

Not Your Grandma's Fascism: Fame, Femininity, and Race in Far-Right Postcolonial India and Brazil

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Much scholarship on the far right focuses on Europe and North America, whereas case studies outside of these regions are often neglected or not recognized as constituting the same phenomenon. In this article, we compare two democracies in the Global South—India and Brazil—to showcase far-right movements within these countries. We situate the “postcolonial neoliberal nationalism” that has shaped the basis of far-right claims in India and Brazil. To illuminate this, we explore female social media influencers within these far-right milieus, and their role in the reproduction of gender, class, and racial hierarchies. Combined with this are insights from media studies on influencer culture as a means of analyzing the performativity of far-right women to advance exclusionary agendas. Overall, we highlight the inherent contradictions and complexity of how far-right female influencers in the Global South are promoting local expressions of gendered indigeneity while also contributing to global far-right narratives.

Introduction

Much scholarship on the far-right focuses on Europe and North America, and to some extent Australia, whereas case studies outside of these regions are often neglected or, as is more common, not recognized as constituting the same phenomenon. While there have been calls to move beyond this Eurocentrism, driven by a supposed lack of empirical knowledge (Castelli Gattinara 2020), we counterargue that there is, in fact, a growing and robust body of literature on the far-right outside of Europe and North America, but it is often not situated within the same field of study of the far-right *per se*. Often, such literature focuses upon themes such as majoritarian nationalism or historical fascism, viewed by far-right studies as markedly different. In this

article, we attempt to bridge these disparate strands of scholarship by framing our study as manifestations of the global far-right. We argue that a global far-right framework is indeed possible, if not necessary, and allows for a more fruitful comparison across contexts. In this article, we compare two democracies—Brazil and India—to showcase far-right movements within these countries that sustain and reproduce existing racial, gender, and class hierarchies.

Scholarship on the far-right centers upon the organizational variants of political parties, social movements, and street-based groups (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro 2019; Mudde 2007, 2019; Ortellado and Solano 2016; Pinto 2017). Other dynamics include intellectual and meta-political organizations, alternative media outlets, subcultures surrounding music and sport, and online communities (Bar-On 2007; Ganesh 2020; Jasser et al. 2021; Miller-Idriss 2018). In the case of India and Brazil, the far-right landscape is heavily contrasted between a highly organized movement and a fragmented milieu, as discussed below. Further, within the scholarship on the far-right, women are often overlooked or dismissed as playing a marginal role. In exceptional cases, women serve in a leadership capacity for far-right parties or groups, but usually occupy positions as silent bystanders, albeit still integral to the cause. Most of this literature analyzes women in far-right movements in the West (Blee 2002; Campion 2020; Dietze and Roth 2020; Pilkington 2017; Spierings et al. 2015), hence our article provides an alternative perspective by comparing and contrasting women's involvement in India and Brazil. We emphasize their unique role of postcolonial constructions of femininity within far-right nationalist imaginaries. By postcolonial constructions of femininity, we are referring not only to "traditional," heterosexual gender roles, but how such performances are informed by the structural legacy of colonial power relations in which social hierarchy is tied to class, caste, and racial positioning. In particular, femininity is framed as the embodiment of sexual and racial purity, untainted by "foreign" influences such as feminism. Indian and Brazilian far-right women, as we illustrate below, are key reproducers of this logic.

Our article provides insight into contemporary women's involvement in the far-right as part of a "postcolonial neoliberal nationalism" (Kaul 2019) framework. We explore how far-right female influencers in India and Brazil reproduce racial, gender, and class hierarchies through social media performativity to advance far-right agendas. By taking an intersectional approach, we highlight how each of these aspects contributes toward reproducing and maintaining the status quo of the far-right's nationalist imaginary of social and sexual dominance in India and Brazil. Our understanding of gender concerns a desire to maintain the "traditional" family unit and heterosexual gender norms centered on femininity and masculinity. Class refers to protecting capitalist interests, in that neoliberal consumption practices benefit the "in-group" envisioned by the far-right, often the middle and upper classes within India and Brazil. Overlapping with these class-based interests is a desire to maintain racial hierarchies. The postcolonial conditions of India and Brazil

present an interesting contrast to the literature on the far-right in Europe, North America, and Australia. While the legacies of these settler colonial states seek racial domination by white-majority populations, the far-right narratives within India and Brazil problematize whiteness as a hegemonic norm (see [Mondon and Winter 2020](#), 22), positioning racial domination *in situ* as a driver of the fascist utopia.

Our categories of gender, race, and class cannot always be distinguished separately and should not be considered mutually exclusive categories. Rather, these overlap toward achieving a far-right vision. In order to unpack this phenomenon, we situate the “postcolonial neoliberal nationalism” that has shaped the basis of far-right claims in India and Brazil. We then turn to insights from media studies as a means of analyzing far-right influencer culture in digital spaces. We utilize this approach in a case study of far-right female influencers in India and Brazil on Twitter and Instagram. In particular, these influencers advance far-right ideology and gender norms, doing so in performative ways that enhance their personal celebrity. Building upon a critical visual methodology, this article uses a comparative framework to detect thematic similarities and differences concerning race, gender, and class to advance global far-right narratives.

Background

We draw upon scholarship from different fields to position contemporary far-right women in India and Brazil who play a key role in the gendering of these political movements. While India has a strong organized far-right presence, including the historical establishment of woman-only groups, in Brazil, women have instead served a central function in supporting the traditional family (private sphere) *vis-a-vis* the patriarchal state (public sphere). Women have occupied a pivotal role in both countries through supporting Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Jair Bolsonaro, yet the nature of their involvement within the broader far-right landscape has not been thoroughly explored. In this article, we make a comparative assessment of these dynamic relationships.

One common feature is the postcolonial conditions of India and Brazil, an important aspect toward understanding far-right mythmaking in both countries. While fascist movements share similar narratives of palingenegetic ultranationalism, seeking to return to a mythicized past through national rebirth or revival (see [Stanley 2018](#); [Thorleifsson 2022](#)), we argue that the legacies of colonialism continue to shape Indian and Brazilian far-right mobilization. For Hindu nationalists, it is a glorification of the Vedic “golden age” prior to British colonialism and the Mughal Empire. Meanwhile, the construction of a Brazilian “golden age” has been articulated by Bolsonaro in reference to the 1964–1985 military dictatorship.

