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Dehumanisation in a Time of War Hysteria

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The loyalty-treachery divide in India silences voices of peace at home. State propaganda merges with public discourse, and war's influence permeates civilian thought. By dehumanising people into targets, war makes the unacceptable seem necessary, eroding the humanity of both victim and perpetrator.

Dehumanisation lies at the heart of war's logic, enabling the systematic suspension of empathy and moral restraint. Throughout history, warfare has required that the enemy be stripped of its humanity – cast as barbaric, sub-human, or evil – to justify violence, conquest, and mass killing. From the mythological wars of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to colonial genocides and modern drone strikes, this logic has allowed individuals and states to commit atrocities while preserving the illusion of righteousness. By reducing human beings to abstractions – targets, collateral, threats – war transforms the unacceptable into the necessary, eroding not only the humanity of the victim but also that of the perpetrator.

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Since 2014, however, with the ascendance of the right-wing under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, there has been a qualitative degeneration even in this familiar process of dehumanisation, as starkly evident in the India-Pakistan tensions after Pahalgam. Pre-2014 episodes of conflict between the two nations were often punctuated by sober appeals for peace from civil society actors, a shared sense of war-weariness among citizens, and – even if inconsistently – a measure of restraint from the media. This time, however, the television studio morphed into a war room, and the anchor into a general.

Mainstream news channels, also known as 'godi media', abdicated journalistic ethics long ago. They have become willing propagandists of the state, shamelessly dishing out fake news. Headlines scream for vengeance, hashtags like #WipeOutPakistan trend across platforms, and even the mildest calls for de-escalation are branded anti-national. The binary of loyalty versus treachery is now used not only to demonise the enemy across the border but also to criminalise peace-loving voices at home. In such an atmosphere, the line between state propaganda and public discourse collapses, and the machinery of war extends its reach deep into the civilian psyche.

Ideological roots

The logic of dehumanisation in contemporary India cannot be fully understood without tracing its ideological roots to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) – the parent organisation of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). From its inception in 1925, the RSS has been premised on an exclusionary and hierarchical conception of the nation, where only Hindus are considered the rightful citizens of India. While its source ideologue, V.D. Savarkar, while defining Hindutva, identified Muslims and Christians as the others, its second chief, M.S. Golwalkar, openly declared that non-Hindus must either subordinate themselves to the Hindu nation or live "wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizens' rights" (1939: 52). Later, Golwalkar explicitly termed Muslims, Christians, and Communists as the three internal threats to the Hindu Rashtra (1966: 166–194). This formulation established a majoritarian framework in which dehumanisation of the "Other" was not merely strategic but also foundational to the project of building a Hindu Rashtra.

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The RSS's worldview is militaristic, expansionist, racist, and supremacist, drawing inspiration not only from Hindu mythology but also from European fascist movements of the early 20th century. Golwalkar admired the racial purity campaigns of Nazi Germany, writing approvingly of how the Germans "maintained their race pride […] and kept up the purity of the race and culture" (1939: 43). This ideal of a culturally and racially pure Hindu nation underpins the RSS's vision of "Akhand Bharat" – a mythic, unified Hindu land stretching beyond India's current borders, which not only erases plural histories but treats present-day nation states such as Pakistan and

Bangladesh as illegitimate fragments to be reclaimed. In this schema, Muslims are perennially seen as invaders, traitors, or fifth columnists.

The RSS's training camps (*shakhas*) cultivate a hyper-masculine, vigilante form of patriotism that valorises physical aggression against perceived enemies and trains young minds to view non-Hindus, particularly Muslims, as existential threats (Jaffrelot 2007: 134). The notion of India as a *vishwaguru* is not a benign aspiration but a self-aggrandising ideology of cultural supremacy, implying that others must either emulate or submit to the Hindu civilisational order (Heredia 2015: 89). This supremacist self-conception not only denies dignity and agency to non-Hindus but also produces a moral framework in which violence against them becomes justifiable, even virtuous.

Nationalist hysteria

The Modi regime, true to its ideological legacy, has systematically refashioned Indian nationalism into a majoritarian narrative – Hindu, militaristic, and hyper-masculine – where dissent is equated with disloyalty and peace is seen as cowardice. This shift is not just about words; it has fundamentally changed how state institutions operate, what people talk about, and how the media works, creating a constant state of mobilisation against perceived threats, both within and outside the country.

In post-2014 India, dehumanisation has taken on a newly intensified form, sharpened by a climate of militant nationalism, a hyper-partisan media ecosystem, and a political regime that valorises enmity as a moral good. The 2019 Pulwama-Balakot episode exemplified this dangerous turn. Forty-four Indian paramilitary personnel were killed in a suicide bombing in Pulwama, and almost immediately, India launched an air strike across the border on Balakot, Pakistan. What followed was not merely military retaliation but a national spectacle that transformed grief into theatre and dissent into sedition (Ghosh 2022).

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This moment marked a shift in Indian political discourse that had been unfolding since Modi's rise to power in 2014. Patriotism was untethered from democratic ideals and constitutional values; it became synonymous with loyalty to the government, uncritical belief in military actions, and public displays of animosity towards Pakistan. Television channels aired simulated dogfights and computer-generated imagery (CGI) reconstructions of air strikes. Anchors shouted down critics and opposition leaders, branding anyone who questioned the official narrative as "anti-national" (Chopra 2019, Thussu 2021: 87, 112).

