

Late-colonial Incels? Erotic Debasement, Celibacy, and the Hindu Nationalist Movement

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Abstract

Of the different movements that have grabbed headlines in recent years as comprising the “global far right,” the Hindu nationalist movement in India is the numerically largest. Although neo-Nazis and Hindu nationalists may seem worlds apart, there are shared characteristics that justify their common designation as “far right.” Among these is their ideological stance on demography, gender, and sex, which have a central place in far-right ideologies worldwide. This project investigates the specific ways in which these themes manifest themselves in the Hindu nationalist movement, especially in its simultaneous and contradictory emphases on celibacy and maintaining a Hindu demographic majority in India. In doing so, the analysis draws on primary sources from foundational Hindu nationalist ideological tracts to newspapers across the span of 150 years. I argue that the Hindu nationalists’ embrace of celibacy has its roots in British colonial rule, in which a group of Indian men were deemed sexually and romantically undesirable in the eyes of the British. Reacting to this humiliation, these men – the precursors of the modern Hindu nationalists – adopted celibacy as a way to compensate, claiming to be indifferent to the world of love and sex they still craved but were denied access to. These dynamics of humiliation and compensation were subsequently sublimated into the history of the Hindu nationalist movement from the twentieth century to the twenty-first. These findings raise the question of agency in the face of the legacy of history: to what extent was the Hindu nationalists’ celibacy voluntary or *chosen*, and to what extent was it imposed upon them by their British colonizers? My conclusions display how gender, sex, and demography play out differently in each movement according to local histories and contexts. Understanding the Hindu nationalists’ views on these questions is therefore inseparable from a consideration of the afterlives of colonialism and empire in India.

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In November 2017 the online forum Reddit banned a subpage (a “subreddit”) on its website named r/Incels. The subreddit had become a virtual gathering site for men who described themselves as “incels,” or “involuntary celibates.” These were men who desired a romantic or sexual partner but were unable to get one, raging at the women who denied them the sex they believed they were entitled to.¹ This was perhaps too late, however. This masculinist subculture – which had substantial overlaps with North American radical right political movements – had already trended towards violence, inspiring attacks on women since 2014. In 2018, another attacker motivated by incel ideology murdered 10 people in Toronto.² “We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacy’s!” a previously published Facebook post by the killer read, respectively referring to conventionally attractive, white men and women, the latter of whom rejected the incels’ sexual or romantic overtures.³

Eight thousand miles away and three years later, on November 28, 2020, another radical right political organization in the Hindu nationalist Government of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) passed a law prohibiting the “unlawful conversion from one religion to another by misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, allurement or by fraudulent means or by marriage.”⁴ Although the bill itself makes no mention of it, its conception and the public debate it incited was provoked by the “Love Jihad” conspiracy theory propagated by the Hindu nationalist movement. This theory asserted that there existed a concerted effort by Muslim men to convert Hindu women to Islam through seduction, kidnapping, and marriage; the Muslim offspring they subsequently had were part of an ongoing attempt at the

¹ Christine Hauser, “Reddit Bans ‘Incel’ Group for Inciting Violence Against Women,” *New York Times*, November 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/technology/incels-reddit-banned.html>.

² Robin Mamié, Manoel Horta Ribeiro, and Robert West, “Are Anti-Feminist Communities Gateways to the Far Right? Evidence from Reddit and YouTube,” *arXiv:2102.12837* [cs.CY]: 1, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2102.12837>.

³ Niraj Chokshi, “What Is an Incel? A Term Used by the Toronto Van Attack Suspect, Explained,” *New York Times*, April 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/24/world/canada/incel-reddit-meaning-rebellion.html>.

⁴ Government of Uttar Pradesh, *Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance, 2020*.

demographic replacement of Hindus by Muslims.⁵ By making such “fraudulent” conversion punishable by up to ten years of imprisonment, the “Love Jihad law” was seen as a defense against this attack on the Hindu *rashtra* (nation).⁶ “If you come to us [with news of Love Jihad], we’ll smash the skulls of these degenerates,” said a male Hindu nationalist cadre of the Muslim men who threatened to take their women away from them.⁷

On its face, the North American incels – and the white nationalists they are tethered to – and the Hindu nationalists seem to exhibit a similar entitlement to women, a feature common also to other radical right movements worldwide. But there is a twist: the Hindu nationalist movement has historically venerated celibacy as a pillar of its political project. It was a scandal when, during his first Prime Ministerial run in 2014, it was revealed that Narendra Modi had been married years before he swore a vow of celibacy in 1971 in order to join the Hindu nationalist organization of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the largest and oldest parent organization of the Sangh Parivar (“Family of the RSS,” the collectivity of Hindu nationalist organizations in India).⁸ How do abstinence and indifference towards sexual activity coexist with a possessiveness over women for the Hindu nationalists, and what are the historical origins of this tension?

This thesis provides an answer by explicating the politics of gender, sexuality, and demography of the single largest organization within the very loose assemblage increasingly known as the global radical right. These issues deeply preoccupy all the movements that comprise it, but each of them respond in ways that are inflected and made distinct by their

⁵ Banu Gökarıksel, Christopher Neubert, and Sara Smith, “Demographic Fever Dreams: Fragile Masculinity and Population Politics in the Rise of the Global Right,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44, no. 3 (February 2019): 571.

⁶ Billy Perrigo, “Why India’s Most Populous State Just Passed a Law Inspired by an Anti-Muslim Conspiracy Theory,” *Time Magazine*, November 25, 2020, <https://time.com/5915579/love-jihad-uttar-pradesh/>.

⁷ VICE News, “The Hindu Extremists at War With Interfaith Love,” YouTube video, October 21, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jol-Rf69gxw>.

⁸ Ellen Barry, “Indian Candidate’s Biography Has an Asterisk: A Wife, of Sorts,” *New York Times*, April 10, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/11/world/asia/top-indian-candidate-believed-a-bachelor-admits-to-being-married.html>.

local histories. In this light, I argue that the Hindu nationalists' practice of celibacy – which is inseparable from the legacy of colonialism and empire, as it stems from the history of a group of sexually humiliated Indian men I describe as “late-colonial incels” – might not actually be as chosen and voluntary as they profess it to be.

Historiographic overview

This project investigates the history of the significance of celibacy to the modern Hindu nationalist movement by tracing this relationship's origins to the sexlessness imposed upon the Bengali Hindu elite by their British colonizers in the late-nineteenth century, as the former were labeled as undesirable by the latter. In doing so, I touch on topics of masculinity, sex, erotic desire, colonialism, and nationalism from the mid-1800s to the early twenty-first century. Much scholarship has explored all of those themes in each of those periods, but the centrality of celibacy to the emergent Hindu nationalist movement has gone almost entirely overlooked and unexplained. I believe that my thesis is unique in telling a story of how the Bengali elite's way of responding to their sexual humiliation – celibacy – was taken up by the Hindu nationalist movement. This narrative ultimately identifies the Hindu nationalists' emphasis on celibacy as a form of compensation that reconciles their imposed lack of sex with their movement's heteronormative vision of masculinity.

Scholars agree that British colonization had major impacts on conceptions of gender in India, especially post-1857. The Sepoy Rebellion occurred that year, leading to the end of the British East India Company's administration of the Indian subcontinent and the beginning of the period of direct rule of the British crown. This event is significant because the “martial” and “non-martial” categorizations of Indian men emerged from it, as Heather

Streets and David Omissi have argued.⁹ The work of Mrinalini Sinha and John Rosselli connects this distinction to my project, as they have identified each side of the binary as respectively mapping onto British conceptions of masculinity and effeminacy.¹⁰ Sinha and Rosselli focus on the class of elite, western-educated, Bengali Hindu men who were demeaned as effeminate “*babus*” (a local title of address similar to “mister” that became used as a term of derision by the British) because of their lack of martial prowess.

Chronologically, my project begins with this scholarship on the emasculation of the Bengali elite through the martial and non-martial binary, but examines this through the dimensions of desirability and recognition of one’s manhood through sex with women. This analyzes the *babus* as a group of men who, as they were deemed un-masculine, were correspondingly demeaned and humiliated as undesirable. My thesis then examines how this group of men responded to this mockery by rejecting the importance of sex to one’s masculinity and adopting celibacy. I argue that this practice was then taken up by the Hindu nationalists, a temporal extension into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries which the above scholarship does not make.

I introduce themes of celibacy and nationalism when discussing the Bengali elite and Hindu nationalists’ practice of celibacy. Much of the existing scholarship linking celibacy and nationalism has revolved around the figure of Gandhi. For instance, Douglas Haynes researches the importation of Western sexual mores and frames Gandhi’s practice and advocacy of celibacy as a reaction to those ideas, which he saw as corrosive to the Indian nation.¹¹ Relatedly, Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Vinay Lal argue that Gandhi framed his

⁹ Heather Streets, *Martial races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 11; David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1940* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1994), 9-10.

¹⁰ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 8; John Rosselli, “The Self-Image of Effeminess: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal,” *Past & Present*, no. 86 (February 1980): 133.

¹¹ Douglas E. Haynes, “Gandhi, *Brahmacharya* and Global Sexual Science, 1919-38,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, no. 6 (December 2020): 1168.

individual celibacy as a public and political act, relating it to the nationalist cause.¹² While these works have been useful in revealing how the Mahatma installed individual celibacy as a public issue, the focus on Gandhi cannot be neatly translated across to decipher the Hindu nationalists' communalist politics of celibacy.

I fill this gap by drawing a distinction between Gandhi's idea of celibacy and the Hindu nationalists'. The latter's can be traced back to the Bengali elite, who adopted a collective celibacy in response to the sexual humiliation and emasculation they faced. This practice, unlike Gandhi's, was linked to an oppositional and anti-colonial "Hindu masculinity" that the elites created in challenging British rule. This portion of my argument applies Joseph Alter's identification of semen retention as a potent ascetic-masculinist image in Indian nationalist politics to the Hindu nationalist movement in particular.¹³ Relatedly, Chandrama Chakraborty and Sikata Banerjee both argue that a brahminical asceticism was central to postcolonial Indian conceptions of manhood.¹⁴ I build on this by examining a specific dimension of that asceticism, celibacy. The Bengali elite reclaimed their lack of sex – a product of colonial humiliation – as an ascetic form of renunciation and thus an indication of manhood, a linking of sexlessness to masculinity that the Hindu nationalists inherited.

There is also a rich literature on the Hindu nationalist movement itself. Scholars like Christophe Jaffrelot, B.D. Graham, and Walter K. Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle have written extensively on the organizational structure, political strategy, and motivating ideology of Hindu nationalism. In each of their works, however, mentions of celibacy and its role in

¹² Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, "Self-Control and Political Potency: Gandhi's Asceticism," *The American Scholar* 35, no. 1 (Winter 1965-66): 81; Vinay Lal, "Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments in Celibate Sexuality," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1/2 (January-April 2000): 133.

¹³ Joseph S. Alter, "Celibacy, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Gender into Nationalism in North India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (February 1994): 49.

¹⁴ Chandrama Chakraborty, *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism: Past and Present Imaginings of India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011), 5; Sikata Banerjee, *Make Me a Man!* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 45.

the movement are few and far between.¹⁵ When it is brought up, it is as a passing reference to the ritual behaviors of some members of the organization, with little investigation into the symbolic significance of the practice, and how it might find its roots in preexisting intellectual currents. This project fills in this gap, connecting this work on Hindu nationalist political structure and organization with those very preexisting intellectual currents to shed new light on the latter's politics of gender, sex, and demography. Furthermore, with regard to these politics, Paola Bacchetta, Tanika Sarkar, and Dibyesh Anand all argue that Hindu nationalism's idea of manhood shares characteristics of other hegemonic masculinities worldwide such as misogyny, homophobia, and aggression.¹⁶

Finally, the field of "saffron demography" – Hindu nationalism's politics of population and demography – has been growing in recent years. Mohan Rao, as well as Banu Gökariksel, Christopher Neubert, and Sara Smith, have researched the Hindu nationalist movement's fear of a growing Muslim population, with the latter trio framing it as a local instance of a global trend of far-right panic about demographic replacement.¹⁷ Relatedly, Banu Subramaniam argues that the Hindu nationalists draw upon reified conceptions of "Hinduness" in constructing a biopolitics, as seen in their stance on surrogacy.¹⁸ This thesis looks at the relationship between these demographic concerns and the dimension of desire and sex. It identifies a latent contradiction between the Hindu nationalists' simultaneous

¹⁵ Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 40; B.D. Graham, *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics: The Origins and Development of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 15; Walter K. Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1987), 139.

¹⁶ Paola Bacchetta, "Queer Formations in (Hindu) Nationalism," in *Sexuality Studies*, ed. Sanjay Srivasta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 122; Tanika Sarkar, "Semiotics of Terror: Muslim Children and Women in Hindu Rashtra," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 28 (July 2002): 2875; Dibyesh Anand, *Hindu Nationalism in India and the Politics of Fear* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 72.

¹⁷ Mohan Rao, "On Saffron Demography," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, no. 41 (October 2010): 27; Gökariksel, Neubert, and Smith, "Demographic Fever Dreams," 561.

¹⁸ Banu Subramaniam, *Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 6.

emphases on celibacy and preserving a Hindu majority in India, the latter of which is only possible through procreative sex.

This project weaves together these various fields – British colonial norms of masculinity, celibacy and the body as sites of nationalist politics, gender and the Hindu nationalist movement, the movement itself, and the movement’s politics of population and demography – through its telling of an intergenerational story of Indian men who, deemed undesirable in the eyes of their colonial oppressors, sought to reclaim a sense of manhood and compensate for this humiliation through the adoption of celibacy.

Methodology

The arc of this thesis can be viewed as follows: it develops categories and terms (such as Christian masculinity and erotic debasement) through which one can understand the history covered in this project, before recounting the story of the Bengali Hindu elite through the lens of these categories, then finally showing how their experiences became part of the historical memory of, and were manifested in, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by the Hindu nationalist movement. Terms like Christian masculinity and erotic debasement are derived through a telling of the history itself and also draw on relevant prior secondary scholarship and theoretical work. The reason the paper temporally spans the British Raj from the mid-1800s to the twenty-first century is intrinsically related to its argument; the only way one *can* understand the modern Hindu nationalist movement’s practices and views regarding celibacy is by tracing it back to an earlier history of colonization and humiliation.

Because of this structure, the portion of the paper covering the Hindu nationalist movement is not chronologically sequential in the presentation of its source base. This is, again, related to the argument: I am trying to gesture towards how a preceding colonial

history of ridicule and debasement has been sublimated and lasts into the present, manifesting itself in various ways across the century-long history of the Hindu nationalist movement.¹⁹

All of the sources in this thesis are English-language, a limitation of the project that has not been crippling due to the plethora of sources written in or translated to English that I have been able to access. The source base is comprised in large part of studies or intellectual tracts that show the development and sublimation of ideas, perceptions, and historical memory. The other type of source that I use a great deal is newspaper articles that show how this world of ideas plays out “on the ground,” which also serve as clear timestamps to show the temporal progression of the argument. Before we begin to analyze Hindu nationalist thought itself, though, we must explore the colonial problematic out of which it evolved.