The reactionary underpinning of far-right movements invokes revisionist historiography in order to construct mythologies of a “pure” people during a “golden age” or “perfect past.” Yet, as [Kaul \(2019\)](#) highlights, this promise of regaining a moral or civilizational purity is bolstered when “[the] appeal of a successful right-wing movement in a formerly colonized state draws not merely from this identitarian nativism; it derives equally from the promise of a future where the healing of the colonial wound can only be complete by achieving a level of consumption and lifestyle ‘like the West’.. .without becoming ‘Western’” ([Kaul 2019](#), 12, 15)—enacted through neoliberal “reforms” to manufacture a sense of pride and identity.

The postcolonial fabric of India and Brazil must be understood alongside the neoliberalization of these emerging world economies. This interconnected relationship challenges the claim by [Abrahamsen et al. \(2020\)](#) that the international far-right is characterized by anti-globalization; on the contrary, the far-right presence in India and Brazil is neither anti-neoliberal nor anti-capitalist, but supports and reproduces the existing global economic order. This economic positioning is noteworthy since supporters of the far-right in our study are not, as is commonly assumed, “losers of globalization,” but rather primary beneficiaries of neoliberalism. In particular, neoliberal development myths have a powerful force in postcolonial societies that far-right actors weaponize into what [Kaul \(2019\)](#) describes as “postcolonial neoliberal nationalism.” Here, nationalist and neoliberal logics are interlinked with the postcolonial state as narratives of pride and futurity. In India, this has been represented through the persona of Narendra Modi, the “social media politician” ([Willis 2014](#)), who simultaneously embodies the past (through traditional Hindu dress and rituals) and the future (envisioning the country as a techno-economic powerhouse of the twenty-first century). In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro presents himself on social media as messianic: simultaneously human and superhuman, weak and strong, close and distant. This behavior reflects what Adorno called the “Little Big Man” to refer to authoritarian leaders who characterized fascism of the twentieth century ([Adorno 1950](#)). We aim to draw attention to the central function of digital technologies within this “postcolonial neoliberal nationalism” nexus, which conjoins neoliberal practices with far-right nation building; what [Udupa \(2015\)](#) coins in the Indian context as “enterprise Hindutva” (a mediated form of Hindu nationalism shaped by social media affordances and cultural practices), or in Brazil more broadly as “digital populism” ([Cesarino 2019](#)) to refer to a classic tactic of building political hegemony that was digitally mediated by Bolsonaro’s campaign. A missing component within this framework, however, are the gender dynamics that inform how postcolonial far-right movements shape neoliberal and nationalist imaginaries through digitally mediated everyday co-constructions of race, gender, and class hierarchies.

Women in the Far-Right in India and Brazil

India has a deep legacy with an organized far-right presence, dating back to the colonial era, with the ideology and movement of Hindu nationalism (Leidig 2020). Female-only organizations were established early on, as wings of male-only organizations: the most well known include the Rashtra Sevika Samiti (the female wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) founded in 1936, Durgha Vahini (the female wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad) in 1991, Matri Shakti (the female wing of Bajrang Dal) in 1984, and Mahila Morcha (the female wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party) in 1980. Often these members have familial relations to men in their organizational counterparts (Bacchetta 1993; Menon 2010; Sarkar 1993). Each organization is extremely structured and hierarchical, demanding absolute discipline and obedience from members. Although there is a broad demographic background of female members in these organizations, leadership is almost always confined to mid- dle- and upper-middle-class women, some of whom are related to male lead- ers in the men’s organizations. Caste has also played a significant role in the structuring of these organizations, often through recruiting low-caste women into a movement dominated by the upper castes (Menon 2010, 33), some- times as a means of preventing conversion to Islam or Christianity (Banerjee 2006, 73). However, recent developments, including the attempt to rebrand Hindu nationalism as a “Hindu first” movement under Modi, combined with a growing middle class seeking social mobility in neoliberalized India and the decline of caste politics nationally (Jaffrelot 2015), has led to caste as a less valuable signifier. Caste still retains a vital function within Hindu national- ism—as evident by (female) leadership—but we argue that the shift in focus away from caste toward a united Hindu identity has been an effective means to frame the external enemy: Islam and Christianity as the primary threat to the Hindu population. Gender and sexuality occupy an essential function in this reframing effort through the positioning of female Hindu bodies from these “external” threats, elaborated in the findings below.

The primary role of Indian women, similar to Western far-right movements, centers on their responsibilities as mothers and wives (Mattheis 2018; Menon 2010, 6). As literal reproducers of the nation, Hindu nationalist women see their duty as caretakers in raising the next generation of militant and proud Hindu men. For many of these women, achieving the qualities of an ideal Hindu woman provides them a sense of empowerment, value, and agency. Hindu nationalist women are accepted for their presence and activism in public space, which otherwise would not be afforded to them, if not for reproducing patriarchal structures (Menon 2010, 7). Thus, while far-right women in Western contexts face constraints of empowerment within far-right movements, Indian women experience this restriction within a more conser- vative society writ large.

Brazil, on the other hand, does not have a historically organized far-right movement, but its colonial roots have created a profoundly hierarchical society whose dominant class feels threatened by rights-based advances of vulnerable groups, mainly poor, black, women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ+) communities. Mid-twentieth-century educational reforms, designed to end rigid, race-based exclusions and to incorporate the poor, did so by stressing whiteness as the primary characteristic of modernity (Da'vila 2003). This hierarchy has become normalized, even institutionalized through entertainment such as tourism in the favelas, where there is a fetishization of poverty and blackness (De Santana Pinho 2018; Freire-Medeiros 2009). President Bolsonaro represents the privileges of the dominant class and the convergence of ideological and identity elements of the far-right in Brazil: the ultraconservative, mainly evangelicals (de Almeida 2019), and neoliberal sectors (Campos 2021; Reis 2011), together referred to as "Bolsonarismo."

