

Sohrab Hura

Images Are Masks

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In 2014, after receiving news of a predictable national elections result, I tried to scan myself into the computer. Even back then, it was easy to foresee the situation India finds itself in today, where we are governed by an irresponsible, dictatorial, and supremacist government. What was surprising, however, was a certain misplaced, widespread belief following the election. Now that Modi was prime minister of a union of states, thought many Indians, he would focus on ushering in an agenda led by development rather than the religious supremacy he had been known to propagate. Perhaps the image of a sea of Modi masks worn by people attending his political rallies helped instill the delusion that the fateful fire in Godhra in 2002 – sparking months of deadly violence against Muslims in the Modi-led state of Gujarat – was only a distant memory. Or maybe the proliferation of pro-Modi WhatsApp forwards led people to compromise their morals. Even my parents, who were new to WhatsApp, expressed confusion when I'd point out doctored messages they shared with me. At the time, the slogan "*Hindu Khatre Mein Hai*" (Hindus are in danger) circulated widely. The words were often superimposed on an assortment of images of what looked to be a riot, with buses and tires set on fire. These images included people wearing white skullcaps – meant to reveal that Muslims were responsible for the purported violence. Back then it was still relatively easy to identify and verify the origins of those images, to clarify that old images from another part of the world had been stripped of their original context and presented differently. But because my parents knew that the images they received were sent by friends and relatives, they had an inherent trust in these images. Out of frustration, my first impulse was to remove myself from the people around me who were starting to feel increasingly zombie-like in their reception of the new authoritarian political reality. I decided to scan myself away into the computer. The digital space – outside of WhatsApp, that is – seemed like it could teleport me somewhere else quickest. But all I managed in the scanning endeavor was a warped self-portrait of my hand. It was an afterimage of a glitched attempt at escaping the future, a photograph that remained neither a document nor an abstraction, just an image stuck somewhere awkwardly in between.

As I write this, I think of my colleague Danish Siddiqui, who was brutally murdered by the Taliban in Afghanistan four months ago. Over the two years prior, Danish and others like him had become the eyes for an entire milieu, exposing the lies and deceptions of the Modi government. Danish was a photojournalist with Reuters. Throughout the 2019 protests against



Sohrab Hura, *Spill*, 2014. Archival Pigment Print. 12.5" x 9". Courtesy of the artist.

the Citizenship Act (which determines citizenship based on religion), the subsequent pogrom against Muslims in New Delhi in February 2020, the mass migration of day laborers following the erratic and mindless implementation of Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, the massive farmer protests against the government (still ongoing), and the death and devastation of the second wave of Covid-19 a few months ago – Danish and others were there, playing the role of documentarians at a moment when the machinery of the state sought to erase and rewrite histories. No matter how much this government has tried to block the world from knowing, seeing, and hearing, photographers like Danish have been consistently unmasking the truth – all this while working with integrity and putting their lives on the line.

The current government insists on increasing censorship and meeting demands for accountability with punishment – protection from which varies according to what community, religion, caste, and class one belongs to in India. Between this and the collapse and compromise of traditional media, what do independent photographers, writers, graphic designers, filmmakers, and artists do today? During the 2016 Shanghai Biennale, curators Raqs Media Collective were surprised to find scores of visitors watching extended video works in their entirety, or even watching them multiple times. The curators asked the spectators what made them spend so much time with these works. The answer was that they were searching for hidden messages that the artists might have inserted into the videos.

In the last decade, the Indian government has vigorously fueled a perverse sense of supremacist nationalism and hate, which had been relatively dormant before. This nationalism has been taken up by the larger Indian population, including some of my family members and erstwhile friends. There is also a clearer awareness among regular people of images becoming the new dominant language of history-making. In the 2000s, increasing access to camera-equipped mobile phones brought about the idea of citizen journalism. News outlets encouraged readers to document their own stories in images. This was presented as an opportunity for ordinary people to call out the corruption they encountered in their daily lives. But this development also quietly dovetailed with the rise of a new model for the journalism industry, which replaced news with content, and journalists with content providers – all of which led to massive layoffs among photojournalists and journalists. Soon after, the idea that citizen journalism could operate within traditional news outlets was extinguished by the rise of Facebook,

Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. What had once been the mainstream was now swallowed up by what had once been the colloquial.