Mutiny, martial races, and erotic debasement

In 1857, the Scottish Reverend Alexander Duff – a missionary living in Calcutta – wrote a series of letters addressed to his colleague Reverend Tweedie regarding the uprising of local *sepoy* infantrymen around the country.²⁰ These passages, in which Duff extolled the manliness of those who had quelled the conflict (the Indian Rebellion of 1857), outlined his understanding of *Christian masculinity*, an ideal of hegemonic manhood predominant in the United Kingdom and imported into its colonies. It was hegemonic, since it was used both at home and abroad to justify the social ascendancy and rule of the white, heterosexual men – whom it made the benchmark – over women, as well as other men who fell short of its markers because of race, sexuality, and other factors. In a colonial-imperial context, Christian

¹⁹ As this thesis is, in a sense, a genealogy of masculinist thought, it focuses primarily on the voices of Indian men. However, the work of scholars like Tanika Sarkar and Tarini Bedi provide rich insights into the role of women in the Hindu nationalist movement and Indian politics.

²⁰ Alexander Duff, *The Indian Rebellion: Its Causes and Results* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1858), 263.

manhood and virtue was often inextricable from military adventurism and martial achievement.²¹

A distillation of the virtues of Christian masculinity can be found in a contemporaneous source like *The Manliness of Christ*, written by English lawyer and politician Thomas Hughes in 1880, in which he used the figure of Jesus Christ as an embodiment of all of the characteristics of manhood every male should aspire towards. Hughes made clear the relevance of these virtues to Britain's imperial designs in India, comparing the social conditions of Galilee which so desperately needed the reforming presence and morality of Christ to "perhaps the nearest [parallel case in the modern world, which] exists in a portion of our own empire" – India.²² India was desperately in need of the redeeming force of a Christ-like masculinity's physical and moral virtues: to Christian manhood, athleticism and strength were just as important as courage and self-restraint.

A key facet of Christian masculinity was heteronormativity – heterosexual sex and relationships were the ideal. In *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick describes the link in Christian-masculinist thought between a man's "heterosexual desire" and his "active, dominant will," with which he could "master the world." This heterosexual desire, shaped by hegemonic, Christian manhood and its virtues of mastery and dominance, often manifested itself as an *entitlement* and *possessiveness* towards women.²³ Entitled, possessive heterosexuality was inextricably tied to the other virtues of Christian masculinity. Owning and dominating women as sexual and romantic partners made one a man, and in turn a man's performance of the virtues of Christian manhood was tied to his sex life and desirability.²⁴

²¹ Banerjee, *Make Me a Man!*, 2.

²² Thomas Hughes, *The Manliness of Christ* (New York: American Book Exchange, 1880), 581.

²³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 336-337.

²⁴ Joanne Bailey, "English Marital Violence in Litigation, Literature, and the Press," *Journal of Women's History* 19, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 150.

To understand this further, it is useful to introduce Foucault's idea of *sexuality*. Foucault identified a change in the way sex was discussed and conceived of starting in the 1600s: it had become something to be administered and rendered by power into something "morally acceptable and technically useful." How one had sex and with whom suddenly became linked with questions of morality, of identity – "everything that might concern the interplay of innumerable pleasures, sensations, and thoughts ... through the body and the soul, had some affinity with sex."²⁵ The act of sex had been transmuted into *sexuality*: a universalizing category of identity, abstracted from individual sexual experiences and particular circumstances, that could be widely applied across varying populations of people in different geographic and temporal regions (heterosexual, homosexual, normal, deviant, virgin). What one was labeled as carried implications about their character, and in this case, a male's heterosexuality was inextricably woven up with his Christian masculinity.

Martial and non-martial races

The uprising had failed, in large part thanks to the valorous Christian men who had helped put it down. Despite his relief, however, Duff expressed a deeper anxiety about the root causes of the conflict. He mentioned a new idea that had been circulating within colonial channels, a solution that could perhaps quell native dissent – "an allusion [was made towards] the province of Behar, and to its people, as a military, manly, self-reliant race." This was because of "the fidelity exhibited in a few special cases," which led to the inference "that the whole of the inhabitants [of Behar] were loyal to the British sway."²⁶ This was an intimation of what would, in the years following the Rebellion, become the category of the "martial races" – the idea that certain ethnicities or types of people within India (mostly describing

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 20-21.

²⁶ Duff, *The Indian Rebellion*, 303.

men) were well-built for fighting and others not. The martial races had traits that approximated the virtues of Christian masculinity, such as physical fitness and a primitive form of bravery, but not the mental and moral qualities that proper British men possessed. “Non-martial” races were smart and educated but cowardly and physically weak.²⁷

Although both martial and non-martial races failed to attain the full spectrum of physical and moral virtues that defined a Christian man, the martial races were seen as more manly and prestigious due to Christian masculinity’s valuing of military accomplishment, as will be shown below. In many cases, the distinction between martial and non-martial races was drawn between the ethnic groups that had remained loyal to the British during the Rebellion and those that had rebelled.²⁸ The idea of “martial” and “non-martial” races, then, can be seen as an instance of hegemonic, Christian masculinity through its maintenance of the rule of white, male colonizers, who were posited as the masculine ideal. It was a divide-and-rule technique, spurred to creation by the unrest of the 1857 Rebellion, that stratified the native male population according to their proximity to the ideal of Christian manhood. This ideal made white men fit to rule, while ensuring that no Indian man could actually attain it, and thus lay claim to the privileges of the colonial elite.²⁹

Desire and the recognition of “manliness”: fetishization and erotic debasement

The stratification between the martial and non-martial races, with neither fully considered to have attained Christian manhood, in turn produced a hierarchy of sexual desirability. The men of the martial races were sexually fetishized: seen as desirable, but with this desirability stemming from aspects of their identity that, in this case, were perceived through (and created

²⁷ Amiya K. Samanta, *Gorkhaland Movement: A Study in Ethnic Separatism* (New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 2000), 26.

²⁸ Streets, *Martial races*, 8.

²⁹ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 2-8.

by) a racialized and stereotyped colonial lens.³⁰ The martial races were fetishized because of their approximation of Christian masculinity: physically strong, but hyper-masculine to a pathological degree due to their lack of mental faculty (ultimately falling short of Christian masculinity in this way). The men of the non-martial races, in exact opposite fashion, were what I call *erotically debased*: seen as *undesirable* due to some aspect of their identity, which in this case, as with the martial races, were the product of a racialized and stereotyped colonial gaze. Intelligent and educated but lacking courage, physically enervated, and morally and sexually perverse, they were effeminate beings who fell far short of the ideal of the valorous, energetic, and virile Christian man – wholly unattractive.

Written in 1933 by Sir George MacMunn, a Lieutenant-General in the British Army who had served in India, *The Martial Races of India* exemplifies the respective fetishization and erotic debasement of the martial and non-martial races according to the yardstick of Christian masculinity. On the very first page, MacMunn drew a distinction between the martial races and other, “unwarlike” peoples of India. The latter had “the brains and aptitude to assimilate Western education far more rapidly than the more virile races,” who did not have such mental faculties. However, they were also people “whose hand has never kept the head,” and it was the virile, martial races “that have dominated India in the past ... and would do so again if British control were removed.”³¹ As stated earlier and shown here, both types of men did not live up to the standards of Christian masculinity, but in differing ways: the martial races were hyper-masculine yet brainless, unable to control self and other; the non-martial races were seen as intelligent but physically weak.

The fetishization of the martial races and the erotic debasement of the non-martial ones were born out in the descriptions MacMunn offered of both. MacMunn inquired as to

³⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 187.

³¹ Sir George MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., Ltd., 1933), v.

where these martial races – the “great bearded Sikh with his uncut Nazarite hair” and “curling beard,” the “jaunty swaggering hill-man from the frontier,” the “square-shouldered athletic Mussulman of the Punjab” – came from.³² These descriptions were almost laudatory in tone of the sturdy physiques and rugged features of the martial races: take the comparison of the Sikh man’s hair to the long, luscious locks of a Nazarite – somewhat ironically, as the latter was those who undertook a vow of asceticism and abstinence in the Hebrew Bible. They portrayed the martial races in a glowing light, bestowing upon them a measure of desirability, as they approximated the athleticism and physical vitality of Christian manhood.

Unsurprisingly, then, these martial races “are given to women,” exhibiting a virility that attracted the latter, “[striding] across the stage” as if they were “swinging through Marseilles with half the girls of France on their arms.”³³ Even better – not only were these warlike peoples built like oxen, but they could also pull women. The virility MacMunn admiringly imputed to the martial races had a decidedly heteronormative bent, which, recalling the heteronormativity of Christian masculinity, only further reinforced their masculine-adjacent status and attractiveness. These were people “whom surely Baba Gandhi” – that most prominent of Indian nationalists pushing for independence – “never fathered,” implicitly hanging Gandhi and the other nationalists of his ilk on a lower rung of the masculinist hierarchy by grouping them with the other, unwarlike peoples.³⁴ On full display here is the value of the martial race concept in stabilizing colonial rule: it was a brilliant divide-and-rule tactic, pitting those bestowed with certain piecemeal privileges and praise against the others who lacked even the most meager of recognition.

With regards to Gandhi, it was clear where the “gentle yet merciless race of hereditary moneylenders, from which Lala Gandhi springs” and “clever trading classes” of tradesmen,

³² MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India*, 1.

³³ MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India*, 4.

³⁴ MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India*, 1.

artificers, and goldsmiths came from.³⁵ One can see here the deployment of the “merciless usurer” trope, used to describe the cunningness of Jewish people as seen in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, to show the gulfs in between the miserly non-martial races and the magnanimous Christian man. MacMunn veritably curled his lip as he described this “mass of the people” with “neither martial aptitude nor physical courage,” a condition created by “a strange medley of causes” ranging from “early marriage” to “premature brides” and “juvenile eroticism,” a “thousand years of malaria and hook-worm,” poor sanitation in hot climates, and “the deteriorating effect of aeons of tropical sun on races that were once white and lived in uplands and on cool steppes.”³⁶

This is a litany of erotically debasing devices and metaphors, some of which is easy to explain – the non-martial races, physically enervated due to disease, shriveled in the heat, darkened by the sun (pointing towards a racial dimension expanded on below), were far from the ideal physique of the Christian man that MacMunn so approvingly identified the martial races as having. But what explains the emphasis on the sexual perversion and deviance of the unwarlike peoples as an indication of their undesirability?

The emphasis arose from the conceptual linking, as Foucault explicated, of heterosexuality and masculinity. The “Victorian puritanism” on display in MacMunn’s scorn for the practice of child marriage and “juvenile eroticism” of the non-martial races was a prime example of this. Child marriage contravened Christian manhood’s ideal of heteronormativity: the non-martial male populace was having heterosexual sex, yes, but with *underage girls*. This indicated not these men’s desirability but the exact opposite. They were so perverse and deficient in self-control that they would marry, and even impregnate, girls,

³⁵ MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India*, 3.

³⁶ MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India*, 2.

breeding endlessly. MacMunn was not alone in his disgust for this, and this perception of the sexual deviance of the non-martial races contributed significantly to their undesirability.

There was also a definite racial, colorist dimension to the British colonizers' respective fetishization and debasement of the martial and non-martial races. The former more closely approached the ideal of Christian masculinity, which itself justified and reproduced the colonial rule of the white, male British by making them the standard of proper manhood. As such, the "races of the North" – the martial races – were superior to, and would dominate, "the people of the South" – the non-martial peoples – without the restraining effect of British rule.³⁷ The former, explained MacMunn, were "largely the product of the original white races" – the invading Aryans who arrived from the north and settled in the Indian subcontinent, conquering the "negroid and Mongoloid aboriginals" of the south who were already inhabiting the region (and are the ancestors of the non-martial races). Small wonder that the martial races, possessing a "high-grade," "Aryan beauty" that "bears considerable resemblance" to the "physiognomy of the Greek," were so desirable.³⁸ On various axes – physical vitality, moral fiber, race – the martial races more closely approached the ideal Christian man than the non-martial ones. As such, they were fetishized, and the latter erotically debased.

Late-colonial incels?

Erotic debasement distanced the non-martial peoples from the ideal of masculinity more than fetishization did to the martial races, because being straight – *possessing* women as sexual and romantic partners – had a central importance to masculinity under the specific vision of Christian manhood. In turn, for the white and Indian man alike, his desirability and ability to

³⁷ MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India*, 3.

³⁸ MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India*, 6-9.

“get” women – especially white women, the feminine ideal – was inextricably tied to how masculine he was perceived as being, how closely he met the qualities of Christian manhood: white, fit, straight, “manly” in disposition.³⁹ Unlike the martial races’ fetishization, erotic debasement stripped the men of the non-martial races of any recognition of their desirability, and by definition, a key part of their masculinity.

The sexlessness imposed by erotic debasement was a trauma that left a gaping hole in the non-martial races’ claim to Christian manhood, one that needed to be explained. What follows is the recounting of the male Bengali elite who, after being denied sex through their debasement at the hands of their colonial oppressors, decided to reject the world of erotic desire entirely as a way to rationalize and justify this loss. These scars from the past lived on into the present, continuously compensated for by the Hindu nationalist movement’s practice of celibacy. To compensate, however, implies the existence of a trauma or loss to compensate *for*, that something valuable has been lost. Given that they still did value and desire sex as proof of manhood, then, did these men willingly and actively choose celibacy, or were they given no other choice, in light of the sexlessness imposed on them by their position in these imperial hierarchies of desirability (which, I would argue, constitute a “world-system of desire”)? Were these men voluntarily or involuntarily celibate?

The lived experience of the Bengali *babu*

Reverend Duff’s frantic letters were all sent from Calcutta, the capital of the colonial subdivision of Bengal Presidency, later Bengal Province. The region had, by 1857, been long integrated into the workings of the British Empire. After the British East India Company consolidated its hold on the area following the Battle of Plassey in 1757, it established an

³⁹ Kathy Deliovsky, “Normative White Femininity: Race, Gender and the Politics of Beauty,” *Atlantis* 33, no. 1 (2008): 52.

extractive relationship with the province, capitalizing on large Bengali industries like tea planting and coal mining which were holdovers from the pre-colonial Mughal period.⁴⁰ The Company needed a group of natives familiar with local intricacies to grease the wheels of their operation. Thus, the mercantile capitalists of the East India Company trained a class of Western-educated, predominantly male, and Hindu Bengalis who could act as accomplices to colonial rule, middlemen who could reach the peasants at the end of the commodity chain.⁴¹

In the late-nineteenth century, this class of people began agitating for the same privileges as the white colonial administrators. Former accomplices to colonial rule, they became classified as non-martial for their troubles, emasculated and erotically debased. The Bengali elite's subsequent attempts at being recognized as a desirable martial race were rejected, sowing the seeds of an oppositional, nationalist masculinity that would place celibacy at its heart.

The erotic debasement of the Bengali elite

In the century prior to the 1857 Rebellion – even before the increasingly explicit formulation of the martial and non-martial distinction in the decades following that year's unrest – there already existed a tendency, in the colonial mind, to associate Bengalis with the un-Christian, effeminate, and erotically debasing characteristics later attributed to the non-martial races. However, this was a more sweeping perception that included not just the class of witnesses to colonial extraction that were the educated Bengali middlemen, but all levels of society, including the peasantry.⁴²

⁴⁰ Indrajit Ray, *Bengal Industries and the British Industrial Revolution (1757-1857)* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2011), 14.

⁴¹ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 4-6; Jairus Banaji, "Merchant Capitalism, Peasant Households and Industrial Accumulation: Integration of a Model," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 16, no. 3 (July 2016): 415.

⁴² Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 16.