Brazil as a postcolonial country emerges as a fundamental aspect to understand its patrimonial relationship between common resources (represented by the state) and particular interests (represented by the traditional family).¹ Scholarship focusing exclusively on Bolsonaro's women is an emerging field of research. Many women developed a "moral panic" in response to the supposed indoctrination of left-wing and gender ideologies in schools, leading mothers to support Bolsonaro (Balieiro 2018). Within several social networking groups of women who supported Bolsonaro during the 2018 campaign, they concretely defend femininity and oppose feminism. They are also upper class and ethnically "white," articulating violent rhetoric that stigmatizes and dehumanizes the Afro-descendant population (i.e., an obese and dirty black person), transsexuals (i.e., an aberration), and feminists (i.e., communists) (Pinheiro-Machado et al. 2019). Such groups constitute the "enemy" of the traditional, heterosexual, and white family (i.e., the "good citizen"). Far-right women have played a fundamental role in the construction of Bolsonaro, as well as project gendered national symbols.

Postcolonial India and Brazil

Despite similarities in the role of gender in far-right movements globally, India and Brazil's diversity as postcolonial countries merits consideration. We refer to "postcolonial" in non-hyphenation rather than "post-colonial," as conceptualized by Kaul (2019, 6), in order to indicate the ongoing legacies of colonial encounters in everyday constructions of race and nation as opposed to the chronological aftermath of colonialism. Understanding postcolonial in this sense, we argue, is key to situating Indian and Brazilian far-right nationalist imaginaries in the present.

One of the most prominent issues among the Indian far-right relates to claims of "indigenous" and "authentic," that is, predating an era of colonial

influence. Female-only Hindu nationalist organizations describe themselves as an alternative to feminist thought, which is viewed as a “foreign” and imported ideology (Bacchetta 1993, 40). These claims of indigeneity are steeped in the idea of a lost, primordial identity. The “importation” of Western ideas and norms during the colonial project sparked the formation of Hindu nationalism, a counter response to a decidedly secular, modern interpretation of the future nation in the run-up to independence.

That philosophy holds today:

[Hindu nationalism depends] on a seemingly radical critique of “modern secularism,” a critique that opposes liberal theories of rights it considers “alien, imported, Western” notions. The Right tries to postulate in their place ahistoric notions of a natural affinity among individuals and communities, which it misleadingly terms indigenous. This image of a sustaining, nurturing community is then used to undercut all left attacks on political and social hierarchies. the Right concentrates its attack on the liberal theory of rights, arguing that this theory is of contaminated historical origins or came to India in colonial times through the agency of Western education. (Sarkar 1993, 21)

By positioning itself as “indigenous” and unpolluted from foreign influence, this effectively circumvents the critique that Hindu nationalism is oppressive. Instead, social hierarchies and adherence to authoritarianism are supposedly natural expressions of the human order steeped in ancient wisdom.

Indigeneity is projected onto the female body as a site of intrinsic knowledge and meaning. The “Hindu woman’s body, hemmed in with scriptural ritual, was imagined as a pure space that escaped the transformative effects of colonization, whereas the Hindu man, seduced by the operations of Western power and knowledge, had surrendered himself and lost his autonomy” (Sarkar 1993, 19–20). While Hindu femininity remained intact from the excesses of the colonial regime, Hindu masculinity became subsumed to Western domination over male subjectivity. The Hindu woman, then, became a signifier of “lost” truth.

Meanwhile, the Brazilian colonial period from 1530 to 1888 (when slavery was abolished) had a lasting effect on social hierarchies that still characterize contemporary Brazil. Colonial society was organized on the basis of extractivist logic: large-scale rural exploitation, mining, and agricultural production remains the foundation for the current economic and social structure of Brazil (Prado 2011). Its colonial history further concerns the relationship of women to violence, militarism, religion, racism, and inequality (Aidoo 2018). During the authoritarian period of the *Estado Novo* led by Getúlio Vargas (1937–1945), Freyre’s term (1933) of “racial democracy” popularly referred to Brazil as a country that could not be categorized as racist, but instead a certain balance between opposites—a “relationship of equilibrium.” During this

period, a project of harmonization of national identity was initiated as a way to prevent conflict and attract foreign investment. Over time, most immigrants eventually settled in southern and southeast Brazil, where white Brazilians make up a significant part of the population (Ribeiro 1995). (Bolsonaro himself is a descendent of Italian immigrants.) The immigration history of whitening crucially reflects how Bolsonaro's racism is ingrained in Brazilian history through the social organization of various peoples (Chakravarti 2017). This historical process demonstrates the role of whiteness as an ideology that was adopted in Brazil (Finchelstein 2019; Stanley 2018). As a postcolonial, racist, and hierarchical society founded on a regime that normalized violence, Brazil managed these practices through the cordiality of relationships such as festive celebrations (e.g., carnivals, football).

As part of the colonial legacy, the so-called upper-middle class, descendants of the dominant sectors of tropical colonial agriculture, saw Bolsonarismo as a solvent project to defend spaces of privilege. Segments of Brazilian society that embraced Bolsonarismo are, in large part, dissatisfied with racial justice and redistribution policies, such as investment in the public health system (see Otovo 2016), adopted prior to Bolsonaro's ascent to the presidency. Thus, while the Brazilian far-right does not explicitly weaponize an anti-colonial narrative like its Indian counterpart, its postcolonial society continues to function within these extant racial and class structures.

Bolsonarismo retains a sacred vision of Christian marriage as a source of respect and the construction of femininity and masculinity. Since the 1990s, neo-Pentecostal churches have pursued a project of *rapprochement* with institutional politics through the election of pastors (Lacerda 2017), and religious conservatism has become a relevant political force in Brazil, playing a key role in Bolsonaro's election through the transmission of values. If relations were established in the colonial period through the "godfather" and the "godson," Bolsonarismo uses the concept of "family" to establish relations, hierarchies, partisan positions, opinions, and even rights and duties. Far-right women are motivated to maintain this social order, understood as security and a vindication of femininity (Errejo'n and Mouffe 2015). These narratives are important—as we illustrate later on—in calls for meritocracy, based on equality regardless of gender, class, or race, which disregards postcolonialism in present systemic inequalities.

