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## **Polarizing Hinduism: How Language Manifests it in the Virtual Domains**

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### **Abstract**

*Religion is differentially constructed on the electronic domain by exploiting different linguistic strategies. The networked domain is of vital importance, frequented by an approximate 3.1 billion users worldwide (statistical proof from the Irish web-domain of Statista and the American web-domain of Internetlivestats). So the different religious organizations (which could have political associations too) have designed specific domains with dedicated web-interfaces to reach out to the connected masses. Specific e-resources like video recordings, blogs, tweets, electronic versions of articles, messages, animated content are created to propagate certain ideologies and objectives. It also obligates followers to believe in a certain set of codes. My work has explored such domains related to Hinduism. Employing theories of the language of religion as well as theories of the language of media, the paper portrays how polarizations exist in the virtual domain, manifested through the use of language. The analyses of language, utilized by the ideological/religious organisations under study, uphold the theories of discourse analysis, like, Framing Theory, Ideological Square, and Language Game Theory etc. The paper, making the theories of discourse as the basis for analyses, attempts to sum up how the ideological/religious organisations under study utilise language to control public opinion.\**

**Keywords:** Hinduism, Hinduism on the virtual domain, Polarization, Hinduism on the internet, Virtual religion, Hindu ideology.

### **1. Introduction**

The focus of the paper is to look at how the notion of Hinduism is framed by ideologically polarized groups on the virtual domain. The Internet is arguably the most influential social medium and connects billions of people across the globe. So it is easier for any organisation or individual to spread the intended message over specialized domains. It would cater to populations beyond a spatial boundary and could influence more people to accept certain viewpoints. Consequently, those who use the Internet and those who depend on the Internet as their source of information are affected by the way in which a certain notion is constructed or interpreted. By and large the internet has become “*today’s primary source of transactive memory*”, as per researcher Betsy Sparrow. The internet is considered as the most exhaustive vault of information of every kind. The language used in the virtual domains can construct, deconstruct, challenge and transform thinking of the masses, and in the process, undergo change itself.

### **2. Theories of Analysis**

In the digital domain, the discourse of religion is constructed by different organizations and the language reflects the ideologies and the broader perspectives that influence such views. In this regard it is significant to briefly discuss the Framing Theory, whereby there is a certain structure (frame) in which the issues or the perspectives are presented before the target audience.

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According to Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, “*the major premise of framing theory is that an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations. Framing refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue.*”

Framing is accomplished through a series of processes. To begin with, an issue has to be constructed and this ties it to McCombs and Shaw’s ‘Agenda Setting Theory’. The original proposition entailed that the media feeds the public on what to think about. This is same in the Framing perspective, whereby first an issue is brought into public focus or in other words an issue is constituted to make people believe that ‘this’ is the issue. In this regard, it has to be noted that the powerful always sets the agenda, or in other words, power-structures have a significant role in constructing the issue. It is however not a one-way street and the context of the public also needs to be captured. This also incorporates Fairclough’s notion of “degrees of presence” (1995). It determines how important does the media want the constructed issue to be and there are various tools to control the effect. Fairclough conceptualized that certain aspects of an event can be ‘foregrounded’, ‘backgrounded’ or not mentioned at all or simply presupposed. This can be performed by deciding where the message occurs on the media, the topic-sentence (i.e. the headline for the newspapers) and the sequence of information.

Once the primary agenda is set, it has to be focused and emphasized through the process of foregrounding. For instance, if we consider a report featuring the headline: THE PROTESTERS REACTED VIOLENTLY, it is clear that the issues faced by the protesters and how they were treated before a ‘violent’ response are never discussed. The possibility of their response being a retaliation to something life-threatening is also ambiguated. This constitutes the process of Priming, whereby public focus is affixed on certain aspects of the reality. As Lakoff aptly points out that every word evokes an image, what is foregrounded while Priming becomes even more decisive. The reality is relative. There is hardly any humanly possible way to decipher what is real. The media’s objective is to ensure that their reality matches the public perception.