The writings of Thomas Babington Macaulay, a high-ranking member of a group of advisors to the Governor-General in Calcutta, provide perhaps the most-cited erotically debasing descriptions of Bengalis.⁴³ In his 1841 essay “Warren Hastings,” a recounting of the life of the first Governor-General of Bengal, Macaulay described the scene that the eponymous official encountered upon arriving in the region. It is hard to overstate the degree to which Macaulay debases the Bengalis:

The physical organisation of the Bengalee is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapour bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid. During many ages he has been trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardy breeds. Courage, independence, veracity, are qualities to which his constitution [is] unfavorable. His mind ... is weak even to helplessness for purposes of manly resistance; ... what beauty ... is to woman, deceit is to the Bengalee. Large promises, smooth excuses, ... chicanery, perjury, forgery, are the weapons ... of the people of the Lower Ganges. All those millions do not furnish one sepoy [infantryman]. But as usurers, as money-changers, as sharp legal practitioners, no class of human beings can bear a comparison with them. With all his softness, the Bengalee is by no means placable in his enmities or prone to pity.⁴⁴

Here Macaulay described the Bengalis in terms almost identical to MacMunn’s contemptuous portrayal of the non-martial races. They had neither the physical nor moral virtues of Christian manhood: physically enervated due to the humid climate and a lack of athletic pursuits, lacking any courage or martial prowess whatsoever, yet avaricious and ruthless when it came to questions of money. Macaulay’s disgust was evident as he outlined the “constant vapour bath” withering the skin of the Bengali, the softness of his musculature, the meanness of his character.

In *India: Its Administration and Progress*, a comprehensive overview of the state of the British colonial administration of India first written in 1888, the English civil servant Sir John Strachey broadly agreed with Macaulay’s assessment. The accuracy of Lord Macaulay’s descriptions “has hardly been denied by the Bengalis themselves, and will be disputed by no

⁴³ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 15.

⁴⁴ Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Warren Hastings,” *Edinburgh Review*, October 1841, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/hastings/txt_complete.html.

Englishman.” But something had changed: writing nearly half a century after the publication of “Warren Hastings,” Strachey drew a distinction between the mostly Muslim peasant population and the elite class of Hindu middlemen, landlords, and *rentiers*, one which Macaulay elided in his broad-brush erotic debasement of a monolithic Bengali populace. The laboring and peasant classes, many of whom were Muslim, were now “exempted from the charge of effeminacy,” as Sinha puts it, with the Muslims in particular being characterized as a hardier and more martial race of people.⁴⁵ The target of erotic debasement had been narrowed down to the class of Western-educated Hindu elites, now referred to as *babus*.⁴⁶

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, this Bengali-middlemen stratum began to push for the same treatment and privileges that hitherto had been reserved for the white, colonial elite.⁴⁷ This can be seen, along with the 1857 mutiny, as part of a general groundswell of unrest, and it saw the inception of the martial race and “effeminate *babu*” concepts the colonial administration employed to ease the agitation. Both legitimated the colonial hegemony of white males by positing them as the standard of manhood and having native Indians – martial and non-martial – fall short of it, voiding any claim they had to rule. The Bengali Hindu *babu*, which came into being as a category years after the mutiny and the formulation of the martial race concept, was grouped with the non-martial races by the British. This subjected the Bengali Hindu elites, newly designated as *babus*, to the erotic debasement and greater humiliation (relative to the martial races) seen in MacMunn’s treatment of the “unwarlike peoples.”

The Bengali Hindu elite’s categorization as a non-martial race – the *babus* – had various implications for how they were seen in the eyes of the British. On one hand, the way in which the *babus* were viewed had certain similarities with the earlier, non-class-specific

⁴⁵ This grouping of Muslim men with the more masculine and desirable martial races has implications that are explored in the final section of this paper.

⁴⁶ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 16-18.

⁴⁷ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 4-6.

descriptions of the general undesirability of the Bengali people. What was new about the Bengali elite's specific designation as non-martial *babus*, however, was the race-based erotic debasement it brought along. This is seen in Sir Herbert Risley's 1915 *The People of India*, a scientific-racist text that was an ethnographic study of different groups of Indian people as classified into various racial subgroups. Risley labeled the "Brāhmans of East Bengal" – the Bengali elite – as a "Mongolo-Dravidian" type, "[recognizable] at a glance" by their genetic makeup, comprised of a mixture of "Dravidian stock" and "Mongoloid characteristics."⁴⁸

This was a racial grouping that was identified as the one of the ancestral lineages of the non-martial races by MacMunn. Thus, all of the debasing imagery of the non-martial races, which MacMunn offered prime examples of, was now used to describe the class of elite Bengali *babus*. For instance, the Mongoloid-Dravidian East Bengali Brahmins "show a far higher proportion of broad noses," in contrast to the "high aquiline nose" that the martial races possessed and which MacMunn praised as an example of their "Greek physiognomy." The *babus*, far from being magnanimous and generous Christian men, were characterized by "their remarkable aptitude for clerical pursuits" and their stinginess.⁴⁹ The fair-skinned, "Indo-Aryan" genetic stock of the martial races "[vanished] beyond recognition in the swamps of Lower Bengal" with the admixture of the Dravidian blood of the "feebler folk" of Bengal. This genetic inferiority, along with "the influence of a relaxing climate and an enfeebling diet," as well as "the practice of marrying immature children" – the latter being "the great blot on the social system of the upper classes of Bengal" – led to the "physical degeneration" characteristic of the elite *babus* Risley described in his studies.⁵⁰ The Bengali elite, now classified as a non-martial race, were thoroughly erotically debased.

⁴⁸ Sir Herbert Risley, *The People of India* (London: W. Thacker & Co., 1915), 40-42.

⁴⁹ Risley, *The People of India*, 40-42.

⁵⁰ Risley, *The People of India*, 56-57.

Brown skin, white masks: the search for recognition and its denial

The Bengali *babus* – that class of Western-educated former-accomplices-to-colonialism, classified as a non-martial race and erotically debased starting in the late-nineteenth century – heard the slander and mockery of the British colonial elite. They internalized all of it – the colonial vision of Christian manhood and desirability, their failure to approximate it through their labeling as a non-martial race, the martial, non-martial binary itself – and in so doing developed a “self-image of effeteness,” as John Rosselli would have it.⁵¹ A look at an 1887 editorial in the Calcutta-based newspaper *The Statesman* reveals the spread of colonial accusations of the effeminacy of the non-martial races, in this instance with regards to the sexual perversion on display in the practice of child marriage. “We cannot but believe the practice of infant marriage to be productive of national harm,” the editorial board wrote. They cited the “weight of native authorities ... who declare it to be so.”⁵² The men in question were Keshub Chunder Sen and Krishna Mohan Banerjee – two Bengali social reformers and thinkers who, tellingly, advocated for change according to a worldview heavily based on Christian theology. Small wonder that the latter in particular would have internalized his own debasement: Banerjee had attended lectures of the aforementioned Scottish missionary Alexander Duff.⁵³ Even the Bengali intellectuals Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Swami Vivekananda – who will later play important roles in this story – had made this debasement their own. “Alas! this frame is poor,” Vivekananda lamented of “the

⁵¹ Rosselli, “The Self-Image of Effeteness,” 121.

⁵² “Practice of Child Marriage,” *The Statesman*, June 30, 1887.

⁵³ “Banerjee, Krishna Mohan,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of South Asian Christianity*, ed. Roger E. Hedlund, Jesudas M. Athyal, Joshua Kalapati, and Jessica Richard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

physique of a Bengali,” the physique of his people.⁵⁴ “Bengalis never had any physical valour,” agreed Chatterjee.⁵⁵

However, the *babus* of Bengal remained undaunted in the face of the unattainable standards of Christian masculinity and desirability, believing that they could be reached – or at least approached – through the attainment of “martial-race” status. Many a *babu* complained about the “demilitarized” condition of the contemporary Bengali Hindu elite relative to manlier and more desirable past generations.⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly, then, these Bengali men began to hit the gym. Indeed, returning to Strachey’s 1888 survey of the state of British rule in India, he noted in his earlier-quoted discussion of Bengalis that “there have been many changes since Lord Macaulay wrote [“Warren Hastings” back in 1841], among them signs of increasing vigour [in the Bengali male population];” a significant recent development has been the cultivation “of a taste for athletic sports among the educated classes and in the government schools and colleges.” “Gymnastics are often practised with some enthusiasm,” and “the Bengali schoolboy has taken to cricket, hockey, and football,” with the latter becoming especially popular “all over the province.”⁵⁷ This pursuit of physical culture by the Bengali Hindu elite could be seen as their striving for recognition, a reaching for the standards of Christian masculinity and desirability. There was a belief that with consistent effort, training, and discipline, they too could be seen as a martial race in the eyes of the British, and thus proximately masculine and more desirable.

The Bengali *babus*’ striving for recognition as a martial race came to the fore in the native volunteer movement of 1885-86. The Panjdeh incident – a war scare between Britain

⁵⁴ Swami Vivekananda, “The Education that India Needs,” Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda online archive (hereafter “SRSV online archive”), April 24, 1897, https://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_4/translation_prose/the_education_that_india_needs.htm.

⁵⁵ Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, “The Physical Valour of the Bengalis,” in *Racanabali* (1874), quoted in Rosselli, “The Self-Image of Effeteness,” 123.

⁵⁶ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 55.

⁵⁷ Strachey, *India: Its Administration and Progress*, 451.

and Russia caused by a skirmish in Afghanistan – had occurred in March 1885, which led the Governor-General of India Lord Dufferin to call for the creation of a Volunteer Reserve Force comprised of volunteers from the native male population. Although this idea was quickly shot down by the Military Department of the Government of India, this sparked demands all over India for the establishment of regional native volunteer corps. This was finally an opportunity for the Bengali Hindu elite to prove themselves, to obtain the recognition as a martial race in the eyes of the British they had coveted for so long. By June 1 that same year, the Bengal Government had been flooded with 27 petitions calling for a Bengali volunteer corps, with a total of over 1,800 signatures between them.⁵⁸

These requests were summarily laughed off. “Ram Jam Tunga Ghose and Company could (not) be induced to fire at a target much less at an enemy,” read a letter from an Anglo-Indian (white) reader to the Delhi-based *Pioneer* newspaper on the prospect of a bunch of weak Bengali *babus* volunteering in the military.⁵⁹ White, Anglo-Indian sentiment was united in the belief that the non-martial races, including the Bengali elite class, simply was not masculine enough to volunteer, drawing from the erotically debasing imagery and tropes of non-martial races analyzed in previous sections. “The *babu* although a valiant wielder of the pen, is not so handy with the sword,” went another piece in the *Civil and Military Gazette* of Lahore. The British administrator Sir Lepel Griffin, writing in the *Asiatic Quarterly Review*: “Not a single Bengali *babu* from Assam to the Sunderbunds would fire a shot for the English if they were engaged in a war ... with Russia.”⁶⁰

The Bengali elite’s appeal to be recognized as a martial race – to have recognized their manhood and desirability (relative to the non-martial races) – had been denied, and they reacted in fury at the sight of others being recognized instead of them. In the *Bengalee*

⁵⁸ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 69.

⁵⁹ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 77.

⁶⁰ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 80.

newspaper, a writer fumes at the “Africans, West Indians, Armenians and Jews ... who find ready admittance into the army of Her Majesty’s citizen soldiers. ... Does our Aryan blood carry with it so great a stigma”? How did it make sense that “the dusky sons of Africa” and “the mixed race of America” were recognized for their martial character, when the Bengalis, with truly martial blood running through their veins, were not?⁶¹ This was a racist claim to the Aryan ancestry attributed to the martial races and associated with all sorts of desirable characteristics (recalling MacMunn’s fawning over the “Greek physiognomy” of the Aryan-descended martial races). It demonstrated the deep desire of the Bengali elite to be recognized as a martial race, as desirable.

The denial of the desirability and manhood of the Bengali elite came not just in the eyes of the white male colonial administrators who rejected their demands for native volunteering, but also from white, British women, who were prevented from interacting with Indian males by anxious British men. In February 1883, a law known as the Ilbert Bill was proposed in the Legislative Council which would have allowed native Indian officials to preside over criminal cases involving British subjects. This triggered an uproar from many sectors of the Anglo-Indian populace for a variety of reasons, but one of the most common rhetorical devices used to argue against the passage of the bill was the image of the white woman being put on trial, especially in cases of sexual assault.⁶² Rumors abounded of the sexual assault of white women by native men. In *India Under Ripon*, a 1909 series of personal recollections and anecdotes from the English poet Wilfrid Scawen Blunt’s travels in India, the author described the Ilbert Bill as a “revolutionary measure” which would put “every Englishwoman at the mercy of native intrigue and native fanaticism.”⁶³

⁶¹ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 92.

⁶² Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 51.

⁶³ Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *India Under Ripon: A Private Diary* (London: Chiswick Press, 1909), 6.

Whether these rumors were true or not was irrelevant – the “perceptions of real and imaginary assaults” spread like wildfire. In a way, they were grounded in a kernel of truth. Indian men – martial and non-martial like – *did* sexually covet white women, who were portrayed as the ideal woman in the colonial imagination: “an English girl in all her maidenly dignity” exhibited all the feminine virtues; “that innocent girl, so kind, so affectionate, so loving,” was the *standard* of womanhood.⁶⁴ Native men would engage in “revolting and suggestive” impersonations of white women to the amusement of their peers.⁶⁵

The white, male colonial elite knew this, and did everything they could to prevent sexual or romantic relationships between Indian men – especially the non-martial races (like the Bengali *babus*) – and white women. A Reverend William Hastie accused a white female missionary in Calcutta, Mary Pigot, of sleeping with a native Christian teacher in her school, the *babu* Kali Charan Bannerjee (Pigot subsequently sued Hastie for defamation of character and won the case).⁶⁶ Lady Wilson, married to an Anglo-Indian civilian, noted in the early 1900s that “most Europeans of the old school would not allow a [European] lady to accept an Indian gentleman’s proffered hospitality, ... [or] receive an Indian as a visitor, far less dine with him.”⁶⁷ But why was there this “fear and denial with which Anglo-Indians responded to any possibility of intimacy between white women and native men” in the first place, this ado over a white woman being with an Indian man, and a *babu* at that?⁶⁸

This fear existed because getting the ideal girl would mean that you were the ideal guy, or at least, in the case of Indian men – who were doomed to fall short of the mark in the other measures of Christian masculinity – closer to being one.⁶⁹ In the heteronormative

⁶⁴ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 56.

⁶⁵ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 48.

⁶⁶ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 49-50.

⁶⁷ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 47.

⁶⁸ Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*, 49.

⁶⁹ Frantz Fanon, “The Man of Color and the White Woman,” in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 45.

iconography of Christian masculinity, the ideal, archetypal white, Christian man was paired with *his* ideal, archetypal white, Christian woman in a heterosexual relationship.⁷⁰ Thus, in this instance the white man's loss was the Indian man's gain. "Getting" white women would confirm that the supposedly effeminate, weak *babus* of the Bengali elite were (partially, recalling the fetishization of the martial races) as athletic, martial, courageous – as *desirable* – as the white men posited as the ideal of manhood. And of course they – these unruly Bengali men demanding more privileges and threatening the colonial order; who, for that, were categorized as a non-martial race – could not have that.

“The Seminal Fluid,” a.k.a. semen: *Brahmacharya* and the Hindu revival

In the late-nineteenth century, the Bengali elite reached for the standards of Christian masculinity through their attempts to be recognized as a martial race. Their failure was unsurprising, as Christian masculinity was constructed to legitimize the rule of white males, and in the Indian context, the white, male colonial elite. The martial, non-martial distinction was a divide-and-rule tactic that posited the former as closer to the ideal of Christian manhood, and thus deserving of some privileges, and the latter as thoroughly effeminate. The Bengali elite, having agitated for receiving the same treatment as the white colonial administrators, were categorized as a non-martial race, putting these threats to social stability as far away from the corridors of power as possible.