The Rise of Digital Mobilization in India and Brazil

In addition to postcolonialism, India and Brazil are prime examples of countries with a rapidly growing social media user base (da Silveira 2019, 2017; Nasir, Khatoon, and Bharadwaj 2018), which presents an opportunity for far-right actors to exploit communications technology. Online spaces as far-right hubs for propaganda dissemination, radicalization processes, collective mobilization, and community building has been well documented in

Western contexts (Conway, Scrivens, and McNair 2019). However, there is a lacuna in understanding how non-Western far-right actors shape and operationalize these practices. As highlighted above, India has a history of far-right mobilization, whereas Brazil does not. What both share in common, though, is a proliferating social media community of far-right users, intrinsically linked to the rise of far-right political leaders, i.e., Modi and Bolsonaro, in their respective countries who are sustained by this vast digital apparatus (Fernández-Villanueva and Bayarri 2021; Goldstein 2019; Govil and Baishya 2018; Mohan 2015; Udupa 2015). While previous scholarship demonstrates the effectiveness of these digital networks in mobilizing support for far-right movements, less attention has been paid to specific individuals who serve as key nodes in shaping and circulating narratives that advance far-right agendas.

Thus, building upon Lewis's study of the "alternative influence network" of far-right YouTubers in North America and the United Kingdom, we draw upon the concept of political influencers who "build audiences and 'sell' them on far-right ideology" through intimate and accessible relationships with their viewers (Lewis 2018, 4). These influencers are highly effective at merging political content with personal branding techniques in order to garner an audience. Meanwhile, on Instagram, as Marwick notes, the phenomenon of "Instafame" can be considered "a variety of microcelebrity," or "a mind-set and a collection of self-presentation practices endemic in social media, in which users strategically formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status" (Senft 2013 in Marwick 2015, 138). Microcelebrity practices and the consumption of their content by "fans" generates a culture that relies upon gender performativity through visual cues (Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017). This, in turn, can present an opportunity for far-right movements to deliver messaging in ways that reflect and reproduce the cultural norms on these mediums for a "legitimizing" effect.

Besides Lewis (2018) and Maly (2020), however, the prevalence of influencers within the far-right scene in Western countries has not been rigorously explored at scale, despite playing an important metapolitical role in spreading far-right discourse on mainstream digital platforms. Furthermore, research on far-right influencers, specifically women, in the Indian and Brazilian context is absent (for an exception, see Leidig 2021). We showcase how Indian and Brazilian far-right female influencers promote their personal brands in line with a political ideology premised on racial, gender, and class hierarchies.

In India, scholars have noted that male, mostly anonymous users bolster the Hindu nationalist digital apparatus (Banaji et al. 2019; Chadha and Guha 2016; Jaffrelot and Verniers 2020; Udupa 2015), while very little has focused upon the presence of influencers, and especially of women's roles in these online spaces. We thus examine the visibility of women in Hindu nationalism who have helped shape and adapt the movement through social media

performance. Meanwhile, social media influencers in Brazil have promoted a “political brand” (Da Silva and Tessarolo 2016). As bearers of authority in digital spaces, these influencers have become heralds of truth with their opinions and testimonies, viewed as legitimate sources of knowledge on social media platforms (Politi 2009; Silveira 2020). These influencers propagate messages constructed in the form of absolute and indisputable truths, such as the premise that “Brazil never had racism.”

Our article is the first study exploring influencer culture within the Indian and Brazilian contexts as a means of far-right communication and propaganda. Female influencers in particular capitalize on racial and class hierarchies as often attractive, fair skinned, and sexually desirable women who fit into a middle- and upper-class strata exclusive to a privileged few in these countries. We argue that these influencers amplify such traits in their intent to advance far-right norms concerning gender, class, and race through their social media performativity.

Methodology

For our study, we collected Twitter and Instagram data of thirteen Indian and nine Brazilian far-right female influencers (for more, see [Supplementary Tables S1 and S2](#)).² The contrast of Twitter for *de facto* political content and Instagram for personal content allows us to capture the different ways in which these influencers present themselves to audiences on these platforms. Not all influencers used both platforms equally; however, we felt the data adequately captured a representation of these women.

Twitter is a popular platform for information sharing in the two countries, and easily accessible for research purposes. Our data collection period of tweets spanned from December 2020 to March 2021. Despite this short time frame, we collected a large amount of data from these influencers’ accounts. Using Netlytic software, we imported tweets using Twitter’s Application Programming Interface (API).³ In total, we collected 14,606 tweets (including retweets and mentions). This is further broken down by 11,258 tweets by Indian influencers and 3,348 tweets by Brazilian influencers. The distribution of tweets between our sample of Indian and Brazilian influencers is vast, which reflects their differing frequency of usage. However, rather than focusing upon the number of posts, we are more concerned with how these influencers reproduce racial, gender, and class hierarchies through these mediums. Our analysis focuses upon a selected number of tweets for comparison across these categories.

Instagram was additionally included in data collection due to its prominence of visual material, an aspect we felt important due to performances of femininity on these platforms. We analyzed posts from Instagram accounts of the influencers in our sample using Meta-supported CrowdTangle. Since

CrowdTangle provides a full archive of Instagram posts, we were able to analyze data from their first Instagram post up to the most recent (March 2021). In total, there were 7,266 Instagram posts. This is further broken down by 4,020 posts by the Indian influencers, and 3,246 posts by Brazilian influencers. We present below posts for analysis of race, gender, and class representations.

To analyze Tweets and Instagram posts, we employed a critical visual methodology to interpret images and texts according to four sites where meaning is made: the site of production of an image; the site of the image itself; the site of its circulation; and the site where it is seen by audiences (Rose 2016, 24–25). When these sites of an image are analyzed in conjunction, we can interpret not only the framing and composition of the image, but also the political and social context in which such images are produced and circulated to create meaning. We analyzed the interaction of these four sites of an image according to our categories of race, gender, and class in order to situate how these social constructions are reproduced through visual material.

Findings

When comparing these Indian and Brazilian far-right female influencers, we want to reiterate that our categories of analysis overlap and cannot always be neatly demarcated, demonstrating the intersectionality of these identity markers. Nonetheless, they similarly construct racial, gender, and class hierarchies on social media platforms to advance exclusionary agendas.⁴ Concerning racial hierarchies, Indian influencers express a civilizationalist discourse of anti-Muslim rhetoric, whereas the Brazilian influencers express racism and racialization toward black and indigenous populations. Religion, as tied to racial constructs, is framed as integral to Indian Hindu and Brazilian Christian supremacy. A further interesting convergence is the targeting of the political left as an out-group enemy.

