense of reclaimed cultural nationalism. Throughout the web presence of OFBJP.org, we see this use of cultural nationalism in conjunction with political nationalism, with appeals to cultural nationalism often generating far greater engagement and passion than simple political messaging. People protest Reza Aslan's portrayal of Hinduism not only because they find it insulting to their religion, but also because in doing so, he is threatening a national identity. In many ways, it is a mirror of the strategy used within India. The

religious becomes the national, and any attack on one is an attack on the other. It is less about politics, about the actual policies enacted by the government that materially impact people in their day-to-day lives, than it is about forming and perpetuating a certain religio-cultural identity. The political aspect is there, but it is not the most important or animating part. In an international context, this means that the focus of the migrant is turned back towards her or his “home” country and particularly to the cultural life there, and is less concerned with engaging politically with their current location.

Since the 2016 US election, a great deal of attention has been paid to “echo chambers” and the use of social media to amplify certain voices. What has received less attention is the way organizations are able to use social media to exercise a sense of control over their followers. As has been shown by the policy listed on their website and the levels of interaction on their social media channels, OFBJP seems less concerned with creating a larger ecosystem or echo chamber than they are with control. Organizations focused on echo chambers invite and encourage the active involvement of their followers to amplify their message. Instead, OFBJP limits the speech and involvement of their followers. This also points towards why Facebook is a much more popular tool for OFBJP, with 16 times as many followers as their Twitter page. Twitter is best used for broadcasting and is a far more public service. With Facebook, on the other hand, there are more opportunities for discretion, and pages are able to delete comments left on their posts that they do not approve of. It can inculcate an ideology and block out competing voices.

On a larger scale, how does the example of OFBJP’s web presence lead us to a better understanding of the relationship between new media technologies and political

groups or cultural wings of the state? Even as the internet offers us the possibility of radical connection and the intermingling of different identities, it can also be used, as OFBJP and the Indian state has, as a way of reaching into the diaspora and reorienting identities back towards a preferred vision of cultural life in India. It is a way of hardening existing borders, of extending the boundaries of the territorial nation-state into the diaspora and establishing it in the minds of people in the diaspora, people who may not be citizens of the nation-state in the traditional sense, but still contribute to the nation-state project ideologically and financially. OFBJP shows us that our traditional ways of looking at the nation-state: either as a discrete, territorially-bounded entity or as an obsolete concept on its last legs, are inadequate. The tools afforded states by the internet have allowed them to shed the limitations that were imposed on them by geography. Rather than weakening it, the Indian state has shown how the internet and the permeability it invites, in conjunction with a carefully cultivated cultural nationalism, can in fact be used to strengthen and reaffirm the nation-state.

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