As a result of their non-martial categorization, the Bengali elite, construed as effeminate *babus*, were subjected to the erotic debasement that all non-martial races faced. Having their efforts at recognition of their martial status – and thus, their desirability – denied, in this section I argue that as a response, the Bengali elite rejected the centrality of desirability and heterosexuality to one's manhood in the last two decades of the nineteenth

⁷⁰ Bailey, “English Marital Violence,” 150.

century. The Bengali elites inverted the heteronormativity of Christian masculinity: it was actually the *absence*, not the *presence*, of heterosexual sex and desire that made one manly. This made those seen as masculine under the paradigm of Christian manhood, with all of their sex with women and minds clouded by lust, now effeminate. It was the sexless Bengali who was truly a man under the terms of a new, oppositional masculinity the Bengalis constructed to oppose British rule.

Hindu warriors, Hindu men

In 1882, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, one of the Bengali intellectuals who had internalized his own erotic debasement, published the novel *Anandamath*. This was a foundational work in the Bengali response to the humiliation they suffered at the hands of the British, a movement that has been labeled variously and which will be referred to as *Hindu Revivalism*. In the book there is a dialogue between two of his characters that reveals much about the new conception of manhood the Revivalists had begun to develop. “What makes this difference between the British and the Indian soldier?” one asked. The other responded:

Because the British soldier would never run away even to save his life. The Indian soldier runs away when he begins to perspire; ... The Englishman surpasses the Indian in tenacity. He never abandons his duty before he finishes it. Then consider the question of courage: A cannon ball falls only on one spot. But a whole company of Indian soldiers would run away if one single cannon ball fell among them. ... British soldiers would not run away even if dozens of cannon balls should fall in their midst.

He continued: “Virtues like these cannot be plucked from trees like ripe fruit. We have to acquire them by patient practice and unyielding perseverance.”⁷¹ The first-person plural “we,” coming from the mouth of Bhavan, an Indian rebel fighting against the East India Company, was used to refer to the band of *sannyasis* (male Hindu ascetics) fighting against the British. Through Bhavan’s voice, Chatterjee was posing a question to his fellow Bengalis: How could

⁷¹ Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Anandamath*, trans. Basanta Koomar Roy (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1992), 41.

Indian men, *Hindu* men, build up and develop themselves to a point where they would be able to resist the British in the struggle for freedom?

Once it became apparent that they would never attain the standards of Christian masculinity and the mandate to colonial privilege and rule that it bestowed upon white men, the Bengali elite began to forge an oppositional masculinity that could be used to oppose British rule entirely. Thus, this conception of manhood was intrinsically connected to the Revivalist anti-colonial and nationalist movement, which I will later argue was the precursor to modern Hindu nationalism. This version of masculinity, and the Hindu Revivalism it was bound up with, both rested on the idea that India had had a national essence and spirit throughout its history, and that this essence was religious – it was Hindu. As such, both drew heavily on ideas, images, and practices that their proponents considered to be “Hindu,” despite their idea of “Hinduness” itself being a colonial construct. As Christophe Jaffrelot has argued, even the idea of a unified “Hindu essence” itself was a product of the Western perception of India, one that ignored the fact that Hinduism, for most of its history, has been a collection of variegated and mutually incoherent sects.⁷²

This form of masculinity, which will be referred to as *Hindu masculinity*, posited Hindu men as the ideal of manhood. It justified their rule and social predominance in the Hindu-based anti-colonial and nationalist project for independence as well as the independent nation to come. It legitimized their ascendancy over women and also men who did not reach its requirements: men of religious minorities like Muslims and Sikhs, homosexual men (as I will show, heterosexuality was still paradoxically made a key trait of Hindu masculinity even as it swore off sex), Adivasi men. Many of Hindu masculinity’s virtues mirrored those of Christian masculinity: the emphasis on physical vigor, martial capability, athleticism; as well as similar moral qualities like courage, restraint, and discernment. As Sikata Banerjee notes,

⁷² Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, 1-5.

these virtues were presented with a Hindu tint, with the figures of the “Hindu soldier” and the ascetic “warrior-monk” being common models of Hindu masculinity.⁷³

Swami Vivekananda, another aforementioned *babu* who lamented the “poor frame” of his fellow Bengalis, was a key, world-renowned Hindu Revivalist, a standard bearer of the new Hindu manhood.⁷⁴ Vivekananda was a prolific writer and speaker, and his many works and speeches offer a comprehensive picture of Revivalist thought. In an 1897 address he delivered in Calcutta, he painted an image of an Indian national essence that was fundamentally Hindu in character. He contrasted India’s Hindu-based identity with the identity of other countries: “With us, religion is the only ground along which we can move. The Englishman can understand religion even through politics. ... But the Hindu can understand even politics when it is given through religion.” Embracing this Hinduness would lead to the “regeneration of India” and her conquering of the world and teaching to other nations of “our religion,” “our spirituality.”⁷⁵ The nationalism of the Hindu Revivalists, grounded in an idea of a unified, Hindu national essence, used India’s spiritual superiority over other nations as an argument against colonial rule.

For Vivekananda and the Revivalists, the mission of reviving India’s Hindu character was assigned mainly to its men. “There is a law laid on each one of you in this land by your ancestors,” Vivekananda declared in 1897 to a crowd gathered in Kumbhakonam, a city in the southern region of Tamil Nadu, then-Madras Presidency. “[Regardless of Aryan-ness or caste], ... The command is the same to you all ... from the highest man to the lowest Pariah, every one in this country has to try and become the ideal Brahmin,” a member of the highest, priestly caste of Hinduism whom Vivekananda used as an illustrative embodiment of Hindu

⁷³ Banerjee, *Make Me a Man!*, 2.

⁷⁴ Vivekananda, “The Education that India Needs.”

⁷⁵ Swami Vivekananda, “Address of Welcome Presented at Calcutta and Reply,” SRSV online archive, 1897, https://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_3/lectures_from_colombo_to_almora/address_of_welcome_presented_at_calcutta_and_reply.htm.

manhood's characteristics.⁷⁶ The Revivalists' prescriptions applied to every man in the country – in the project of national rejuvenation, everyone had to pitch in, especially the males upon whom its outcome rested. “Make your nerves strong,” Vivekananda exhorted in another 1897 lecture delivered in then-Madras. “What we want is muscles of lion and nerves of steel ... No more weeping, but stand on your feet and be men.”⁷⁷ The nation would be built on the shoulders of strong, Hindu men, who had to be as valorous as the British and Muslims – colonial oppressors and Mughal invaders respectively – who posed threats and obstacles to the establishment of a Hindu India. One of his followers, Irish woman Margaret Elizabeth Noble (later Sister Nivedita), recounted him telling her that “the aim of his whole life was ... ‘to make Hinduism aggressive, like Christianity and Islam.’”⁷⁸

What was the figure of the Brahmin, then, the trope Vivekananda pointed to as a representation of all of Hindu masculinity's virtues? So far I have identified physical strength and martial valor as ideals Vivekananda prescribed to all Hindu men, ideals similar to those of Christian masculinity. However, the brahminical character of the Revivalist vision of manhood came through in its *asceticism*. In his above-quoted address on every man becoming a Brahmin, Vivekananda explained: “By the Brahmin ideal what do I mean? I mean the ideal Brahmin-ness in which worldliness is altogether absent and true wisdom is abundantly present. That is the ideal of the Hindu race.” Indeed, the priestly asceticism of the Brahmin caste was the foundation beneath all of Hindu masculinity's other qualities, such as the martiality discussed in the previous paragraph: “Those who train themselves to live on the least and control themselves well will in the end gain the battle, and ... those who run after

⁷⁶ Swami Vivekananda, “The Mission of the Vedanta,” SRSV online archive, 1897, https://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_3/lectures_from_colombo_to_almora/the_mission_of_the_vedanta.htm.

⁷⁷ Swami Vivekananda, “My Plan of Campaign,” SRSV online archive, 1897, https://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_3/lectures_from_colombo_to_almora/my_plan_of_campaign.htm.

⁷⁸ *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita, Volume I* (Calcutta: Sister Nivedita Girls' School, 1967), 113.

enjoyment and luxury, however vigorous they may seem for the moment, will have to die and become annihilated.”⁷⁹ The “patient practice” needed to match the martial prowess of the British that the character of Bhavan describes in *Anandamath* was the practice of asceticism: “We are all ascetics, you see.”⁸⁰ This linking of asceticism and manhood is related to Hindu masculinity’s celibate stance on sex and erotic desire.

The sexual inversion

As established in previous sections, heteronormative sex, relationships, and desire – especially with the feminine ideal of the white woman – had a central place in Christian masculinity. Unable to obtain this recognition of their Christian manhood via winning the white woman and her body, the Bengali-elite-turned-Revivalists *inverted* the equation in an attempt to reclaim their manhood. It was actually the *absence*, not the *presence*, of sex and desire that made one manly and vice versa – having sex to satisfy libidinal desires made one less of a man. This was a play by the Hindu Revivalists to assert that they were manlier (and thus, more fit to rule) than the British colonizers who had debased them, mocked them for their undesirability. As stated by Banu Subramaniam, the latter’s obsession with sex actually made them *less* manly, and the lack of it made the former more so.⁸¹

Within the framework of Hindu masculinity, this sexual inversion was linked with its ascetic character, established above. In an essay written in 1900 fittingly titled “The East and the West,” Vivekananda stated that for the Hindu man the “goal of life is Moksha,” the emancipation from the cycle of rebirth that was a concept of enlightenment or transcendence in various Indian religions. This enlightenment could not be attained without “Brahmacharya or absolute continence;” thus “it is imposed upon our boys and youth as an indispensable

⁷⁹ Swami Vivekananda, “The Mission of the Vedanta.”

⁸⁰ Chatterjee, *Anandamath*, 41.

⁸¹ Subramaniam, *Holy Science*, 95.

condition during their studentship.”⁸² *Brahmacharya* referred to the practice, also found in several Indian religions, of celibacy. In traditional Hindu thought, it was understood as a period of religious training in the lives of certain males as they studied the *Vedas*, the oldest scriptures of Hinduism. Sex and erotic desire were regarded as mentally and spiritually distracting during this phase of life and thus abstained from. In Vivekananda’s quote, he modulated this pre-colonial concept for nationalist aims, turning it into a prescription for *all* male citizens to follow in service of revitalizing the Indian nation.⁸³

What would happen if one did not practice *brahmacharya*? Vivekananda pointed to the West: “The purpose of life in the West is Bhoga, enjoyment; hence much attention to strict Brahmacharya is not so indispensably necessary with them as it is with us.”⁸⁴ Westerners, with all of their erotic desire, sensuality, and “enjoyment,” were decadent, soft, un-martial, effeminate. This was because, according to Vivekananda, “Complete [sexual] continence gives great spiritual and intellectual power. The Brahmachârin must be sexually pure in thought, word, and deed. Lose regard for the body; get rid of the consciousness of it so far as possible.”⁸⁵ The Revivalists’ rejection of sex lay in their rejection of *erotic desire* – desire was enervating, weakening, and thus emasculating. As a result, the Hindu man had to “lose regard for the body” and “get rid of the consciousness of it” in order to attain the ascetic, priestly, Brahmin ideal of Hindu manhood. This was a rejection of both the colonial fetishization of the martial races and debasement of the non-martial ones, which framed manhood in terms of a man’s ability to “get” women sexually and romantically (his

⁸² Swami Vivekananda, “The East and the West,” SRSV online archive, 1900, https://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_5/writings_prose_and_poems/the_east_and_the_west.htm.

⁸³ Alter, “Celibacy,” 48.

⁸⁴ Vivekananda, “The East and the West.”

⁸⁵ Swami Vivekananda, “Thursday, July 25, 1895 – Patanjali’s Yoga Aphorisms,” SRSV online archive, July 25, 1895, https://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_7/inspired_talks/32_thursday_july_25.htm.

desirability). This obsession with obtaining women engendered an atmosphere of eroticism and desire that actually made the British colonists less of a man, and thus less fit to rule.

According to Hindu masculinity, then, to feel erotic desire was unmanly. Again, looking at Vivekananda provides hints as to why libido is emasculating: “By the establishment of continence energy is gained.”⁸⁶ “Save the spiritual store in your body [by] observing continence.”⁸⁷ These quotes’ mention of “energy” and “spiritual stores” of it point towards a mechanism through which a man’s lack of indulgence in erotic desire actually heightened his virility and Hindu manhood.

The seminal fluid

Sivananda Saraswati, or Swami Sivananda, lived from 1887-1963. The man was a Hindu spiritual teacher who, although not explicitly a Revivalist himself, drew from and contributed to the same groundswell of interest in reviving traditional Hindu thought for a modern context and the needs of the emergent Hindu nation. Indeed, Sivananda revered Vivekananda, lauding his precursor as a modern-day saint.⁸⁸

Sivananda’s 1934 *Practice of Brahmacharya* provides a comprehensive explanation as to why the Revivalists conceived of erotic desire as emasculating. According to him, sexual intercourse *for the satisfaction of desire, for pleasure*, made one less of a man because it was physically and mentally weakening. In turn, it was physically enervating because it *made a man release semen*. In a chapter titled “The Value of Semen,” Sivananda described semen as the vital fluid that gave men energy: “Semen nourishes the physical body, the heart

⁸⁶ Swami Vivekananda, “Concentration: Its Practice,” SRSV online archive, 1895, https://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_1/raja-yoga/concentration_its_practice.htm.

⁸⁷ Swami Vivekananda, “Notes Taken Down in Madras, 1892-93,” SRSV online archive, 1893, https://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_6/notes_of_class_talks_and_lectures/notes_tak_en_down_in_madras.htm.

⁸⁸ Swami Sivananda, “Swami Vivekananda,” The Divine Life Society, accessed April 4, 2022, https://www.sivanandaonline.org/?cmd=displaysection§ion_id=1381.

and the intellect.” To lose this essential fluid through passion-driven sexual acts, then, was enervating and robbed a male of the physical and moral qualifiers of Hindu manhood:

“Falling of semen brings death; preservation of semen gives life. Semen is the real vitality in men. ... It imparts Brahma-Tejas [spiritual power] to the face and strength to the intellect.”⁸⁹

Indeed, Ramakrishna – the nineteenth-century Bengali Hindu mystic of whom Vivekananda was a disciple – himself espoused these same beliefs regarding semen and its retention. In *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, a collection of conversations between Ramakrishna and his students and visitors, the former attributes near-superhuman abilities to those men who don’t release semen: “To be able to realize God, one must practise absolute continence. ... *A man controlling the seminal fluid for twelve years develops a special power. He grows a new inner nerve called the nerve of memory. Through that nerve he remembers all, he understands all.*”⁹⁰ Ramakrishna’s use of the words “chastity” and “continence” are important here – they connoted self-restraint and refraining from sex, but not necessarily a total swearing off of it (implying “permissible” forms of sex, which will be discussed in the next subsection). Erotic desire was dangerous because it induced males to have sex for pleasure without abandon and spend copious amounts of their semen, which was what fueled their physical vigor and moral-intellectual-spiritual power as Hindu men.⁹¹

The Revivalist conception of *brahmacharya* showed the appropriation of an aspect of pre-colonial, traditional Hindu thought (*brahmacharya*) for a project of developing a modern vision of masculinity; a masculinity that, in this case, was intrinsically bound up with an anti-colonial, nationalist project. In the process of appropriation, the concept of *brahmacharya* was itself modulated from its original, Vedic conception. The idea of semen loss as bad for a

⁸⁹ Swami Sivananda, *Practice of Brahmacharya* (Uttar Pradesh: The Divine Life Society, 1997), 21-22.