In terms of gender hierarchies, both Indian and Brazilian far-right women view their primary duty to be mothers whose children embody the future of the nation. Relatedly, these influencers convey strong homophobic and anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes, viewed as a threat to “family values.” Additionally, fear-mongering discourse plays a persistent role with threats to sexual reproduction (i.e., the Muslim male, the foreign rapist). In response, these influencers emphasize displaying physical strength and “female empowerment.”

The latter point transitions to the reproduction of class hierarchies by these influencers. In stressing neoliberal capitalist consumption practices to maintain the status quo, these women are guided by class entitlement and privilege. The image of the wealthy, entrepreneurial woman is omnipresent, ingrained through social media images. Such class hierarchies are projected onto the nationalist imaginary, encapsulated as “good citizens.” Together, we situate these

findings as constitutive of the “postcolonial neoliberal nationalism” framework weaponized by far-right movements.

Racial Hierarchies

For Indian influencers, reproducing racial hierarchies through the lens of Hindu nationalism is enacted by microcelebrity practices. Apurva Singh, the head of the BJP’s information technology (IT) cell for the Delhi branch, is especially well versed in merging political ideology with personal branding, as illustrated in [figure 1a](#) and [b](#). Singh’s profile generally does not feature any extreme Hindu nationalist content, but rather uses more subtle language to signify in-group identity.

While the first Instagram post ([figure 1a](#)) features Singh wearing a saffron (the color of Hindu nationalism) sari—holding a BJP flag in one hand and a mobile phone in the other—the second post ([figure 1b](#)) shows Singh performing a *namaste* gesture during a *puja* (worship). The contrast of these two images displays a delicate balance of contemporary Hindu nationalism: one foot in the “Old India,” with its ancient rituals and traditions stemmed from the Vedic intellectual period, and one foot in the “New India” that aspires to be a future techno-economic powerhouse. Singh’s social media activity echoes a performance of religiosity that is cultivated as part of India’s “indigenous” culture, unique to the subcontinent as existing in its “pure,” unviolated form prior to colonialism.

The primordial civilizationalist myth is reinforced by influencers such as Arti Agarwal, a metapolitical activist who discusses intellectual and spiritual debates on her social media channels. As she claims in a tweet:

The more world history I read (& this is like a full time pre-occupation now), the more proud & grateful I am for being born Indian + Hindu. At least my ancestors don’t have the blood of innocent lives on their hands. No wonder Dharma comes naturally to us. (February 24, 2021; see [Supplementary Data](#), images)

Indian Hindus are viewed as exceptional in world history for an inherently peaceful and tolerant worldview. This claim neglects the long history of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia, including some major events incited by Hindu nationalists. However, more striking is the civilizationalist discourse intertwined with religious identity.

The notion of a Hindu civilizationalist identity is deeply embedded in Hindu nationalists’ understanding of Hindus as *jati* (race) who constitute the *rashtra* (nation). V. D. Savarkar, the father of Hindu nationalism, conceptualized “the bond of a common blood” based on descent: “Hindus, argued Savarkar were not only a ‘Nation’ (*rashtra*) but a ‘Race’ (*jati*), possessing, in their veins, the common blood of ‘the mighty race’ descended from the Vedic fathers” (Savarkar 1989, 85 in [Bhatt 2001](#), 94). Racial purity is confined to

(a)



(b)



Figure 1 Photographs from the Instagram account of Apurva Singh posted on May 24, 2019 (a) and August 31, 2021 (b).

(upper-caste) Hindus who dominate the political, economic, and social order, with Muslims and other religious minorities treated as second-class citizens— an ideology that has materialized through legislation of the current BJP government (Jaffrelot 2021). Equating Hindu nationalism with “civilizationism” is a similar trend to Western far-right movements noted by Brubaker (2017) as “driven by a striking convergence in the last fifteen years around the notion of a civilizational threat from Islam” (1193). Like the anti-Islam and anti-Muslim mobilization of the Western far-right, Hindu nationalists seek domination on the basis of civilizational struggle, facing an alleged existential threat to “our way of life” and cultural values.

On the other hand, the phrase “Brazil above everything, God above everyone” demonstrates that the construction of Bolsonarist nationalism is based more on the unity of belief than on the racial unity of blood. The proselytization of Catholicism during the colonial period toward indigenous and African races established the pillars of a model of neo-Pentecostal religious expansion that Bolsonarismo recovers as an element of its far-right nationalist project. Thus, the recovery of whiteness as a feature of Bolsonarismo’s racial supremacy is closely linked to religious missionary activity during the colonial period when non-white races were treated as a “participating” element of colonization—as settlers and mainly as labor. Bolsonarist nationalism tries to sustain an “ethnic project,” whereby Brazilian ethnicity emerges through annulling the ethnic identifications of indigenous, African, and European populations.

Today, supposed Brazilian racial harmony, in which there is no conflict between races, characterizes the form of racial nationalism projected by far-right female influencers. As we see below, there is no explicit attack on Black or indigenous populations since both are considered part of the foundation of a “Brazilian people,” in which the positions of subalternity and white assimilationism are assumed. However, Brazilian social racism, whereby skin color determines social status, is constantly denied.

Federal deputy Carla Zambelli tweets the following:

The DNA of the family cannot be distorted. Check out the daily liturgy with Father Alex and take the opportunity to subscribe to the channel. Have a good Sunday and May our Lord Jesus Christ embrace everyone. (December 27, 2020; see [Supplementary Data](#), images)

The tweet is accompanied by a video in which a pastor explains the origin of the Christian family, composed of a man and a woman, as well as the moral values of Christianity. The message reveals an assimilationist vision of Brazil’s ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity. Zambelli, despite being a legislator, makes explicit her support for Christianity, ignoring the secularism of the state. The concept of Christian morality also has a rhetorical component of sanguine racism: the DNA of the family cannot be deformed and the implicit meaning of this phrase is that there is a “correct” DNA, constituted by a white,

heteronormative family respecting a Christian institution that fails to include Afro-Brazilian or Afro-indigenous cultures, or any lifestyle outside of Christian heteronormativity. It is understood that the family is the nucleus grounding the rest of society, such that the deformation of the family signals the degeneration of society as a whole.