When a new vocabulary is born, there's normally a lag in the diffusion of its understanding among the masses. Citizen journalism ostensibly gave people a stake in telling their own stories. They were able to equate their own voice and lived experiences with journalism and therefore with "truth." But the subsequent collapse of the journalism industry and the rise of social media also meant an absence of verification and fact-checking. It isn't surprising that in 2013, before the general elections, when the journalism industry was in shambles, the primary campaign tactic of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was to attack the press. Modi and his supporters, who by then were already active across a swathe of social-media platforms, regularly labelled journalists as "press-titutes," while simultaneously propagating their own visual stories. These included Modi fighting off crocodiles as a child (which soon after became the subject of a children's book), or positioning himself as coming from a humble economic background by claiming to have been a tea seller on a railway platform. No record of this platform's existence has been found to date. During a television interview, Modi even famously reminisced about using a digital camera and sending a photo by email to someone in Delhi in 1987–88, years before India had access to the internet and before digital cameras were made available in India. Stepping out from the shadow of the previous prime minister, Manmohan Singh, who was known to be quiet, Modi was quickly cultivating his image as a strong, vocal leader. It was only an image, but any reputable media infrastructure that could question images was being rapidly dismantled. Over the last decade in India, images have been increasingly weaponized to control history. "Real or fake, we can make any message go viral," announced the current home minister, Amit Shah, to BJP social-media volunteers at a meeting in 2018.¹ While most of the population is still coming to terms with the new image system, political parties have been growing increasingly adept at tinkering with this powerful means of controlling information.

It has also become progressively necessary for image-makers to find vocabularies containing codes and clues that might help bypass unwanted interference from those who seek to maintain media control. Such strategies are needed to negotiate and survive an environment so rife with self-censorship and scrutiny – both by the government and the prying neighbor who shares its ideology. In July, a leading Hindi daily newspaper had its offices raided by the tax

department. This came days after the newspaper had published an article on the decades-long history of snooping by the current prime minister and home minister. Stretching the already damning revelation from the Pegasus spyware controversy of 2016 further into the past did not present a good “image” of the government. The raid on the newspaper was part of a series of intimidation tactics directed toward any form of questioning or dissent.

On February 14, 2019, a few months before the previous national elections, and while the government was fending off massive criticism around its handling of the economy, we were suddenly inundated with images of a bomb attack on a convoy of paramilitary forces in Pulwama, Kashmir. The dominant narrative quickly turned from unemployment and rising prices to national security, terrorism, and Pakistan. Security raids on civilians in Kashmir were conducted and television news channels in India funneled public anger away from themselves and toward Kashmiris living here. Critics of the government were quickly labelled “anti-nationals,” as the image of the nation, the government, and the ruling party were efficiently merged into one. The opposition quickly deflated; they had no choice but to align with the

government on an issue like national security. A few months later, Modi returned to power with a decisive electoral majority. In January 2020, not more than a year after that bomb attack, a high-ranking police officer named Davinder Singh was caught driving out of Kashmir in a personal vehicle with four people, two of whom were identified as Hizbul Mujahideen militants. At the time of the bomb attack in 2019, Singh’s job was to track the movement of armed forces in Kashmir. Now rewind back a couple of decades. In the early 2000s, Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri separatist, was charged with carrying out a terrorist attack on the Indian parliament in New Delhi in 2001 – again at a time when the BJP was in power, coincidentally. In a 2004 letter that Afzal Guru wrote to his lawyer from prison, he spoke of the same police officer, Davinder Singh, who had ordered him to take a man to Delhi and to arrange accommodations for him there. That man was later identified as one of the militants shot dead outside the Indian parliament. Afzal Guru was sentenced to death, as the Indian court found that this recourse was needed to satisfy the “collective conscience” of the country.² In 2013 he was executed in secret so that Kashmir would not have another martyr.

