Is nationalism politics-as-usual?: WhatsApp, disinformation ‘services’ and renewable ingenuity of online abusers

In this talk, I will examine an assemblage of infrastructures, practices and actors of digital media that constitutes contemporary forms of right-wing nationalism in India. The key focus is on what is defined as “bhakt business” – actors who navigate nebulous networks of patronage, brokerage, idolatry and ideological affiliation. They are the digital nouveau riche, who have turned their social media skills to move up the political ladder for monetary gains, social status or the sheer joy of experiencing political participation. Departing from explanations that see these actors as self-aggrandizing strategists – which they are partly are – the talk will open up a range of analytical angles to understand their practices – from online affective loops and masculine showmanship to meticulous work of building up followers and livelihood options, all set within a volatile terrain of new promises unleashed by digital networks. I locate this problematic at the intersection of data capitalism, digital practice and political propaganda. Building on the theory of extreme speech (Udupa & Pohjonen 2019; Udupa 2019), ethnographic field data, and a virtual dive into a nationalist WhatsApp group, the talk will show that contemporary nationalism is non-exceptional. It is mainstream, it is politics-as-usual, with dire consequences for those that it excludes.