When comparing racial hierarchies, the Indian influencers express a stronger civilizationalist discourse within Hindu nationalist ideology that is positioned as anti-Muslim rhetoric, whereas the Brazilian influencers focus upon racism and racialization toward black and indigenous populations. Although both countries have postcolonial legacies, power dynamics exercised by dominant groups manifest in different ways. Hindu nationalism asserts a majoritarian discourse that is strongly segmented by religious classification, whereas the myth of Brazilian racial harmony creates a denial of racism as evident in structural institutions and resources.

However, religion occupies an interesting aspect in relation to racial hierarchies. Although Hinduism and Christianity are both positioned as integral to the constitution of Hindu and “white” Brazilian supremacy, the former is viewed as an “indigenous” practice, whereas the latter is clearly a consequence of colonialism. Despite this difference, white Christian heteronormativity is repackaged as a form of sanguine racism through bodily composition, that is, the “DNA” of the family that is immutable and divine.

What transpires to be an interesting area of convergence is shared rhetoric concerning the targeting of the political left as an enemy for both the Brazilian and Indian far-right. For example, federal deputy Bia Kicisín tweets:

Unfortunately, President @RodrigoMaia recently stated in his speech that the conservative pattern divides and generates hatred. It’s exactly the opposite, who divides are the globalists with their identitarian agenda that puts women against men, blacks against whites, gays against straights. (December 18, 2020; see [Supplementary Data](#), images)

This reflects a common criticism of affirmative action as not promoting equality, but inequality (faced by the dominant groups). Bolsonarismo promotes this form of racism, which does not allow space in institutions for expressing the diversity of racial identities. To this end, they resort to an alleged conspiracy of “globalists,” a slur often used by the Western far-right to label Jewish elites in cahoots with left-wing political activists, who are seeking to divide society with leftist identity politics. Similarly, Indian influencers often attribute the political left for causing societal degradation. Deepika Narayan Bhardwaj shares this view:

I am convinced that this world is more confused, toxic, intolerant, hypersensitive, irrational & morally depraved than ever because of loony left. (February 13, 2021; see [Supplementary Data](#), images)

The “loony left,” a phrase commonly used by the far-right globally, indicates displays of irrationality and delusion from the opposition, framed as subversion and causing disruption. In both instances, then, the left is portrayed as instigators of societal and moral decay, disruptive, irrational, and intolerant, seeking to dismantle the status quo. Rather than acknowledge the aims of pro- gressive social movements to achieve equality and rights for the marginalized, these far-right influencers frame such behavior and beliefs as an attack on so- cial harmony, ignoring their position as primary beneficiaries of the social and racial order.

Gender Hierarchies

Fundamentally, Indian and Brazilian far-right women view their primary duty as mothers and homemakers, with an emphasis on children as the future of the nation. This is not surprising given the role of women in far-right movements *vis-a`-vis* gendered nationalist imaginaries elsewhere. The focus on maternalism is illustrated in [figure 2](#) by television news anchor Rubika Liyaquat holding her baby daughter in an Instagram post.

Brazilian influencers likewise express a gendered discourse strongly marked by the role of women in the family. Carla Zambelli tweets:

Monument to the unborn child: The image shows the suffering of the mother from the abortion and the child forgiving the mother. New



Figure 2 Photograph from the Instagram account of Rubika Liyaquat posted on October 4, 2020.

research claims that the baby feels pain during the abortion process even in the first few weeks. (December 30, 2020; see [Supplementary Data](#), images)

The tweet features an image of a sculpture showing a mother crying and the child, transparent, giving forgiveness for having had an abortion. The anti-abortion narrative is often repeated by these influencers through Christian morality and attacks on feminism. As it is a space of identity construction for Bolsonaroist women, the guilt regarding abortion is always placed on the mother who aborts, and never on the father or the social conditions surrounding the decision. For these influencers, women have a role in the family that is determined by traditionalism, in which having children is a core duty.

In India, maternalist narratives are associated with upholding Hindu nationalist supremacy, whereas in Brazil, far-right women are placed as a maternal figure within the traditional Christian family nucleus, but not representative of a specific ethnicity. Instead, these Brazilian women embody the “folk,” what Ribeiro terms the “Brazilian people” (1995).

Both Indian and Brazilian influencers project a high degree of homophobia and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments, as this represents a direct threat to the family unit and the erosion of “family values.” Romantic relationships between women and men are portrayed as “natural,” with homosexuality seen as perverse. In response to government obstruction of the passage of same-sex marriage laws by the Delhi High Court, Ritu Rathaur frames this act as “upholding civilizational ethos” (Twitter, February 25, 2021; see [Supplementary Data](#), images), i.e., marriage should be between a biological man and woman. LGBTQ+ rights are viewed as a Western, “foreign” import that is imposing upon “indigenous” Hindu civilization.

The defense of femininity and masculinity—as embodied through the family unit—against gender progressivism is also articulated by other influencers. Bia Kicis tweets:

The prayer at the opening of the American Congress today ended with an Amen and an Awoman. As if Amen had anything to do with ‘A man’ or gender stuff. Help! (January 4, 2021; see [Supplementary Data](#), images)

The tweet embeds a video showing the opening session of the US Congress. This represents how Brazilian influencers attack new forms of inclusive language. For them, this language ridicules the seriousness of traditions, such as the Catholic/Christian “amen,” and distorts its original meaning. Moreover, in attacking inclusive language, these women also defy the logic of feminism, claiming the traditional family role of women and their feminine role, which should not be differentiated in words or in affirmative policies.