The final process is that of Framing. To put it simply, framing involves placing something in front of the target audience in a ‘frame’. Having a frame implies having a crafted structure, within which certain items are enhanced and the others weakened or neglected, to influence how people perceive or think about it. It is relevant to mention that Goffman first envisioned this process in his Theory of Organization of Experience (1974). The idea is that there is a reality, in the tangible, physical world, which can be experienced but the public perceives it in a certain way. Goffman’s propositions suggest that the goal is to make the audience visualize the world in a way that would be in accordance with how the media projects it, to control public opinion. Priming involves the second level of agenda-setting, thereby reconstructing the reality and the meaning.

Van Dijk’s ‘Ideological Square’ is another critical approach to analysing media discourse. Ideology is “a systematic body of ideas organized from a particular point of view” (HODGE and KRESS, 1991:6). Van Dijk’s theory emphasizes a positive representation of the in-group and a negative representation of the out-group. There is de-emphasis, denial and mitigation of the negative aspects of the in-group and the same strategy is executed for the positive aspects of the out-group. On the other hand, there is positive re-inforcement, focus and exaggeration of the positive actions of the in-group. There is a strong critical scrutiny into the negative actions of the out-group with mostly amplified connotations.

The tool of transitivity is another kog within the media-circle. It discovers the underlying ideology of the producer of the sentence. For instance, in a sentence presented with active form of the verb, the agency as well as intentionality of the actor is claimed. Whereas in the passive

construction, the agency of the actor is not overtly presented (again it is not explicitly denied). This is facilitated by the fact that actor/agent is unnecessary in passive constructions.

There is also the aspect of intermixing of media and religious registers. The wired domains present information or set the agenda fusing the two registers. Here the notion of translatability also becomes relevant. The notions represented with the help of religious register are often not translatable. This implied even though the articulatory-perceptual system may allow a linguistic replacement of a certain notion (bound to a particular register), the conceptual-intentional faculty blocks the substituted entry.

Wittgenstein's 'Language Game Theory' comes into play, since to make sense of the propositions one has to adhere to the theological context and the rules of that context. According to Wittgenstein, religious language is different from the non-religious counterpart because it is a different language game. Although the physical facts remain unaltered, the perspectives on them in religious and non-religious register are conspicuously dissimilar.

Austin's 'Speech Act Theory' and the notion of authority behind the message are equally significant.

### **3.Web Content Across Certain Domains**

There are a huge number of websites hosted by national as well as internationally located servers to disseminate information on Hinduism and what it means to be a Hindu. In the process of analysing information available on multiple websites, differences of viewpoints emerge and polarized schools of thought can be recognized.

#### **3.1 Vishwa Hindu Parishad.**

To explicate the accounted theories, I would look at how the digitized space used by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad constructs the notion of Hinduism:

*"Hindutva is synonymous with nationality and Hindu society is undisputably the main stream of Bharat. Hindu interest is the national interest. Hence the honour of Hindutva and Hindu interests should be protected at all costs."* (a quote from the domain of VHP)

The notion of Hinduism being equated to a national identity and transcending mere religious identity is crucial here. It is a strong claim and ignores the presence of other religious groups through the use of special vocabulary: "undisputably the main stream of Bharat", "national interest". This is how the notion is constructed or the agenda is established.

Transitivity comes into focus in the final sentential construction where the notion of honor of Hindutva has been foregrounded. The agency has been backgrounded and deliberately left out to emphasise the issue more. It could also entail that adding an agency would dilute the urgency of the topic, namely the protection of Hindu interests. This grammatical pattern of using a passive construction also highlights the underlying ideology i.e. prioritizing the cause above the agency; protecting Hindutva over the role of the protectors, since identity would be meaningless without preserving Hindutva.

The message also involves Austin's Speech Act Theory. The copular construction "*Hindu interest is the national interest*" is a performative act and it is licensed through the authority that the VHP has been accorded historically. This also involves the perlocutionary force that the domain inherits as a result of its historic association since 1964.

The belief is re-affirmed by quoting personalities like Mahatma Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo. This is a domain design under the subheading of Sanatana Dharma.

Further analysis reveals that the notion of 'Hindutva' is not translatable. This implies that it is fixed to the Religious register, for it to be properly interpreted by the conceptual-intentional system. Mere replacement with 'Hindu essence' takes away the semantic leverage of the notion.