The performance of nationalism penetrated everyday spaces. On social media, hashtags like #Badla (#Revenge) and #SurgicalStrike2 trended for days. Bollywood celebrities issued jingoistic statements, while dissenters – including grieving Kashmiri students – were harassed, arrested, or labelled terrorists. Empathy itself was recoded as betrayal (Udupa 2018: 1506–22). Across universities and civil society, the very idea of Indian identity became militarised. The term 'nation' was no longer a shared political community but a sacred geography that demanded blood for its honour.

This wave of nationalism did not merely influence India's foreign posture – it reshaped the moral fabric of public life. A society that watches war with popcorn in hand, that cheers the death of the other, and that regards mourning as weakness, gradually loses the capacity for civic compassion. This dynamic is not unique to India—but the intensity and choreography of nationalist sentiment in the post-2014 landscape stands out. The convergence of state power, digital platforms, and a compliant media has produced a powerful apparatus to sway emotion and ideology (Rajagopal 2020).

> 'National security' justifies censorship, sanctifies state violence, and criminalises critique. Truth itself becomes malleable, shaped by sentiment and spectacle.

Crucially, the BJP's political narrative has both fuelled and benefited from this hysteria. Since 2014, there has been a systematic construction of the "national enemy"—external (Pakistan, Rohingyas) and internal (Muslims, secularists, dissenters-Urban Naxals). This strategy serves several ends – it mobilises majoritarian support, delegitimises opposition, silences dissent, and maintains a state of perpetual emergency. The Balakot strike, and the orchestrated frenzy around it, took place just months before the 2019 general election. Unsurprisingly, the BJP's campaign rhetoric leaned heavily on this episode, casting Modi as a warrior-statesman (Chatterjee 2019: 142–43; Hansen 2021: 89–91).

As Ashis Nandy warned decades ago, when nationalism becomes religion and war becomes morality, democracy begins to wither (1998: 23). In today's India, the language of 'national security' justifies censorship, sanctifies state violence, and criminalises critique. Truth itself becomes malleable, shaped by sentiment and spectacle. Even credible reports that the Balakot strike missed major targets were drowned in the clamour. Calls for proof were labelled treasonous (Ghosh 2022).

> Indians are taught not to mourn, but to gloat. And that, perhaps, is the most tragic victory of this new nationalism.

What we are witnessing is not just the dehumanisation of the enemy, but also of the self. The citizen becomes a spectator, rationality is replaced by rage, and public discourse devolves into a war of hashtags. Suffering – of Pakistani civilians, Kashmiri families, even Indian soldiers – fades into background noise. And Himanshi Narwal, the widow of a young navy officer killed at Pahalgam, gets trolled in a filthy manner. In this new order, Indians are taught not to mourn, but to gloat. And that, perhaps, is the most tragic victory of this new nationalism.

Wars are not video games

Since 2014, an era of militarised hyper-nationalism has turned war into a televised spectacle – repackaged as hashtags, memes, and media bravado fraught with falsehoods and blatant lies.

> Wars are not evidence of strength but symptoms of diplomatic failure.

Nowhere is this more dangerous than in the recurring India-Pakistan confrontations, where conflict is framed as drama, yet its consequences are brutal and deeply human. While newsrooms cheer missile strikes and #WipeOutPakistan trends online, border communities endure cycles of trauma, loss, and displacement. War is not a game—it leaves behind graves, shattered limbs, scorched fields, and lasting psychological scars.

Casualties and displacement: From 2016 to 2020, India recorded more than 14,000 ceasefire violations, with more than 300 civilian deaths and thousands displaced. Villages in Jammu and Kashmir – like Poonch and Kupwara – have faced repeated evacuations. Families live in bunkers for months, schools remain shut, and harvests rot in fields. For many, displacement is a recurring crisis, not a one-time tragedy.

Property and livelihood destruction: Each year, hundreds of homes are damaged by shelling. Livestock is killed, granaries destroyed, and farmlands rendered unsafe by landmines. The economic cost is borne by small farmers and workers who receive little to no compensation.

Military expenditure and misadventures: India's defence budget touched $86.1 billion in 2024 – almost nine times Pakistan's. While security is essential, jingoistic posturing masks the steep opportunity costs. The 2019 Balakot air strikes, involving 30-plus aircraft, cost hundreds of crores and led to the capture of Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman. Such operations, later hailed as victories, are financially and strategically costly.

Developmental opportunity cost: Sustained tensions have stalled infrastructure, tourism, and social services in border states. Schools remain closed due to shelling, and hospitals struggle with staff shortages. Youth unemployment in Jammu and Kashmir remains as high as 17% to 18%. In Pakistan too, the India threat is used to justify disproportionate military spending at the expense of education and welfare.

Psychological trauma: The deepest wounds are often invisible. Children in conflict zones grow up with anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Families live in fear; soldiers return with depression and substance abuse issues. Yet, the state glorifies sacrifice without investing in long-term mental healthcare or rehabilitation.

Spectacle over substance

Wars waged on television screens deliver spectacle, not solutions. Politicians and media profit from nationalism; the people on the ground pay the price. These conflicts, far from being brief episodes, inflict long-term, intergenerational harm.

Wars are not evidence of strength but symptoms of diplomatic failure. When governments resort to sabre-rattling and media spectacles instead of sustained dialogue, it reflects not courage but abdication of responsibility. In a functioning democracy, war should be the last resort, not a photo-op. The real cost of conflict—paid in broken bodies, ruined lives, and lost futures—is borne by those far from TV studios and power corridors. It is time we stopped mistaking war cries for patriotism, and demanded accountability, not bravado, from those who claim to speak for the nation.

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