⁹⁰ Mahendranath Gupta, “Rules for Householders and Monks,” in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda, SRSV online archive, 1942,

https://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/gospel/volume_1/20_rules.htm.

⁹¹ Alter, “Celibacy,” 58.

man's health was an ancient Indian religious belief.⁹² However, as it was absorbed into Revivalist thought, it became a universal standard for all male citizens to follow, given its importance to masculinity and thus, the nation-building project. As the Revivalists drew on a Western view of a unified and coherent "Hinduness" for the project of national rejuvenation and independence, so they also used their modified understanding of the Vedic concept of *brahmacharya* and semen retention for the purpose of forging the Indian men who would turn the vision of a Hindu India into reality.

The procreation provision

The Revivalists made exceptions for certain types of sex. As mentioned previously, the words "chastity" and "continence" often used by proponents of *brahmacharya* like Sivananda and Ramakrishna were just loose enough to offer a loophole in their diagnoses of semen release's enervating effects. This loophole is what I will refer to as the *procreation provision*, or, to use Subramaniam's words: "the ideal of 'marital, procreative, domestic' sexual activity is the only sex legitimized. All other sex is considered illegitimate."⁹³ Sex for pleasure, to satisfy libido, was verboten, but sex for procreation between a heterosexual, married couple was permitted. Vivekananda wrote of a book by a Western scholar on Ramakrishna in an 1899 review: "Even [the author], born of a foreign nationality and living in a foreign land, can understand the meaning of our Brahmacharya as the only way to the attainment of spirituality," whereas Indians themselves "are unable to see anything else than carnal relationship in the matrimonial union!"⁹⁴ Even within the context of a marriage, then, sex should not be had *for pleasure or desire*, but for procreation alone.⁹⁵

⁹² Om Prakash, Sujit Kumar Kar, and T.S. Sathyanarayana Rao, "Indian story on semen loss and related Dhat syndrome," *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 56, no. 4 (October-December 2014): 377.

⁹³ Subramaniam, *Holy Science*, 95.

⁹⁴ Swami Vivekananda, "Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings," SRSV online archive, March 14, 1899, https://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_4/translation_prose/ramakrishna.htm.

⁹⁵ Alter, "Celibacy," 60.

A Hindu man having sex under the terms of the procreation provision was able to maintain his celibate status. Sivananda affirmed this in *Practice of Brahmacharya*: “If men and women restrict sexual indulgence to mere procreation, then that itself is observance of Brahmacharya.”⁹⁶ Celibacy, or “Brahmacharya [means] moderation, a wise rational, restrained use of the sex energy for the purpose of procreation.”⁹⁷ Like sex for pleasure, procreative sex still did drain a man of the vital fluid of semen. The difference was that the latter was, in theory, done without desire. This meant that couples could “rationally” and “with restraint” choose how much they copulated, with the result that the man, not led by lust, did not spend too much of his sex energy, his semen, having wanton sex.

However, Sivananda acknowledged the unlikelihood of this because of the inherent difficulty of siloing off feelings of desire from the act of sex: “As [restricting sex to procreation] is found to be impossible in the vast majority of cases, total abstinence is enjoined on those who seek the higher values of life.”⁹⁸ As such, he proposed a routinization of procreative sex, a habit that couples could fall into. Male “householders are allowed to visit their wives once in a month at the proper time without the idea of sexual enjoyment just to get progeny to keep up the line.” Not only did this preserve the man’s vital energies, but it also allowed the couple, “observ[ing] Brahmacharya” and “avoid[ing] excesses,” to produce “robust children who will be the pride of the country.”⁹⁹ This procreation provision added a heteronormative dimension to Hindu masculinity. The ideal Hindu man was ascetic and celibate, yes, but also a patriarch, a householder, paired with *his* Hindu woman in a chaste marital relationship and tasked with conceiving children and therefore continuing the nation.

There was a latent contradiction here, even if the procreation provision superficially resolved it. For the Revivalists, the release of semen during sexual acts diminished a male’s

⁹⁶ Sivananda, *Practice of Brahmacharya*, 3.

⁹⁷ Sivananda, *Practice of Brahmacharya*, 127.

⁹⁸ Sivananda, *Practice of Brahmacharya*, 3.

⁹⁹ Sivananda, *Practice of Brahmacharya*, 35.

manhood because of its weakening effects, but was permissible if done in limited amounts for the purpose of procreation and guaranteeing the nation's future. The presence and absence of *erotic desire* was the key differentiator between sex for pleasure and procreative sex, respectively – both were weakening, but driven by desire and lust, couples ran a risk of engaging in too much of the former. But *how many* Hindu men, claiming to be celibate by professing to only be having sex for procreation, truly did not feel any desire at all? As Sivananda himself acknowledged, it was doubtful that the Revivalists' prescriptions on masculinity, sex, and desire truly turned all of their adherents into enlightened, spiritually pure male ascetics. This tension between a lack of desire in theory and the reality of the Indian men who tried to adopt it – a tension that reveals the true nature of this celibacy and to what extent it was actually voluntary – will be explored in the final section of this paper.

A reclaimed masculinity: the compensating men of Hindutva

The modern Hindu nationalist movement emerged from an intellectual lineage heavily influenced by Revivalist thought.¹⁰⁰ In 1923 Vinayak Damodar Savarkar – one of the foundational ideologues of Hindutva (literally “Hinduness”), the dominant strain of Hindu nationalist ideology – published his foundational text *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*. In it, he articulated an idea of a unified Indian history and civilization based on a notion of a Hindu essence at the exclusion of “others” like Christians and Muslims, and said that this cross-caste identity would be the foundation of the nation-to-come.¹⁰¹

The Hindu nationalists positioned themselves as the successor movement to the Hindu Revivalists. Given this, I argue that the former inherited the latter's thoughts on Hindu

¹⁰⁰ Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, *Mission Bengal: A Saffron Experiment* (Haryana: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2020), 64.

¹⁰¹ Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, 30; Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969), 4. https://archive.org/details/essentials-of-hindutva-veer-savarkar_202106/page/n1/mode/2up.

nationhood, masculinity, sex, and desire, all of which were elaborated upon in the previous section. This section looks at how the Hindu nationalists understood and modified this intellectual legacy through their organizational practices – which include celibacy – and stance on surrogacy. This inheritance and reproduction imply that the colonial humiliation of emasculation and erotic debasement that the Revivalists suffered from and responded to were absorbed into the collective consciousness of the Hindu nationalist movement; both at its founding in the early twentieth century and continuing into the present.

It would be remiss not to address where Savarkar's contemporary Gandhi, that most famous of celibate nationalists, fits into this picture. His concept of *brahmacharya* differed from the Hindu nationalists' Revivalist-inspired interpretation. This was because Gandhi's nationalism was secular, based on a vision of an independent India that was pluralistic, incorporative of all religions. Meanwhile, the anti-colonial and nationalist projects of Revivalism and Hindutva were predicated on India being a fundamentally "Hindu" nation.

These differing nationalisms – although both opposed to colonial rule – had correspondingly different views of gender and how they related to the nation-building project. Gandhi's secular, liberal nationalism was much less gendered than the Revivalists' communal, Hindu-based one. His idea of a future India did not require that males sit at its apex.¹⁰² In the "new patriarchy" of a Gandhian India, "male and female citizens would be as brother and sister, mother and son, father and daughter."¹⁰³ The Revivalists – and the Hindu nationalists who claimed the mantle of succession from them – viewed the nation-to-be as one with Hindu men sitting at its core and apex. They created a Hindu masculinity which justified this social position, and accordingly made its martial and violent tendencies an essential part of their political strategy and method. For the Revivalists, a Hindu masculinity

¹⁰² Chakraborty, *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism*, 134.

¹⁰³ Alter, "Celibacy," 62.

that matched the martiality of Christian manhood would be able to use violent means to kick the British out. This stood in contrast to Gandhi, who was accused of “feminizing resistance to colonial power” through his promotion of nonviolence.¹⁰⁴

This meant that the idea of *brahmacharya* had a different significance for each. For Gandhi, the resisting of desire that celibacy entailed was something beneficial to both men and women. As Alter has argued, this was because it was less about retaining semen than it was about cultivating the mental and spiritual fortitude needed to resist temptation. This meant that celibacy was a practice that everyone, male and female, could and should undertake, so that all of them, regardless of gender, could develop the strength needed to contribute to the movement for independence. For the Revivalists and Hindu nationalists, however, celibacy *was* about retaining semen and its vital, masculinizing properties. Only men have semen, and thus *brahmacharya* was a practice relevant only to them, who needed its invigorating effects as they shouldered the responsibility of fighting for a Hindu India.¹⁰⁵

Inheriting the mantle

The founding of the modern Hindu nationalist movement can be located on September 27, 1925. That day, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar – who had studied medicine in Calcutta in 1910 and was covertly involved with Bengali secret societies steeped in all the nationalist and Revivalist ferment – founded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (Association of National Volunteers, or RSS), a quasi-paramilitary Hindu nationalist political group which eventually became the father organization of the Sangh Parivar, the collectivity of Hindu nationalist organizations in India. Hedgewar had read *Who is a Hindu?* and met Savarkar earlier that year, founding the RSS with the eventual goal of establishing a Hindu *rashtra* (Hindu

¹⁰⁴ Chakraborty, *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism*, 135.

¹⁰⁵ Alter, “Celibacy,” 62.

nation).¹⁰⁶ Importantly, the Hindu nationalists explicitly positioned themselves as the inheritor of Revivalist thought. They claimed the personage of Vivekananda, in particular, as their inspiration and spiritual-intellectual forefather. Madhavrao Sadashivrao Golwalkar – the second *sarsanghchhalak* (chief) of the RSS and another prominent Hindutva ideologue – in his compiled writings and speeches published in the mid-1960s titled *Bunch of Thoughts* stated that Hindutva stood on the shoulders of “notable thinkers in many fields like Ramakrishna and Vivekananda,” two prominent Revivalists mentioned previously.¹⁰⁷

As the Hindu nationalists inherited the Revivalist vision of a Hindu India and made it their own, so did they absorb their conception of a physically robust and morally purified Hindu masculinity that would be needed to realize that project. In *Bunch of Thoughts*, Golwalkar stated that “the first thing [for men] is invincible physical strength. We have to be so strong that none in the whole world will be able to overawe and subdue us. For that, we require strong and healthy bodies.” Both physical and inner strength of its male members was needed for the Hindu nationalist movement to succeed. Indeed, Golwalkar himself directly cited a Vivekananda quote mentioned in this very essay: “Swami Vivekananda used to say, ‘I want men with muscles of iron and nerves of steel.’” He showed the importance Vivekananda and the Revivalists had in Hindutva thought by valorizing him and depicting him as a model of manhood, saying that “[Vivekananda] himself was like that. Finding that some co-disciples were always sitting down and shedding tears, he would thunder, ‘That is not *bhakti* [devotion]. That is nervous weakness. Don’t sit down and weep like little girls.’”¹⁰⁸

Like it was for the Revivalists, for the Hindu nationalists, this vision of Hindu manhood was core to the anti-colonial and nationalist project. Golwalkar exhorted men to make themselves more manly in service of the establishment of a Hindu *rashtra*. “The great

¹⁰⁶ Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, 33.

¹⁰⁷ Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts* (Bangalore: Sahitya Sindhu Prakashana, 2000), 1.

¹⁰⁸ Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, 56.

builders of our society since hoary times” had always been “the selfless, self-confident and devoted band of missionaries, ... who have roused the sleeping manliness in our nation in times of adversity and made our nation rise gloriously from a heap of shambles.” Golwalkar’s exhortations reached a perorational passion as he exclaimed: “Let us shake off the present-day emasculating notions and become real living men, bubbling with national pride ... Only such a band of young men fired with a missionary zeal can ... ward off the grave perils threatening our country from inside and outside.”¹⁰⁹

The language of fraternity (“band of young men”) is apparent in Golwalkar’s invocation of Hindu masculinity for the cause of national rejuvenation. Christophe Jaffrelot describes a “prevalent brotherliness and egalitarianism in the RSS,” a sentiment that is confirmed by Kewalram Ratanmal Malkani, who joined the RSS in 1941. He described the local organization, comprised of “spirited young men,” offering training in using a *lathi*, a baton-like weapon (he related this experience to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee – Revivalist author of *Anandamath* – and his poem “Ode to Lathi”). The RSS made its members feel like they were making themselves manlier; it offered adults and young males alike an opportunity to reflect on “what he was, what he aspired to be.” Its “atmosphere of purity and integrity was a standing invitation to self-improvement according to one’s lights.” Some practiced *asana* yoga poses “to improve health,” whereas others gave up meat, smoking, or even films for the cause. And “at the end of it, all of them felt different, they felt better.”¹¹⁰

Golwalkar supported all this: in “bend[ing] all our energies towards this fundamental process ... the great process of man-making,” “our ancient and sacred nation can once again attain its original position of greatness and glory.” This process included celibacy. Golwalkar approvingly cited the story of 17th-century Indian general Tanaji Malasure, who was “busy

¹⁰⁹ Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, 335.

¹¹⁰ K.R. Malkani, *The Midnight Knock* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978), 91-93.

making preparations for his son's marriage" when he was notified that he was needed in battle. He instantly "gave up the thought of marriage saying, 'My son's marriage may well wait for some time; I will first carry out the command of my king. My first duty is towards the Swaraj.'"¹¹¹ Just as Malasure gave up marriage for the sake of the king, so for the Hindu nationalists giving up marriage was an essential ingredient in the process of forging the Hindu men crucial to the establishment of the nation.

Ascetic-cadres

Like the Revivalists, the Hindu nationalists extolled celibacy as key to Hindu manhood and thus, to the nation-building project. In direct opposition to Christian masculinity's relating of sex with women to manhood, under Hindu masculinity, it was the *lack* of sex that made one manly. This was a belief that the Hindu nationalists both espoused and put into practice, exemplified in various instances across the century-long history of their movement.

The Hindu nationalists' valuing of celibacy is seen in the way they praised the chastity and continence of key figures in their movement's history. Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS, was identified as a model of Hindu masculinity for the celibacy he maintained after returning from his medical studies in Calcutta and embarking on the path of nationalist politics. In a 2015 biography of the man written by Hindutva apologist Rakesh Sinha, the author wrote: "Dr. Hedgewar had now dedicated himself to the national cause, observing complete celibacy. ... everyone implored him to reconsider the extreme nature of his sacrifice, but had to bow to Hedgewar's constructive thinking and positive resolve. ... His decision was not influenced by momentary impulses or the external world, but rather by a calm mind and the challenges that lay ahead, and his mission for the nation." Celibacy was connected to Hindu manhood's virtues of a "calm mind" unmoved by "momentary impulses

¹¹¹ Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, 59.

or the external world,” an ascetic and brahminic affect that was needed to surmount the challenges in store for the national cause.¹¹²

In his book *Jyotipunj*, a compilation of hagiographies of important figures in the history of Hindutva, Modi continued this trend. “Who will build the nation,” he asked, “if everybody is engaged in his own individual tasks of earning livelihood, living a personal life and procreating offsprings [*sic*]?”¹¹³ In passages on Vivekananda and Hedgewar, he lauded both for their dedication to the national cause, and the latter in particular for “[initiating] the tradition of Pracharak ... in which people renounce all their aspirations and ambitions of their private lives in order to live life for the nation and society.”¹¹⁴ Golwalkar, who “in his heart of hearts, wished to be a Sanyasi [a Hindu religious mendicant]” and “was initiated into Brahmacharya,” was offered as an exemplar of a man of spiritual fiber.¹¹⁵ Again, the ascetic, priestly Brahmin ideal of Hindu manhood was seen as integral to the nationalist project.