It also depletes the sentimental association with the community. ‘Hindutva’ not only signifies an in-group identity, believing in a particular code, and a way of life. It goes beyond these and integrates much more, which would cease to be relevant if we use ‘Hindu essence’.

Next follows the task of Priming:

*“By taking up issues like Shri Ramjanmabhoomi, Shri Amarnath yatra, Shri Ramsetu, Shri Ganga Raksha, Gau Raksha, the Hindu Mutt- mandir issue, the religious conversions of Hindus by Christian Church , Islamic terrorism, Bangladeshi Muslim infiltration etc, VHP is proving to be the indomitable force of the Hindu society for the protection of its core values- beliefs and sacred traditions.”*

Here the importance of protecting the Hindu identity has been re-inforced by bringing up issues that purportedly encroach on the in-group identity (“religious conversions of Hindus by Christian Church”) as well as socio-political issues (the territorial debate over Ramjanmabhoomi, Hindu Mutt- mandir issue, Bangladeshi Muslim infiltration et al).

The objective here is to emphasize the VHP agenda of “protecting Hindutva”.

Here in the process of priming, we find the mention of the agency as VHP and its associates. So the agency is foregrounded through an active construction.

A second-level agenda setting is witnessed on the same domain under the objectives of the VHP:

*“To consolidate, strengthen and make invincible the global Hindu fraternity by following the eternal and universal life values based on Sanatan Dharma and work for total welfare of humanity on the basis of the unique cultural ethos of Bharatvarsha.”*

Here Hinduism has been referred to as Sanatan Dharma (part of religious register; so here religious register is exploited to satisfy the goal of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, namely emphasizing the significance of Hindutva, grounded through quoting Aurobindo on Sanatan Dharma).

Special focus on the phrase “make invincible”: whereby the Vishwa Hindu Parishad’s ideology of protecting the identity is rooted. Also the expressions: “eternal and universal life values”, “unique cultural ethos of Bharatvarsha” are incorporated to outline what is privileged in constructing the Hindu identity.

The devices used here are indigenous expressions like “Sanatan Dharma”, causative constructions with adjectives like “invincible” to construct meaning. The power behind the language is in the historical background of the association and the founder S.S. Apte’s association with eminent figures. The following are the personalities listed in the web-domain:

PujyaShankaracharyas of KanchiKamkotiPeeth and SharadaPeeth, Shri. K. M. Munshi (Mumbai), Sant Tukadoji Maharaj and M. S. Aney (Maharashtra), Dr.Sampurnanand (the then Governor of Rajasthan), Shri. ChandrashekharaShastri and Dr.Mathuralal Sharma (Rajasthan), Gyani Bhupinder Singh, Master Tara Singh and Maharaja of Patiala (Punjab), Dr.Hajari Prasad Dwivedi (Chandigarh), SatguruJagjit Singh (Bhaini Saheb), PujyaPrabhudattBrahmachari, Sir Sitaram Roy, Shri. Prakash Vir and Shri. Hanuman Prasad Poddar (Uttar Pradesh), famous industrialist Shri. J. K. Birla, Ex-Chief Justice Shri. B. P. Sinha, the then central minister Shri. Jagjivan Ram (Delhi), former Central Minister Shri. N. V. Gadgil, Pujya Guru Yogiraj Maharaj of Swami Narayan Panth, Shri Bhailal Bhai Patel, (Gujarat), Shri. Batuknath Bhattacharya (Bengal), Satradhish of Vaishnava Mat (Assam), Dr.RamaswamiAyyar (Kerala), Shri. K. Santanam (Tamil Nadu), Maharaja of Mysore (Karnataka), Shri. Kushal Bakul (Laddakh).

The objective behind enlisting all of them is to reinforce historicity of the group’s initiatives. This could also be analysed as a step to manufacture the belief of the readers. So it was a nationwide association and involved a great deal of co-ordination.

