

At its outset, this project aimed to understand the symbols which are being used by far-right Hindutva groups in India. By examining the visual communications and the aesthetics of these groups through modern history, as well as today, I hoped to gain insight into the unspoken values which these groups communicate visually. I began by reading the foundational texts of Hindutva ideology and learning about its contexts, and then moved on to more recent academic literature on the Hindutva movement. Finally, I looked on Facebook and Twitter for popular pages which promoted Hindu nationalist ideology and paid specific attention to which symbols they used and how they did so.

While the most common modes of visual communication have changed for every group over time, I noticed that Hindutva groups maintained a relatively consistent canon of major symbols to call upon regardless of the mode of that communication. These were most commonly the symbols of Lord Rama, Mother India, and the cow as a gentle, motherly symbol. While these symbols among many others are used in the process of identity formation for many Hindus, their use in online Hindutva spaces often promotes the conflation of these specific symbols of Hindu identity with Indian identity. As a result, these symbols do not only suggest that these groups have religious nationalist aims, but more importantly they give us clues about what kind of Hindu nation, inspired by which symbols, these groups want to see established.

Almost all these symbols refer to Hindu religious traditions of the past, appropriating the authority that these symbols held over the Hindu demographic group for the more radical Hindu nationalist aims. The majority of religious stories about Lord Rama show him as a protector, defending his wife or his family, and accepting the necessity of militant violence. The use of his image in these visual communications, always holding his bow and arrow, is then a reference to this strength. The symbol of the cow holds a lot of religious meaning for Hindus, who do not traditionally eat beef and who revere cows as sacred symbols. Cow imagery then not only brings together those of the Hindu faith, but it also gives them something to protect, and this responsibility to protect cows has recently inspired the vigilante killings of religious minorities in India for being involved in farming cows for slaughter. This symbol allows Hindu nationalists to hide behind an image of protecting the Hindu faith, which is maternal and nurturing like the cow, while also promoting violence against those who don't have the same reverence for cows in real life. The symbol of Mother India is a product of the Indian independence movement, but she has also taken on the role of a goddess. This imagery then not only refers to a religious authority, but it also refers to a historical authority, which serves as a reminder in the present day of the hard-fought independence of the nation. This inspires a love for the land, as it needs to be safeguarded as well as revered the same way a Hindu would revere a Goddess. This intertwining of nation and religion makes Mother India an ideal symbol for a movement which aims to create a Hindu religious state, often at the expense of religious minorities in India.

Once I turned my focus to contemporary examples of visual communications in popular Hindutva accounts on Twitter and Facebook. I found widespread use of the image of Narendra Modi, the BJP Prime Minister of India, himself. His image is used occasionally alongside the God Rama or a religious figure, like the monk Yogi Adityanath (who is also the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh), but his image is often also used on its own. Modi's political power, approved of by Hindu nationalists, then seems to have its own authority, and the use of his image is in line with the other kinds of religious symbolic imagery I had found until this point. This suggests that in the modern day, Modi himself has become a part of this canon of symbols for strength, power, religious traditionalism, and reverence.

The use of these symbols then suggests that the values of Hindu nationalist groups are militant strength in protection of not just the nation of India, but particularly the Hindu nation of India. What's more, the religious tradition and history of India has a great many other examples of figures who succeed through means other than violence or who represent other facets of the human experience. The stories of Lord Krishna as a child and in his relationship with Radha depict him as mischievous and as a representative of divine love, and I found no images of Krishna on these Hindutva social media pages. Nonviolent historical figures like Gandhi are also ridiculed by these groups as effeminate and weak. This rhetoric, tying up Indian land with Hindu religion, with an emphasis on narratives of violence and struggle, have had obvious tangible effects on the interactions between religious communities in India. The violence against religious minorities in India has only escalated, and while Modi and many other powerful Hindu nationalists insist that they are inspired by a love for a Hindu faith which is peaceful and tolerant of all, the implicit messages that these common symbols contain seem to tell a different story.