The Hindu nationalists embraced celibacy not just rhetorically, but in political practice as well. Despite occasionally conflicting scholarship, various sources point towards the RSS having its members adhere to celibacy, either through making them take a vow of it or simply having it as a widespread social norm.¹¹⁶ The salience of this practice was on full display during the month-long 2014 Indian general election, when Modi himself was caught up in a “scandal” in which it was revealed that he had had “an arranged marriage ... about 45 years ago.” He quickly reassured voters that he was still, at the time, in the process of “considering becoming a monk or a full-time activist with a Hindu nationalist organization, which required a vow of celibacy,” and upon making his mind up “abandoned [the marriage] soon after the wedding.” Fearful that his marriage would show his wavering commitment to

¹¹² Rakesh Sinha, *Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar: Founder of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)* (New Delhi: Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2015), 16-17.

¹¹³ Narendra Modi, *Jyotipunj* (New Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, 2015), 12.

¹¹⁴ Modi, *Jyotipunj*, 33-34.

¹¹⁵ Modi, *Jyotipunj*, 14.

¹¹⁶ Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, 40.

“a life of service” to the nation, “Modi and the B.J.P. took pains to keep the marriage quiet for many years,” which was “apparently not consummated.”¹¹⁷

The cadres of the RSS and BJP were aware of the possibility of this scandal breaking loose long before the election. In 2009, an *Open* magazine profile of Modi’s estranged wife detailed how she was under the “close watch” of RSS members “to ensure that her disclosures do not embarrass the [then] Chief Minister of Gujarat.” In trying to secure an interview with her at the school where she taught at, the author saw that various men had arrived outside, “park[ing] their vehicles within the school premises” and “look[ing] directly into the principal’s office” where the interview was being conducted.¹¹⁸ The shame of Modi not actually being celibate, ascetic, and masculine was so great that “one of [Modi’s] mentors, L.K. Advani, called the magazine’s owner to request that his reporters not meet Mr. Modi’s estranged wife again.”¹¹⁹ Modi, as the head of the entire Hindu nationalist movement, could not be seen violating an organizational practice as essential as celibacy.

Purging perversions

The Hindu nationalists linked celibacy to masculinity for the same reason the Revivalists did: sex was enervating, and drained men of the vital fluid that endowed them with the traits of Hindu manhood. Recalling Sivananda, erotic desire would be the undoing of a man, as an unbridled lust would lead to a profligate draining of the “seminal fluid.” As such, in *Bunch of Thoughts*, Golwalkar criticized the modern idea of development and the “progressive modern societies” – from Western countries to the “Communist dictatorships” of Russia and China – which subscribed to it. He saw these societies as being characterized by “permissiveness” –

¹¹⁷ Barry, “Indian Candidate’s Biography Has an Asterisk.”

¹¹⁸ Haima Deshpande, “[I am Narendra Modi’s Wife](https://openthemagazine.com/features/india/i-am-narendra-modis-wife/),” *Open*, May 30, 2009, <https://openthemagazine.com/features/india/i-am-narendra-modis-wife/>.

¹¹⁹ Manu Joseph, “Votes Won by Feeling, Not Facts,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/17/world/asia/in-india-votes-won-by-feeling-not-facts.html>.

progress was seen as “the individual [being] left free to indulge in whatever way he chooses to enjoy himself”; with “unbridled licentious behavior with respect to sex, food, drinks, family life, social intercourse and all such aspects.”¹²⁰ This permissiveness and indulgence in desire and lust, according to ascetic Hindu manhood, was effeminate.

Given the danger posed by erotic desire to the man-making process, in a chapter titled “Purge Perversions,” Golwalkar stated that a key pillar of the Hindu educational system needed to be “continence,” and without this and other key values instilled in students, it was little wonder that “our young men ... take to reading vulgar and obscene magazines.”¹²¹ Golwalkar imputed to this seemingly insignificant and personal act a national importance, because of what it indicated about the condition of the young men of the nation, its future warriors and defenders.

“No nation,” Golwalkar declared, “can hope to survive with its young men given over to sensuality and effeminacy.” India, whose future depended on the strength and vitality of its male Hindu warrior-monks, was no exception. Minds distracted and morals corroded by a culture of eroticism and sexual libertinism – including the reading of vulgar magazines or the wearing of suggestive clothing – would guarantee the failure of males in attaining the martial qualities of proper Hindu men. To prove his point, Golwalkar pointed to France as an example. After their victory in World War I, “Frenchmen succumbed to sensuality and enjoyment,” forms of “effeminacy which had *sapped the energy* of the heroic manhood of France,” leading to its quick collapse to the invading German forces two decades later. India was at risk of suffering the same fate, with “‘sex’ [having become] the one dominating theme of all our ‘modern’ literature”; “history of countries the world over has time and again shown that sex-dominated literature has been an unfailing precursor to the ruin of nations and

¹²⁰ Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, 20-22.

¹²¹ Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, 191-192.

civilisations.”¹²² The Revivalist influence here is clear: a pervasive atmosphere of erotic desire, imported by the sex-obsessed British, was draining young men of the vital and energetic fluid of semen through wanton sex. Having weak men jeopardized the nation and was a recipe for its defeat in the global clash of civilizations.

Golwalkar even tried to draw a distinction between the erotic “exhibitionism” of the “Westerners” who “show their love through dramatic embraces and kisses” – “mostly an outward show ... as there is the danger of their divorce the very next day” – and the true love of “the Hindu husband and wife [who] do not display their love openly,” and yet are “aglow with love” for one another.¹²³ This ideal of love and gender roles – similar to Sivananda’s portrait of a Hindu husband and wife who maintained their celibacy if they had sex solely for procreation – without the corroding and emasculating effect of erotic desire made sense on a theoretical level, sure. Yet it begs the question once again: how likely is it that all those men (and women) who followed Golwalkar’s prescriptions were asexual but not aromantic? In other words, how likely is it that couples are going to feel romantic attraction for one another, but no sexual desire at all? It is more likely that, for the vast majority, the former included the latter. Even if one interprets Golwalkar’s idea of love as a spiritual, deeper bond beyond romantic or erotic feelings entirely, it is highly unlikely that these writings truly elevated all of his male and female adherents onto this more enlightened plane of being.¹²⁴

Like the Revivalists, Golwalkar and the Hindu nationalists made an exception for procreative sex. He cited a story from the Hindu epic poem *Mahabharata* in which a mother blessed her sons before sending them off to war: “She blessed them saying, ‘Go ye all to the battle. This is the occasion for which Kshatriya women give birth to sons. Go and give your best in this *dharmayuddha* [righteous war].’ Let every mother speak in the same heroic strain

¹²² Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, 190. Emphasis added.

¹²³ Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, 50-51.

¹²⁴ This has implications that will be drawn out in the final section of this paper.

to her sons even now.”¹²⁵ Procreation was the lifeblood of the nation – without women giving birth to sons who would fight for it, how could the *rashtra* expect to achieve greatness? Thus, sex was made permissible in this one instance, as long as there was no desire involved and it was done within the context of marriage. The permissibility of procreative sex within marriage and without desire, crucial as it was to the nation, played out in Hindutva’s politics of surrogacy and population.

The procreation provision in practice: surrogacy, desire, and the politics of population

With the procreation provision stating that sex was permissible within a heterosexual marriage for procreative purposes, where did surrogacy – a practice embraced by Modi himself – fit into this framework?¹²⁶ Savarkar himself undertook an set of mental acrobatics reconciling surrogacy with Hindu masculinity’s stance on sex, desire, and procreation, drawing upon ideas of *niyoga* (a form of surrogacy) in ancient Vedic texts to do so.¹²⁷ This effort itself shows how this stance was inseparable from Hindu nationalism’s politics of population and demography. The Hindu nation had to be *Hindu-majority*. For Hindu nationalists, there was thus an urgency around conceiving the next generation, which conferred an existential importance to procreative sex and surrogacy; practices which, as seen above, Hindu masculinity accordingly permitted. In order to stay consistent with Hindu masculinity’s emphasis on *brahmacharya*, the procreation provision allowed a man to claim celibacy even if he was having procreative sex by saying that it was done without desire.

The point here is that, for the Hindu nationalists, questions of population and demography and those of sex and desire were intrinsically related to one another. The

¹²⁵ Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, 227.

¹²⁶ “PM Modi takes leaf from Batra book: Mahabharat genetics, Lord Ganesha surgery,” *The Indian Express*, October 28, 2014, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/pm-takes-leaf-from-batra-book-mahabharat-genetics-lord-ganesha-surgery/>.

¹²⁷ Savarkar, *Hindutva*, 87; “Chapter IX,” in *Laws of Manu*, Internet Sacred Text Archive, no. 63. <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu/manu09.htm>.

procreation provision was inextricably intertwined with the urgent need of the nation-building project to guarantee its future through conceiving offspring. This relationship between Hindu masculinity's stance on desire and the politics of demography will be seen in the next section: the Hindu nationalists simultaneously panicked over demographic replacement by, and harbored a sexual envy of, the Muslim population.

“Love Jihad” and the jealous Hindu man

The Hindu masculinity – and its sexual inversion, ideas of semen retention, and procreation provision – developed by the Hindu Revivalists and inherited by the Hindu nationalists were a reaction against the erotic debasement, sexlessness, and emasculation inflicted upon the Bengali Hindu elite by their British colonizers. It allowed the Bengali elite to turn the tables on the British by asserting that, being ascetic, brahminic Hindu men, they did not want sex with women (or anyone else) in the first place, and that desiring it was what actually made the British less of a man. Although Revivalism and Hindutva's celibacy may appear as a choice, then, I argue that this history suggests that it was involuntary. It was a way for the Bengali elite to rationalize and justify to themselves – to compensate for – the loss of the world of sex and desire they still craved and saw as key to their manhood, but were denied access to by their traumatic erotic debasement at the hands of the British. These forms of trauma and compensation were intergenerational, as they were absorbed by the men of the Hindu nationalist movement. They displayed these dynamics through their initial admiration (an admiration that stretched back to the Revivalists, as seen by Vivekananda's desire for Hindus to match the martiality of the Muslims), and later sexual envy, of the historically fetishized Muslim population. This sexual envy of the latter was tightly intertwined with a Hindu nationalist panic surrounding the demographic replacement of Hindus by Muslims.

Muslims as a martial race

As the Bengali Hindus were experiencing erotic debasement at the hands of the British, Muslim men in Bengal and across the country were getting the opposite treatment: they were classified as martial, fetishized due to their approximation of the physical qualities of Christian masculinity. With the Mughal rule of India directly preceding the British colonial era, preexisting tropes and conceptions of the warlike Muslim invader were modulated and transmuted into the martial, non-martial binary.¹²⁸ In turn, these categories, as established earlier, existed within a Christian-masculinist hierarchy that had white, straight, vigorous British men at its apex, presented as the standard of manhood for males to attain.

The categorizing of Muslims as a martial race and their concomitant fetishization is seen in returning to MacMunn's *The Martial Races of India*. He recounted how "the martial races" who invaded India and established the Mughal Empire "professing this [Muslim] faith" emerged from Afghanistan. MacMunn claimed that their ancestry likely traced back to a glorious Greek past, and that the "stronger proclivities of [this] Aryan stock" had likely "eradicated physical traits" of any "Tartar or Turki" blood they might have inherited.¹²⁹

Herbert Risley, in his *The People of India*, described the religion of Islam in a similarly fetishizing, martial way, contrasting it to Hinduism. "Islam ... is in every respect the antithesis of Hinduism. Its ideal is strenuous action rather than hypnotic contemplation; it allots to man a single life and bids him live it and make the best of it; its practical spirit knows nothing of a series of lives, ... of *karma*, of the weariness of existence which weighs upon the Indian mind."¹³⁰ On display here is a dynamic of comparison between Islam – both its beliefs and adherents perceived through the Christian-masculinist lens as dynamic and vigorous – and a Hinduism weak and languid in both doctrine and followers. The martial

¹²⁸ Banerjee, *Make Me a Man!*, 39, 56, 60, 63.

¹²⁹ MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India*, 76.

¹³⁰ Risley, *The People of India*, 121.

races from Afghanistan whom MacMunn described all fell within Risley's "Turko-Iranian" and "Indo-Aryan" racial types, and Risley surmised that "further enquiry might lead to [the former's] inclusion in the [superior, latter] type." Thus, the martial races that were the Mughal invaders all had pale-skinned, Aryan genetic stock – they were superior to the dark, indigenous, non-martial races: the "Mongolo-Dravidian," "Mongoloid," "Dravidian" types.¹³¹

Colonial administrator John Strachey's 1888 survey of British rule in India confirms that in the colonial imaginary, the main fault line lay between the sturdy, martial Muslim and the weak, non-martial Hindu. Recalling the brief mention of this distinction in a previous section, Strachey wrote of the weak "general character of [the Bengali people] throughout the greater part of the province," which "cannot, however, be applied to the northern and eastern districts, where the majority of the population is Muhammadan." The "great mass of the Musulman population [of Bengal] is agricultural," and these Muslim peasants, regardless of ancestry, "are men of far robuster character than the [Hindu] Bengalis of the western districts." The Muslims were martial and brave, serving in the Battle of Plassey as *sepoy* infantrymen, while the Bengalis had "no shame or scruple" in their cowardice.¹³² This distinction between the martial Muslim and the non-martial Hindu was one that the Revivalists internalized as well, as seen in an earlier quote in which an admiring Vivekananda stated that "the aim of his whole life was ... 'to make Hinduism aggressive, like Christianity and Islam.'" ¹³³ This is the divide seen in the rest of this section: between the Muslims, who were lauded and fetishized as a martial race, and the Hindus, mocked and erotically debased as a non-martial one.

¹³¹ Risley, *The People of India*, 33-34. There was a distinction made between the descendants of the original Muslim invaders from the northwest and the locals who converted to the faith. For Risley, each wave of conquerors that entered India, whether "Greek, Scythian, Arab, Moghal," was "more or less absorbed in the indigenous population," the interbreeding with the inferior genetic stock of the local populace resulting in the invaders' "physique degenerated, their individuality vanished, their energy ... sapped." For more, see Risley, *The People of India*, 53 and 126-127.

¹³² Strachey, *India: Its Administration and Progress*, 448-51.

¹³³ *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita, Volume I*, 113.