The domain derives its recognition from the VHP's history and work in Indian states. As Lakoff points out :*"No words are neutral. In examining the language in the media, how meanings are framed in a specific context."*

We find rhetorical constructions in the messages and in the other mentioned objectives:

*"To completely eradicate social evils such as untouchability, dowry system, etc. to restore due status to woman in the society and to rejuvenate the dynamic holistic Hindu way of life."*

*"To establish and reinforce contacts with all Hindus living abroad to help them unite to fulfil their cultural and spiritual aspirations."*

Agency has been backgrounded in these objectives laid out for its followers. Infinitival phrases have been conjoined to prime the issues that outline the Parishad's second-level agenda of assuming the guardian role of the Hindu community

### **3.2 Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh.**

A similar sort of ideological perception is found in the domain of the RSS:

*"The Hindu culture is the life-breath of Hindusthan. It is therefore clear that if Hindusthan is to be protected, we should first nourish the Hindu culture. If the Hindu culture perishes in Hindusthan itself, and if the Hindu society ceases to exist, it will hardly be appropriate to refer to the mere geographical entity that remains as Hindusthan."*

Here religion is substituted with 'culture' in the construction of meaning and it reflects the underlying ideology of addressing the cultural identity rather than the religious identity. This could be interpreted as an inclusive strategy or as an attempt to mitigate or belittle the issues of the other (non-Hindus). Here we can find underpinnings of Van Dijk's ideological square.

A subsequent message on the same domain, clearly points out the Sangh's attempt to emphasize its role:

*"As a movement for national reconstruction totally nurtured by the people, Sangh has no parallel in Bharat or elsewhere. The growth of the Sangh - as a movement for assertion of Bharat's national identity - acquires added significance when we remember that the birth of the Sangh was preceded by mental, cultural and economic onslaught by alien rulers for long decades."*

So this again iterates Van Dijk's proposition to bring out the significance of "us".

Even though they have some sort of an ideological equivalence in the mission to defend 'hindutva' and preserve its essence, there are subtle differences.

Also as evident in my discussion, the RSS does want itself to be recognized as the spearhead of initiatives aimed at protecting Hindutva.

*"Expressed in the simplest terms, the ideal of the Sangh is to carry the nation to the pinnacle of glory, through organising the entire society and ensuring protection of Hindu Dharma."*

In this particular message, there is also an embedded political ambition to lead the nation which juxtaposes itself with the mission to ensure Hindutva is safe and flourishing. So there is the implication of a second-level agenda setting over here whereas the main agenda is to protect Hindu Dharma and thereby assume the role of the vanguards of the Hindu community.

### 3.3 Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha (<http://www.abhm.org.in/index.aspx>).

The domain of Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha, puts across its objectives and mission by constructing notions of 'Hindudom' and 'Hindu-rashtra'.

The politically and religiously rooted notion of 'Hindu-rashtra' is a nominal compound derived from the religious register. As per the domain it is translatable into the noun phrase 'National home of the hindus'. However it could have two interpretations, where one is synonymous to the actual connotation and one where it only bears a locative connotation. The actual connotation does not only focus on a geo-political space but also a national identity demarcated by a particular world-view (which essentially incorporates Hindu ideologies and Hindu cultural codes). So 'Hindu-rashtra' may or may not be translatable depending on one's contextual interpretation and the morphosyntactic environment in which it occurs.

The domain proceeds to relate a geographic sense with 'Hindudom'. 'Hindudom' is a nominal construct resembling 'king-dom' whereby the domain of socio-political influence of the Hindus is established:

*"The indivisibility of the land extending from the Himalayas down to the Southern and Eastern Seas being an article of faith with Hindudom..."*

The section deliberating on the Ideals of the Mahasabha begins with:

*"The Hindu Mahasabha stands for the ideal of "Hindu-Rashtra" or a "National Home for the Hindu."*

As Alan Bell (1998) claims that what appears first in a report or a message, is not essentially what happened first but rather what is of significance to the reporter or the informer. Therefore, by clearly equating its ideal to that of a religion-state, the domain puts forth its religious and political motivations.