Threats to sexual reproduction play a persistent role in fear mongering rhetoric. Damares Alves, evangelical pastor and the Minister of Women, Family and Human Rights, tweets:

No more foreigners coming to Brazil to abuse our children! Bolsonaro is President of Brazil, I am a minister and we have here brave policemen who will defend our children from rapists, whether foreigners or Brazilians. (January 6, 2021; see [Supplementary Data](#), images)

Alves discusses in a linked video a report of child rape by a foreigner, and congratulates the police for apprehending the man. The message is clear: the need to protect vulnerable children from abuse. This abuse can come from foreigners, bandits, or teachers in schools, who could be teaching sexual content to children, thereby indoctrinating them at a young age. Faced with this reality, the police, the armed forces, and the family (defending initiatives such as homeschooling), are the saviors of the purity of children, being the moral institutions that guarantee the good personal development of a correct citizen. Within the Indian context, fear of rape and sexuality often manifests within discourse of inter-faith sexual relationships between Hindu women and Muslim men. A tweet by journalist Shefali Vaidya illustrates the Islamophobic narrative of uncontrolled Muslim male hypersexuality:

How can India's secular courts give bail for rape of a minor, if the perpetrator say he is ready to marry the minor coz it is allowed in his faith to marry a minor as well as to marry multiple times? And where are all the fake feminists? (February 1, 2021; see [Supplementary Data](#), images)

By insinuating that Muslim men practice pedophilia and polygamy due to observance of Islam, Vaidya reproduces the trope that Muslim male sexuality is barbaric, savage, and a direct threat to vulnerable, "pure" Hindu girls—a conspiracy commonly known as "love jihad" ([Sarkar 2018](#); [Tyagi and Sen 2020](#)). The greatest threat to the female Hindu body, and by extension the nation given that Hindu women symbolize the daughters of Bharat Mata (Mother India), is the predatory, hypersexualized Muslim male "other" (see [Dibyesh 2007](#); [Menon 2010](#)). Today, constructions of Hindu femininity as in need of protection from violent Muslim masculinity is at the heart of the Indian far-right myth. In response, Hindu nationalist women seek physical strength as a means to defend themselves against the threatening Muslim male. A noteworthy aspect of Indian women in far-right movements is an emphasis on physical strength and bodily defense, including rigorous training including martial arts and shooting. Yet, this militancy is only possible in the foregrounding of Hindu women as wives and mothers ([Banerjee 2006](#)). As wives, they demand displays of masculinity and protection from their husbands. As mothers, they instill fearlessness and nationalism in their children ([Sethi 2002](#), 1548).

In comparison, Brazilian influencers exhibit weapons and arms, valorizing militarization, as depicted by Carla Zambelli in [figure 3](#), posing with a machine gun with the caption “female empowerment.”

Through the visual display of weaponry, a similar connotation of female empowerment is echoed in displays of physical strength. The recognition of symbolic violence, as well as the corporealization of aggression that is interpreted as empowerment, is a war-like metaphor of self-defense and struggle against the dangers of Brazil.

Building upon the narrative of female empowerment, a more recent message propagated by Indian influencers centers upon tropes of the “girl boss” and self-motivation, displayed by Liyaquat in [figure 4](#).

Through her professional achievements, Liyaquat promotes femininity with a neoliberal discourse of female empowerment. Ironically, “indigenous” female physical strength embodied by Indian far-right women becomes repackaged into a “foreign,” Western-inspired narrative of female empowerment, which is distinct from the Hindu nationalism of the past. Instead, the positioning of Hindu nationalist women as leaders and drivers in society is a recent emergence bolstered by neoliberal “New India.” Nupur Sharma, a lawyer and national spokesperson for the BJP, participates in high-level events such as on the panel “Role of Women in Strengthening the Nation” (Twitter, January 24, 2021; see [Supplementary Data](#), images).

In the current Hindu nationalist movement, women are constructed as thought leaders and contributors to the public sphere, but with an important caveat: only those who serve at the elite rank deserve this public recognition. Narratives of female empowerment and achievement are only possible in the foregrounding of such women in their foremost roles as mothers and (cultural) reproducers of the nation.



Figure 3 Photograph from the Instagram account of Carla Zambelli posted on February 16, 2021.



Figure 4 Photograph from the Instagram account of Rubika Liyaquat posted on February 8, 2020.

Finally, it should be emphasized that constructions of femininity and masculinity are exemplified by these influencers through visual frames of microcelebrity practices. As fair-skinned and normative representations of the feminine elicits gender hierarchies, these elite Indian and Brazilian far-right women benefit from neoliberalized global standards of beauty, which is further pronounced in Global South contexts. This aspect importantly intersects with the racial and class hierarchies presented throughout the findings.

Class Hierarchies

Hindu nationalism originated as an elite-driven movement and ideology to maintain caste and class hierarchies in society (Bhatt 2001). Although contemporary Hindu nationalism has arguably become more democratically oriented (Jaffrelot 2015), it still retains middle- and upper-class dominance—far-right female influencers exemplify this privilege. As Shefali Vaidya tweets:

Why should middle class tax payer suffer all such agitations in silence? Every day some anti-India group wants to protest, roads are closed, cops are deployed on bandobast, areas of the city barricaded off, who suffers? The middle class. Just because they have no nuisance value? (January 27, 2021; [Supplementary Data](#), images)

The “middle class” bears the brunt of inconvenience to their lifestyle as a result of protestor disruptions (note that protestors are also framed as “anti-Indian”). In particular, the “middle-class tax payer” suffers, revealing how economic capital is framed to justify privilege and the maintenance of class hierarchies.

Similarly, the Brazilian influencers’ construction of class is inspired by a conception of the “folk,” who have a legitimate claim to rights and demands and are composed of “good citizens,” or what Bolsonarismo legitimizes as adequate citizenship. This conception of folk refers to people who follow a traditional “white” lifestyle, preferably religious, who do not disrupt society and commit crimes, and who participate in capitalist consumption behavior. As journalist Liliane Ventura tweets:

Rights for right-wing people! They go out to commit crimes! Do you think they go home to spend Christmas with the family? #Banditsatlarge. (December 21, 2020; see [Supplementary Data](#), images)

The tweet links a video showing a long queue of prisoners leaving a prison. The message appeals to the dichotomy of “good citizen” versus “bandit,” in which the latter should not have any rights, including the right to leave prison to visit family. The message is part of the punitive logic of Bolsonarismo, and specifically of a neoliberal understanding of the world that influencers frequently express: committing crimes is not the result of structural issues of an unequal society, but rather due to individual decisions.