Celibate envy and the Muslim ego threat

This image of the martial, desirable Muslim was transmitted from the Hindu Revivalist imaginary into the Hindu nationalist one, often figuring in the latter's fears of demographic replacement by the Muslim population. U.N. Mukerji, a doctor writing from Bengal at the height of Revivalist and Hindu nationalist ferment, published a series of articles in *The Bengalee* which in 1909 were compiled into a book called *A Dying Race*.¹³⁴ In it, he discussed the question of why "year after year [the Hindus] are being pushed back, the land once occupied by them [being] taken up by the Mahomedans and their relative proportion to the population of the country [becoming] smaller and smaller." A big reason: "it often happens that Hindu females having fallen in love with Mahomedan males adopt the Mahomedan religion." Mukerji reported that a Hindu man had told him that he "came across ten cases of conversion to Mahomedanism and in all cases love or lust was the motive."¹³⁵

And small wonder that the former fell in love with the latter. In passages that closely mirror Strachey's survey of the Bengali Muslim peasantry and the comparisons he made between them and the region's Hindu elite, Mukerji exhibited an acute awareness of the physical prowess of the Muslim male and the relative degradation of his Hindu counterpart. Looking at the "chur" fields of Bengal one saw "that these tracts are almost entirely inhabited by the sturdy Mahomedan peasantry." "Travelling from Calcutta along the E.B.S. Railway," one saw "the superior physique of the Mahomedans as compared with that of the Hindus" in the figure of the railway porters, who were mostly Muslim: "Very few Bengali Hindus work as porters," since "their poor physique stands in the way." Indeed, "one can get a fair idea of the physique of the two communities by looking at the Mahomedan porter and the Hindu

¹³⁴ Bhattacharya, *Mission Bengal*, 66-67.

¹³⁵ U.N. Mukerji, *A Dying Race* (Calcutta: Mukerjee & Bose, 1909), 5-7.

sweetmeat-seller on the Railway platform.” Muslims fare better with diseases like malaria, since “their better physique, their sounder constitution [helps] them to recover more readily than the Hindus,” who, being “underfed” and “weakly,” were simply “weeded out.” Perhaps “the superior physique of the Mahomedans is due to the fact that they get better food to eat.” Regardless, “to sum up [all of the above] – a Mahomedan enjoys better health, is of stronger physique, has got more stamina than a Hindu.”¹³⁶

This begs the question: Why would losing women matter to Hindu nationalist men who professed their own celibacy, who supposedly did not desire women at all? Should they not have been indifferent to this? Why did it matter to Mukerji or to any of his male correspondents that Muslim men were seducing Hindu women, that they were fitter and more desirable than their Hindu counterparts? Why, as seen below, were these exact concerns taken up by the modern Hindu nationalist movement in the “Love Jihad” conspiracy theory?

The sources below suggest that this mattered to the Hindu nationalists because, despite all of their superficial proclamations of celibacy and asexuality being the mark of a true man, erotic desire remained at the core of Revivalist and Hindu nationalist consciousness. These men cared about their women being taken from them because, in spite of their stated swearing off of libido, they *fundamentally still desired, and felt sexually entitled to, women*. The heteronormative legacy of Christian masculinity – its linking of sex (with white women) with manhood – remained internalized in the collective imagination and self-recognition of Hindu men, regardless of their insistence of its voiding or absence. Denied recognition of their manhood through sex with the white woman, the object of desire subconsciously shifted to Hindu women in their minds.

The entitled, possessive desire the Hindu nationalists continued to feel is revealed by how they perceived the figure of the Muslim man. Muslim men – fetishized, deemed

¹³⁶ Mukerji, *A Dying Race*, 8-11.

attractive in a Christian-masculinist light – threatened to take Hindu women from Hindu men, through force or seduction, converting them to Islam. As such, the Hindu nationalists felt an envy of these more desirable Muslims and a jealousy over them taking “their” women. This is suggested by their myriad insecurities: from a historical obsession over the Mughal conquerors’ rape and conversion of Hindu women to a modern manifestation of this sexual and demographic panic in the “Love Jihad” conspiracy theory.

In *The Indian War of Independence*, a 1909 recounting of the 1857 mutiny, prominent Hindutva ideologue Veer Savarkar recounted the “dogged manner” and “bravery” with which the “Moulvie,” or Mawlawi (an Islamic title given to religious scholars), fought “the foreign foe” of the British. The scholar in particular was “Moulvie Ahmad Shah,” “the most formidable enemy’ of the British in Northern India.” Savarkar described his rugged physique and fine features, in line with the fetishization of the martial races seen previously (recalling, in particular, MacMunn’s praise of their “Greek physiognomy”): “In person, the Moulvie was tall, lean and muscular, with large deep-set eyes, beetle brows, a high aquiline nose, and lantern jaws.”¹³⁷ On display in Savarkar’s writing is an admiring portrait of the Muslim man’s valor and physical characteristics, showing the continued importance to Savarkar of attaining the attractive ideal of Christian manhood, which the Mawlawi approximated by virtue of being a martial Muslim man.

By 1963, this admiration had turned to envy, with Savarkar’s ideological tracts evincing a jealousy over Muslim men taking Hindu women. That year, he wrote *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*, another work of nationalist history identifying six distinct historical phases in India and the martial feats that the Hindu population exhibited in each. Much of Savarkar’s retelling was centered around the threat posed by Muslim invaders over

¹³⁷ Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *The Indian War of Independence of 1857* (n.p., 1909), 370. https://archive.org/details/ldpd_6260651_000/page/n17/mode/2up.

the course of centuries, starting in 1000 A.D.¹³⁸ In particular, he gave much focus to the subjugation and forced religious conversion of Hindu women at the hands of lecherous, hyper-virile Muslim men (and in doing so, himself adopting the colonial fetishization of the martial races as attractive yet pathologically hyper-masculine, with brawn but no brain).

He devoted an entire section to “The Grave Danger of the Muslim Abduction and Pollution of Millions of Hindu Women.” In the “diabolic Muslim faith,” Savarkar asserted, it is “a religious duty of every Muslim to kidnap and force their own religion into non-Muslim women.” Thus, “this incited” the Muslim man’s “sensuality and lust for carnage,” “enormously [increasing the Muslims’] number [and affecting] the Hindu population in an inverse proportion.” Upon a victorious conquest by the Muslim invaders, Hindu women were “collected as ransom” and “distributed by fives or tens amongst the most faithful followers of Islam,” with “the future progeny of these conquered women ... born Muslim.” With “kidnapped Hindu women” married off to polygamous Muslim men or “simply kept as their concubines,” unsurprisingly “aggressive ... Muslim communities began to grow rapidly year-after-year, from a few thousands to millions and more.” He lamented that the Hindu “woman-world ... suffered such a tremendous numerical loss,” with “their future progeny ... lost permanently to Hinduism,” letting “the Muslim population thriv[e] so audaciously.”¹³⁹

The quotes above display two things. It is clear that, at least on the surface, Savarkar condemned the hypersexual and licentious Muslim male aggressor. However, putting this in context with his quotes from *The Indian War of Independence* is revealing. Underneath this excerpt’s stated panic over demographic replacement, as well as censure of Muslim men for being effeminate through their wanton indulgence in sex for pleasure, was a sexual envy. The Muslim, through his conquering of Hindu women, was more attractive than the Hindu – the

¹³⁸ Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History* (New Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, 2020), 121.

¹³⁹ Savarkar, *Six Glorious Epochs*, 143-148.

admiration seen in Savarkar's 1909 description of the Muslim Mawlawi, with his "high aquiline nose" and "large deep-set eyes," had turned to envy in these passages. To possess women as sexual and romantic partners was a key part of Christian masculinity. Thus, Hindu nationalists obsessed over losing the women who – being possessions to be "collected" by and "distributed" between men – were rightfully theirs to Muslim men, which proved that the latter were more masculine and desirable. In a way, their stronger, more martial, manlier, and more desirable Muslim counterparts were living proof and reminders to the Hindu nationalists of their own failure to be attractive and masculine in the measures of Christian masculinity. This fear and jealousy from the historically debased Hindu man of his historically fetishized Muslim counterpart, far from indicating an indifference towards heterosexual sex, pointed towards the continued centrality of it in the Hindu nationalist consciousness, which still internalized and reproduced this legacy of Christian masculinity.

These quotes also show how the Hindu nationalists' sexual envy of Muslims was inextricably bound up with demographic panic. Throughout those passages, the jealousy over women being "lost permanently to Hinduism" was repeatedly connected to the consequence of a decreased Hindu population and an increased Muslim one. Within the Hindu nationalist imaginary, the repressed *erotic* desire for heterosexual sex was reconciled with a professed asexuality and celibacy with the idea that that sex was permissible if done dutifully for procreation. Thus, the Hindu woman took on the figure of child-bearer and numerical augments of the Hindu nation at the same time as she subconsciously became the source of sexual satisfaction for Hindu men in lieu of white women. Having their women taken away by Muslim men, then, invoked a sexual jealousy amongst Hindu nationalists and also a demographic one: the Muslims were taking their women, and by extension, their progeny and the nation's future. These twinned panics over sex and population were seen in the modern "Love Jihad" conspiracy theory.

Sexual jealousy and communalist hatred: Gujarat and Love Jihad

Several instances displayed the Hindu nationalists' sexual envy of their fetishized Muslim counterparts, and by extension, the entitled, heteronormative desire that remained internalized by them. In a 2011 study of Hindu nationalist sexual politics, University of Westminster scholar Dibyesh Anand quoted senior Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP, another Sangh Parivar organization) activist Giriraj Kishore as claiming that "there is a physical reason Muslims can seduce Hindu girls. They give them more *sharirik anand* (physical pleasure) because they have a surgery, Hindus don't." The surgery in question was circumcision, and a young, unnamed VHP cadre affirmed this in an interview with Anand in 2006: "Muslim men are too sexy because they have hard forehead due to circumcision and this is preferred by (Hindu) girls."¹⁴⁰ In the Hindu nationalist imaginary, historically fetishized and desirable Muslim men attracted and pleased women through sex. This incited a sexual jealousy amongst the historically debased Hindu men who weren't as desirable as them: Muslim men were "too sexy" and able to take their women away.

This sexual envy of Muslim men indicated that Hindu nationalists did still feel an erotic, entitled, heteronormative desire underneath their professed celibacy. Indeed, Anand noted that despite these quotes' apparent condemnation of Muslim male hyper-sexuality, an "unprompted indulgence in describing it" on the part of the VHP cadres implied "a pleasure drawn out of the narration of the excess;" this allowed them to "derive pleasure through displacement" of their desires onto the "porno-sexual imagining of Muslims."¹⁴¹ Tanika Sarkar affirmed this in a 2002 article she wrote about "a kind of penis envy" – and perhaps admiration – of "a more virile Muslim male body" amongst male Hindu nationalists.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Anand, *Hindu Nationalism in India*, 80.

¹⁴¹ Anand, *Hindu Nationalism in India*, 77.

¹⁴² Sarkar, "Semiotics of Terror," 2875.

One of the most horrific manifestations of the Hindu nationalists' repressed desire and sexual envy came about in the pogrom they committed against Muslims in the state of Gujarat in 2002. Over three days, 790 Muslims had been killed in the riots, and Anand, in another study of Hindu nationalist sexual politics written in 2007, described various attempts by Hindu nationalists to "emasculate Muslim men and show who the 'real men' are." This included the castration of Muslim men, a symbolic act demonstrating the sexual jealousy of the attractive, fetishized Muslim male in the Hindu masculinist consciousness.¹⁴³

A leaflet, titled "Jehad," distributed amongst Hindu rioters most clearly demonstrated the heteronormative desire and sexual entitlement to women that the celibate cadre denied yet continued to feel. An incitement to sexual violence against Muslim women, it stated that Hindu men had "untied the penises which were tied till now," tied by the erotic debasement they had suffered under the British and their reactive celibacy, which compensated for their imposed sexlessness by rationalizing it as chosen. It referenced "Panvad village," which had a sizeable Muslim population, "where [the Muslims'] mother was fucked." The pamphlet's invocation of the rape of Muslim women showed the heteronormative desire still felt by Hindu men, manifesting in this instance as their assertion of their own potency and desirability, having "untied their penises." The Muslim mother "was fucked standing while she kept shouting," presumably in pleasure; "she enjoyed the uncircumsized penis" of the Hindu man.¹⁴⁴ The Hindu nationalists – acting out libidinal impulses – had proven that they, as much as circumsized Muslim men, could sexually dominate and pleasure women.

These same dynamics of sexual jealousy were reflected in the Hindu nationalist "Love Jihad" conspiracy theory, which married them with a panic over demographic replacement by Muslims. On the campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi, several

¹⁴³ Dibyesh Anand, "Anxious Sexualities: Masculinity, Nationalism and Violence," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 9 (May 2007): 264.

¹⁴⁴ "JEHAD," in "Pamphlet Poison," Sabrang Communications & Publishing Pvt. Ltd., March-April 2002, <https://www.sabrang.com/cc/archive/2002/marapril/pamphlet.htm>.

pamphlets appeared in October 2009 warning against “Love Jihad ... The allegation that Muslim men entice Hindu and Christian women into marriage for reasons other than love, as part of an Islamist conspiracy, [which] has recently been investigated by the Kerala Police and has brought out some ugly details.” The flyer had been printed by Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a student affiliate of the RSS, in response to Justice K.T. Sankaran of the Kerala High Court directing state police to investigate the alleged conspiracy earlier that month. Claiming that “4,000 girls [had] been converted by [then],” the court ruling and the pamphlet were some of the earliest instances of this modern iteration of Hindu nationalist sexual jealousy and demographic panic surrounding the Muslim man.¹⁴⁵ The language of enticement – luring, seducing – was used to describe the “Love Jihadis” who targeted Hindu women. It imputed a deviousness and cunningness to the Muslim man, but also connoted his attractiveness – he had to be seductive if he was to seduce.

By 2014, “Love Jihad” had become a nationwide conspiracy theory. The ABVP formed vigilante groups in “major student campuses” across the country, stating that their goal was to “keep a watch on Muslim youths who try to lure Hindu women to pursue their agenda of love jihad.” Women volunteers for the ABVP began an effort to “‘sensitise’ Hindu women to the dangers of ‘social evils’ such as ‘love jihad, live-in relationships, Valentine’s Day and pub culture,’” all of which had “a ‘negative impact’ on India’s cultural and social ethos.” In a similar vein, ABVP national general secretary Shreehari Borikar said that “‘foreign events’ like Valentine’s Day were ‘polluting’ Indian culture and strong action needed to be taken to end such ‘social evils.’”¹⁴⁶ This view of the paraphernalia of sexual life and erotic desire – Valentine’s Day, couples living together, chatting up strangers at the pub –

¹⁴⁵ Deepu Sebastian Edmond, “ABVP raises storm in JNU with posters of ‘love’ in the name of Jihad,” *The Indian Express*, October 19, 2009, <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/abvp-raises-storm-in-jnu-with-posters-of-love--in-the-name-of-jihad/530384/1>.

¹⁴⁶ Sandeep Joshi, “ABVP vigilantes to curb ‘love jihad’ on campuses,” *The Hindu*, September 22, 2014, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/abvp-vigilantes-to-curb-love-jihad-on-campus/article6434411.ece>.

as a Western import damaging to the Indian body politic evoked Golwalkar's lambasting of sensuality and sex for pleasure as physically enervating and emasculating in his *Bunch of Thoughts*. It was consistent with Hindu masculinity's professed stance on sex – refrained from, indifferent towards, and dutifully carried out for procreation. So far, so celibate.

At least one Hindu nationalist organization dropped the pretense of celibacy in 2017. Tapan Ghosh, founder of the West Bengali RSS affiliate Hindu Samhati, “welcomed Valentine’s Day – a ‘Western concept’ – to combat ‘love jihad.’” The organization urged “Hindu boys to get pally with girls to stop them from falling in love with Muslims.” Ghosh asked in a speech, “What will the Hindu girls do if Hindu boys don’t mix with them? I would instead urge you to fall in love with girls – both Hindu and non-Hindu. If you don’t do this under family pressure, the girls will get pally with Muslims.”¹⁴⁷

The mask of asexuality and celibacy fully came off here: Ghosh’s words showed clearly the heteronormative desire and entitlement to women that the Hindu nationalists continued to feel. Faced with Muslim men taking their women, Ghosh told Hindu boys to actively “mix with” and “fall in love with girls” so that they were not taken by Muslim men – a possessiveness over “their” Hindu women was fully revealed and admitted by his exhortations. In this contest of love, losing their women to Muslim men would mean that Hindu men were less manly and desirable. Thus, in the competition with Muslims over their women, whoever emerged victorious would be the manlier and more desirable of the two.