To accentuate the need for a 'Hindu-rashtra', the message quoted is pertinent:

*"The Hindus alone are a homeless people in the modern world and the Hindu ideology alone is being denied a homeland where its sublime qualities of love, truth, peace, toleration and rationalism, which indeed, tin- world needs most today, can find proper scope for self-fulfilment."*

The primary level agenda of 'Hindu ideology...being denied a homeland' is set through a passivized construction, where we find agency having been removed. It is clear that the domain does not want to be accountable for accusing other communities of suppressing the expression of Hindu ideology. Rather their intention is to unite Hindus by evoking a religious sentiment. The second level agenda is somewhat indirectly set by capturing the essential virtues of Hinduism and how it is the need of the hour in a mechanized, existentialist world. The message which is hidden is that we need these virtues and its realization is being impeded. The agency is carefully denied and we find the theory of transitivity at play. Van Dijk's ideological square comes into play, as 'us' is constructed as 'Hindus alone' and 'them' as the non-Hindus. The quote puts 'us' as the oppressed and 'them' as the oppressors, indirectly accused of usurping 'our' 'homeland' and negating the 'self-fulfilment' of the Hindu virtues.

Finally the political and social ambitions of the Hindu Mahasabha is revealed in the message:

*"The Hindu Mahasabha regards, and shall officially declare when in power, the present State of Bharat, (and after reunion with Pakistan, the entire land from the Himalayas to the Seas) to be the "National Home of the Hindus," or "Hindu-Rashtra," and shall take upon its shoulders the moral and legal responsibility of protecting and promoting Hindus' cultural, economic and political interests, and of rehabilitating Hindu refugees within its territorial jurisdiction in the event of non-Hindu people turning hostile to their Hindu neighbours."*

The message is clearly defining the Hindu Mahasabha as the agency and primes the cause of the Hindus through constant re-iterative expressions like ‘Hindu-Rashtra’, ‘Hindu refugees’, ‘Hindus’ cultural, economic and political interests’. The primary agenda was already set by focusing on the need for a ‘Hindu-rashtra’. Here the positive objectives of the agency are being highlighted. This is Van Dijk’s relational perspective coming into play, whereby the good actions (which can be of the nature of ‘something to come’) of the members of the Mahasabha are re-inforced through national objectives. Here we also find Derridean implication of a state “to come”. But its realization is vague and is always imposed as something required, something socio-culturally vital for the rejuvenation of Hinduism which is endangered geo-politically as well as socio-culturally.

#### 4. Conclusion

From the analysis of the various messages displayed on multiple electronic domains, it is clear that objectives of different Hindu organizations are differentially constructed and range from portraying extremist undercurrents to political aspirations. Religious identity is normatively associated to societal inclusion. A deviance is resisted and deconstructed as anti-social and anti-national. The polarities are somewhat ideologically inter-connected if we focus on initiatives to preserve, to homogenize the Hindu system of codes. Language manifests the different linguistic devices that the creators introduce to propagate a certain world-view and influence potential sets of followers.

Domains like Vishwa Hindu Parishad also resort to Intertextual evidence to strengthen their viewpoints:

*“Atharvedase(1/15/1):  
Just as the small rivulets  
merge to make a sacred river;  
the breezy winds unite  
to make a mighty typhoon;  
the small birds group  
to make a vast flock  
may all the noble souls  
join the great yajna  
to realise the power of unity.”*

The composition is an English translation of a message from the AtharvaVeda. Here the Vishwa Hindu Parishad’s initiatives to unite Hindus is reinforced through Vedic intertextuality. The Vedic source also makes it much more credible for it to influence the Hindu moral and value-system. Religious register comes into focus in the form of ‘yajna’ and the noun phrase ‘great yajna’ primes the message of undertaking initiatives to combine Hindu efforts.

Apart from this, Van Dijk’s ideological square and Goffman’s Theory of Organizing Experience are conspicuously evident in the displayed messages. How an agenda is set, features of a message are primed and ultimately a perceptual frame is established are quite beautifully delineated in the process of analysing internet discourse on Hinduism.

Future improvements to the study would focus on more domains and subsects of Hinduism like Vaishnavism and Shaivism to further illustrate unique points of difference that underlie the subsystems of the Hindu world-view. These are basically the media-constructed domains at work and reflect a standard chunk of the ground reality.

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