These tweets that depict chaos and disorder reflect how Indian and Brazilian influencers partake in operational circuits of outrage—outrage that is manufactured and mobilized through the virality of social media content (see [Ganesh 2020](#)). Outrage, in this instance, is expressed by Indian and Brazilian female influencers on the basis of class entitlement and privilege, enforcing hierarchies through neoliberal middle and upper-class reproduction to maintain the status quo as “good citizens.” At the core of this logic is the notion of individual meritocracy, which fails to recognize structural conditions of economic inequality.

The image of the middle-class/wealthy woman is omnipresent and ingrained through social media images of wealth and status aimed toward fans. Here, gendered hierarchies are closely intertwined with class maintenance. Indeed, Vaidya frequently posts photos on her Twitter and Instagram accounts, such as the example in [figure 5](#), which flaunt her personal wealth in dress and clothing.

Vaidya’s extensive collection of saris, illustrated in the photograph of a vintage silk sari in [figure 5](#), but also featured in numerous other posts using the hashtag #sareeswag, reflects her upper-class status that is unattainable for most people in the country. Weaved into this depiction is Vaidya positioned next to an ancient Hindu temple, a pilgrimage hobby she often enjoys, that



Figure 5 Photograph from the Instagram account of Shefali Vaidya posted on February 25, 2021.

becomes part of her identity as a wealthy Hindu. Flaunting her material possessions and access to travel is, however, viewed as acceptable given that it projects Hindu cultural values.

In addition, these women also frame themselves within a broad category of “entrepreneurial women.” Embodying the concept of “entrepreneurial women” is the Instagram image in figure 6 of Denize Taccto, a television presenter and dancer, who appears posing in a luxurious car.

Taccto refers in the caption to self-care and the importance of having high self-esteem. As an influencer, she not only stereotypes beauty standards of what a Bolsonaro woman should convey physically, such as a thin body type and expensive feminine clothes, but also the way in which material objects should be a central element in the search for balance, happiness, and self-help. Neoliberal consumption of products symbolically represents the social and moral status of far-right women in Brazil.

These influencers extend class hierarchies to the national level as well. In the BJP-led economy, Priti Gandhi, head of social media for female Hindu nationalist organization Mahila Morcha, tweets praise for tech entrepreneurship in the private sector:

PM Modi’s acknowledgement of role of private sector, in Parliament, is welcome. India’s leading tech-entrepreneurs writes on PM’s support for the private sector. (February 24, 2021; see [Supplementary Data](#), images)



Figure 6 Photograph from the Instagram account of Denize Taccto posted on October 18, 2020.

When India's political economy opened up to privatization in the 1980s, the BJP embraced neoliberalism and quickly became the political party representing capitalist interests and development (Gopalakrishnan 2006). Modi has transformed this discourse into a vision of a "New India," which includes the country becoming a technology industry heavyweight and eventually become less reliant on foreign companies, instead supported by India-based corporations (Kaul 2017). By pushing the narrative of neoliberal development, Gandhi is reproducing class hierarchies of the status quo, whereby the middle and upper class will remain the beneficiaries of the globalized economy.

This neoliberal capitalist logic is also reinforced by Brazilian influencers. As Congresswoman Joice Hasselmann tweets:

I appealed today for a vote on the third phase of Pronampe, which will release more than \$10 billion for small and micro-entrepreneurs, the largest generators of employment in the country. This special line of credit will go to save businesses and jobs. #Pronampe. (December 15, 2020; see [Supplementary Data](#), images)

Hasselmann explains in the linked video her initiative to help entrepreneurs. The small businessman is stereotyped as the man of the people who

generates employment and wealth, who despite not being rich earns his living through personal accomplishment. Small-scale entrepreneurs are an ideal representation of “good citizens” who “chose” to work and contribute to society (*vis-a-vis* the “bandit”). The entrepreneur who generates employment will have achieved this by merit, repeatedly cited and defended by Bolsonarismo.

While promoting capitalist interests is not necessarily unique to far-right movements, we argue that this is a central component toward understanding the far-right within contexts of the Global South. These far-right female influencers enjoy the privileges of their middle-class positioning, which is projected onto nationalist myth-making as part of far-right imaginaries of good citizenry. Postcolonialism may partially attribute racial and class legacies, but neoliberalism sustains the reproduction of these hierarchies. When combined, this manifestation of “postcolonial neoliberal nationalism” contributes to constructions of pride and identity that are visually circulated on social media.

Conclusion

In this article, we illustrate the ways in which Indian and Brazilian far-right female influencers reproduce racial, gender, and class hierarchies through affordances of social media. This intersectional approach is situated within the “postcolonial neoliberal nationalism” framework underpinning these countries, which has a significant impact on far-right movements today, not least upon knowledge production, meaning-making, and claims of indigeneity in the Global South. Analyzing the Twitter and Instagram content of these understudied influencers adds a more holistic understanding of the far-right in a few notable avenues: geographical coverage, gender dimensions, and digital cultures. Overall, this article presents an innovative and timely contribution to the literature on gender and the far-right.

Notes

1. Scholars such as Leia Gonz lez (1982), Florestan Fernandes (1972), Darcy Ribeiro (1995), Prado (2011), Victor Nunes Leal (1948), Sergio Buarque de Holanda (1936), Gilberto Freyre (1933), and Raymundo Faoro (1958) have provided a conceptual framework to situate this patrimonial relationship. These scholars are part of the so called “Brazilian Social Thought of the XX Century.”
2. [Supplementary Table S1](#) and [Table S2](#) can be accessed at https://docs.google.com/document/d/17pcUODPoXhsGolW8Y6J9PRNp0eZv_mY4/edit?usp=sharing&oid=104264189757175510253rtpof=true&sd=true.
3. Twitter later released the Academic Research product track, an option for academics via application to obtain access to Twitter’s full public archive.

4. The Twitter and Instagram posts we analyzed can be accessed as supplementary images at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/10YKnKBSFdrdCoNIUSL-HCJvn3ywD4K/edit?usp=sharing&id=104264189757175510253rtpof=truesd=true>.

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Supplementary Data

Supplementary data can be found at <http://www.socpol@oup.com>.

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