The view of Love Jihad as a front in the war over women – a proxy for who was more desirable – came through in BJP Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (UP) Yogi Adityanath’s rhetoric surrounding what was referred to as the “Love Jihad law” by the media. In November 2020, the state government of Uttar Pradesh passed the Prohibition of Unlawful

¹⁴⁷ “Hindu body uses Valentine’s Day to fight ‘love jihad,’” *The Times of India*, February 15, 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/hindu-body-uses-valentines-day-to-fight-love-jihad/articleshowprint/57157942.cms>.

Religious Conversion Ordinance, which outlawed the “unlawful conversion from one religion to another by misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, allurement or by fraudulent means or by marriage.”¹⁴⁸ Although the bill itself made no mention of it, its conception and the public debate it incited were based on the panic surrounding Love Jihad, as seen in its references to “allurement,” “misrepresentation,” and “marriage” as instances of unlawful religious conversion. The language of war came through clearly in a speech Adityanath gave announcing the law. “Here is a warning for all those who conceal identity and play with the honour of our sisters and daughters,” he said. “If you will not mend ways then your ‘Ram Naam Satya’ journey will begin.”¹⁴⁹ *Ram Naam Satya Hai* is a phrase often chanted during Hindu cremation or funeral rituals – this was a death threat to Muslim men who dared take Hindu women away from Hindu men.

A VICE News documentary released in October 2021 chronicled a veritable war effort against Love Jihad – the video itself was entitled “The Hindu Extremists at War With Interfaith Love.” Shot in Uttar Pradesh, it showed predominantly male Hindu nationalist organizations working with police to track down Muslim male/Hindu female couples. One Hindu nationalist leader proudly described the spy network they set up to track down Love Jihadis: “Our workers are everywhere. They could be your rickshaw or taxi driver. They could run the corner shop or work at the cinema halls. They keep a keen eye on things. If they spot something, they report it. With their reports, we do what has to be done.”

“What has to be done” included a variety of measures, from committing acts of violence against Muslim men accused of Love Jihad to running awareness-raising campaigns for Hindu women warning them of the danger posed by Muslim suitors. During a session,

¹⁴⁸ Government of Uttar Pradesh, *Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance*.

¹⁴⁹ Namita Bajpai, “‘Your Ram Naam Satya journey will begin’: CM Yogi’s warning on ‘love jihad’, conversations,” *The New Indian Express*, October 31, 2020, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/oct/31/your-ram-naam-satya-journey-will-begin-cm-yogis-warning-on-love-jihad-conversations-2217607.html>.

male cadres informed Hindu women of the way Love Jihadis showed up to temple, pretended to be Hindu, seduced them, and made their lives hell after, taking compromising pictures as blackmail and trapping them before moving on to their next target (invoking the fetishized trope of the polygamous, sexually libertine Muslim). The narrator noted that none of the women in the room were allowed to speak directly to the camera crew. To the cadres, women were property, with no agency in their romantic or sexual choices. Christian masculinity's possessive, entitled heteronormative desire was still found in the Hindu masculinist consciousness. The men's possessiveness over women and jealousy of the fetishized Muslim man, who threatened to take them away, were on full display as one emphasized: "If you come to us [with news of Love Jihad], we'll smash the skulls of these degenerates."

A segment of the documentary interviewing Dr. Ranjana Kumari, a women's-rights activist for nearly half a century, sums up the cause of the panic over Love Jihad. In it she stated, "You can see how much desperation is there – Muslim and Hindu marriage, how to stop that; that's the preoccupation in the movement." It was this desperation and preoccupation that revealed the possessive, entitled, heteronormative desire still felt by Hindu men. That the Hindu nationalists continued to feel erotic desire implies that their celibacy – and that of the Revivalists – was a form of *compensation*. These men wanted to be seen as desirable according to Christian masculinity's standards, but were unable to obtain this recognition of their desirability and manhood through sex with white women. Thus, they compensated and coped with this loss by telling themselves they didn't want sex or to be desirable at all – that these things actually made one less of a man. Celibacy was held as such a point of pride and masculinity by the Revivalists and Hindu nationalists because it was a way for them to rationalize the loss of sex as a marker of manhood. If their celibacy was compensatory, this meant that they *still did want sex* – that heterosexual sex was still key to

their conception of manhood – which created a seeming contradiction between a claimed indifference to these things and behaviors, as shown above, that showed the exact opposite.

That Hindu men still felt desire holds true even in the face of the procreation provision's claim that sex was reconcilable with celibacy and asexuality if done dutifully, without desire, for procreation within a marital relation. It is difficult to be truly celibate and asexual – truly indifferent to sex whatsoever, as Vivekananda exhorted his followers to be – if one is having any type of sex at all, even if it is for procreation alone, as Sivananda himself acknowledged. Any sexual activity likely engenders feelings of erotic desire, unless one has truly reached another plane of spiritual life. It is doubtful that the Revivalists and male cadres of Hindutva did so, as shown by the mixture of admiration and envy they viewed fetishized Muslim men with, and the jealousy and possessiveness with which the Hindu nationalists reacted to the prospect of Muslim males taking “their” Hindu women (made objects of desire in lieu of white women). This possessiveness extended deeper than a stated panic surrounding demographic replacement and into the recesses of erotic desire and sexual envy – which, according to Hindu manhood, a truly celibate or asexual man would experience none of. To maintain the façade of the Revivalists' and Hindu nationalists' indifference to sex or asexuality (in the eyes of others and themselves), then, sex with Hindu women was justified as being procreative rather than to satisfy any libidinal impulses or erotic desires, recalling the Revivalist writings analyzed prior.

As such, the specter of Muslim men – fetishized, deemed attractive in a Christian-masculinist light – taking Hindu women away from Hindu men struck a nerve in the collective consciousness of the Hindu nationalist movement. Losing their women to Muslim men was emasculating, proof of the Hindu nationalists' sexual inadequacy and failure to “be a man.” Thus, a struggle – real or imagined – over the ownership of them ensued between Hindu and Muslim men, with the outcome proving who the manlier and more desirable of the

two was. A month after the Love Jihad law was passed, the former seemed to be winning: more than 90% of the men accused under its stipulations were Muslim.¹⁵⁰

Conclusion: Transfiguring our desires?

I have presented what I see as a particular far-right (or radical right) movement's response to their erotic debasement within a "world-system of desire": the global hierarchy of romantic and sexual desirability, with white men and women at its apex, created by racial-patriarchal capitalism and exported worldwide via Western imperial conquest and colonial domination. To be sure, there are a multiplicity of political responses to erotic debasement. One could imagine a left-wing political movement against the unjust "systems that shape desire," as the philosopher Amia Srinivasan puts it, the "discriminatory grooves along which our sexual desires" move.¹⁵¹ This thesis does not discuss that possibility, but rather the way in which a particular movement of the global radical right – the Hindu nationalists – responded to its historic erotic debasement. The Hindu nationalists' adoption of celibacy reflected both its commonalities with other radical right movements around the world and its particularities as one inflected by India's specific history of colonialism and empire.

Radical right political projects around the world – from the alt-right in the United States and the masculinist subcultures affiliated with them (among which are incels) to the Hindu nationalist movement – all have at the heart of their movements a form of masculinity influenced by the Anglo-American hegemonic masculinity (i.e. Christian masculinity) that was exported globally over centuries of Western imperialism and colonization.¹⁵² As such, Christian masculinity's heteronormative, entitled, and possessive erotic desire remains core

¹⁵⁰ VICE News, "The Hindu Extremists at War With Interfaith Love."

¹⁵¹ Amia Srinivasan, "Does anyone have the right to sex?" *The London Review of Books* 40, no. 6 (March 2018).

¹⁵² Charlotte Hooper, *Manly States: Masculinities, International Relations, and Gender Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 4.

to the hegemonic masculinities of radical right movements worldwide (and by extension, to the movements themselves).¹⁵³

Given this, a radical right group that has experienced erotic debasement – whether it be North America’s white incels or Men’s Rights Asians (MRAZNS) or the Hindu nationalists – will feel the need to compensate for their inability to have sex with a woman, to meet this criterion of hegemonic masculinity. Their lack of heterosexual sex cannot be ignored and must somehow be addressed, rationalized, or intellectually justified as they attempt to embody a hegemonic manhood. Incels, for example, despite being white and male, are erotically debased by failing to live up to other markers of hegemonic masculinity – by being too short, or skinny, or fat, lacking a “Greek physiognomy,” or not comporting oneself the way an overbearing “chad” would. However, instead of critiquing the structural injustices that produce a patriarchal, racialized, and classist global hierarchy of desire, incels compensate for their debasement with “a rage at [and violence against] the women ‘denying’ them sex,” seeing sex as something that, being (hegemonic) men, they are *entitled* to and must have. It is the misogyny of this understanding of manhood that warps a valid critique of the structures that produce erotic debasement into “something morally ugly and confused.”¹⁵⁴

But that was not the way in which the Hindu nationalists compensated. They faced the same circumstance as the incels do today – a lack of sex due to their erotic debasement – but for the most part compensated not through trying to obtain sex by any means necessary (even violent or coercive ones), but by giving it up altogether. Celibacy allowed the Hindu nationalists to compensate by rationalizing their sexlessness as a choice, as what actually made them true men. In the end, however, what made this a form of compensation was the fact that they did still feel the need to prove their masculinity through sex with women. It

¹⁵³ Hooper, *Manly States*, 60.

¹⁵⁴ Srinivasan, “Does anyone have the right to sex?”

remained important enough to their manhood to make its absence something that needed to be justified and accounted for, rather than a simple fact of life.

It would seem, then, that the Hindu nationalists and incels are both involuntarily celibate – they want sex with women as proof of manhood, but are denied access to it because of social forces and the legacy of history. But this picture is complicated by the fact that the Hindu nationalists compensated by *embracing* their sexlessness – in a way, they chose celibacy. Was their celibacy chosen or imposed, then, voluntary or involuntary? The former would imply that they chose, or at least coexisted with, their celibacy: they felt no overwhelming need for sex to prove that they were men. The latter implies an anxious and unhappy existence: the Hindu nationalists had no real choice in the matter – not only was their celibate status imposed on them through their erotic debasement, but they also still saw sex as key to their manhood.¹⁵⁵ The sources analyzed above would seem to point to the latter.

Then again, there still appears to be a degree of volition involved. The Hindu nationalists could have reacted to their erotic debasement as the incels do, raging against their sexlessness through violence and calls for rape, but they actively chose to embrace it as a virtue instead. In a way, they were straining against the embodied, desperate, and urgent desire for sex with women instilled in them by the dictates of Christian masculinity, straining to become true “volcels” (see footnote) at peace with their lack of sex.¹⁵⁶ Sealed off from the world of love and sex, the Hindu nationalists tried to exit the world-system of desire and its

¹⁵⁵ One could imagine a hypothetical masculinity that links manhood with a *respectful* heteronormativity – treating women not as sexual objects but as equals. Even still, this linkage would arguably create a sense of pressure on men to have sex with women. This pressure, then, is doubled by the fact that the masculinity we *do* have – our predominant form of hegemonic, misogynistic masculinity – insists on men dominating and possessing women as sexual and romantic partners. Thus, not only is it bad enough if men aren’t having sex with women, but they are also weak and “cucks” if they do not (explaining the fear, jealousy, and desperation of Hindu men in the face of supposedly more attractive Muslim men taking their women).

¹⁵⁶ “Volcels”: a term used by the incel subculture to describe “voluntarily celibate” men. Arguably, true volcels would not see sex as a defining feature of their manhood as incels do, and thus would not think of themselves in such terms. By touting their (professed-as-voluntary) celibacy as a point of such pride and marker of manhood, then, the Hindu nationalists were doing exactly what a true volcel would never do. They continued to relate sex (or, in this case, the lack of it) to their manhood, instead of dissolving that connection once and for all.

hierarchies of beauty altogether through their affirmation of celibacy, to transmute and overcome the possessive desire instilled in them as a legacy of British colonialism, to extinguish it through their will. Seen through this light, these efforts were sympathetic, if not admirable. But ultimately these practices were doomed to be compensatory, as they couldn't help but link sex (or their lack of it) to their manhood: despite their best efforts, they still felt Christian masculinity's heteronormative desire and entitlement to women, feelings that led to horrifying communal violence against Muslims. It is a story that is Sisyphean and tragic.

This, then, begs the question: Can we change our desires? Erotic desire is an embodied phenomenon – something felt physically, carnally – that is shaped and molded by social structures and history, a process of which the one experiencing the desire is often unconscious. And often, we can see clearly how erotic desire has been mutilated by social and historical injustice: from the worship of white, blond, fit and able-bodied “chads” and “stacys” as the paragons of beauty; to the fetishization of East Asian women and black men; to the debasement of Asian men and fat, disabled, and black women; to the toxic entitlement and possessiveness towards women inculcated by hegemonic manhood in men worldwide. Yet, as shown in the case of the Hindu nationalists, it is difficult not to “want these bad things” even with the knowledge that they are bad, as Andrea Long Chu would have it.¹⁵⁷ Despite our best efforts at making bodily desire subject to our mind, in many cases it stubbornly holds in place. In the tug-of-war between our body's carnal wants – shaped by history and society – and our mind's higher, political aspirations, the former often wins. We may want to break free from the world-system of desire's hierarchies of beauty in order for desire to “cut against what politics” – and history – “has chosen for us, and choose for itself,”

¹⁵⁷ Andrea Long Chu and Anastasia Berg, “Wanting Bad Things,” *The Point Magazine*, July 18, 2018, <https://thepointmag.com/dialogue/wanting-bad-things-andrea-long-chu-responds-amia-srinivasan/>.

to desire with political intention, but it is hard to think ourselves into arousal for something different, to bend our desires in a new direction than the one they currently point in.¹⁵⁸

Srinivasan insists that there is a way forward, however. She describes a woman who studied photographs of “fat women and [asked] herself what it would be to see these bodies – bodies that previously filled her with shame and self-loathing – as objectively beautiful.” “If the very idea of fixed sexual preference is political, not metaphysical” – and this essay takes this point as axiomatic, that erotic desires are not innate but socially and historically constructed – she wonders if there is a “duty to transfigure, as best we can, our desires.” Srinivasan continues, “The fact is that our sexual preferences can and do alter, sometimes under the operation of our own wills – not automatically, but not impossibly either.”¹⁵⁹

Her point is clear: we are not all automatons doomed to mindlessly tread the preprogrammed routes that history – up to this point – has laid out for us, with no hope for something different. We are not consigned to the weight put on us by the historical legacy and social forces we currently live under; there is an alternative. I would agree. However, our agency is rooted not only in our ability to question, fight, and resist the subjectivity, consciousness, and ideologies that history and social structure impose on us; it rests also in our ability to change those structures themselves and create ones anew. It allows us to identify and abolish the unjust structures and legacies of history – globalized racial capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy – that have, and continue to, produce hierarchies of desirability worldwide: so that desire, freed from the mutilation and shackles of injustice, can choose for itself.

¹⁵⁸ Srinivasan, “Does anyone have the right to sex?”

¹⁵⁹ Srinivasan, “Does anyone have the right to sex?”

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