The interrelated optics – the images



Strip from the comic book *Bal Narendra: Childhood Stories of Narendra* (Rannade Prakashan and Blue Snail Animation, 2014). The book, published in English, features a compilation of Modi's childhood stories.



Sohrab Hura, *Scramble* (detail), 2020. Archival pigment print. 7.5" x 10". Courtesy of the artist.

produced and withheld – surrounding these events are only a small thread pulled from a far denser visual web that has been laid out for us, the Indian and global public, so that we become trapped in it. These image traps are not new; they have existed from the time the first cave drawings were made, which were just traces of a reality that might have been. Gradually, modes of documentation became proactively subjective, not only in what they chose to show but also in what they chose not to. Each choice was meant to usher the viewer into or away from specific readings of the subject. Looking back at both our distant and recent past today enables us to identify more clearly the perspective of that time, to recognize what was told, what was not told, who told it, how it was told, and so on. As Chinua Achebe wrote, citing a proverb: “Until the lions have their historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”³ These image traps of truth and lies are built upon each other, forming webs that in turn come together to create larger systems. Only now, the densities of these webs are almost impossible to completely decipher, at least in real time. The unravelling and re-layering of these image traps becomes a kind of modern warfare in which different protagonists assert their own truth by whatever means they can. What purports to be the truth goes on to have ripple effects on politics, the economy, and society. Think about it. Social-media images made by Palestinians of their children being killed and homes being destroyed have punctured a long-standing and rather convenient geopolitical image of an equal conflict in the Middle East. The echoes of the image of George Floyd on the ground with a police officer’s knee on his neck found resonance here in India even. The mushrooming of that image in different spaces here also made it clear that while upper-caste people in India may have added their voices to the Black Lives Matter movement, we have remained in quiet denial of our own caste privilege, from which we have continued to benefit: a millennium of exclusion, subjugation, and exploitation of other communities right here at home. The selective sharing of images of racial violence from a distant land, paired with a total lack of acknowledgement of the ongoing atrocities against Muslims, Dalits, and other communities at home, betrays the fact that for many of us here, our vulnerability lies only in the *brownness* of our skin.

The people who rule India recognize that images are the most uncontainable vessels of information. These people continuously manipulate the algorithms and meanings around images to produce fear, violence, and hate. They twist context to deflect accountability and

remain in power. This is similar to how we, the governed, constantly mold and remold our own online identities – like how we curate our personal Instagram feeds to “project” ourselves into the larger world of projections, where often how things “look” carries greater weight than how they really are. Think about how such twisting affects movements like #MeToo. A man gets called out for sexual harassment, and soon afterwards, another narrative is put into circulation: *Why did she not say no? Why was she wearing those clothes? Why did she send me/him those contradictory messages?* These questions are meant to scatter the original narrative and wrest power back towards the accused man.

The Indian government recently made the absurd statement that nobody had died from a lack of oxygen during the second wave of Covid. It doesn’t matter that we saw thousands of people pleading for help and queueing up for days to get oxygen cylinders filled for loved ones. It doesn’t matter that we saw news reports of hospitals turning away patients because they had run out of oxygen. It doesn’t matter that hospitals reported that hundreds of patients died because they could not manage to replenish their oxygen supplies. It doesn’t matter that we saw reports with images of the dead floating in rivers in places that did not even have proper medical facilities, let alone oxygen supplies. With the upcoming state elections early next year, this absurd statement that nobody died from a lack of oxygen is going to be repeated often, along with many other lies, until it turns into truth somewhere. And in that repetition, someone somewhere will be led to believe that this government indeed had no role in the loss of these lives during the second wave.

So how do the images (and words) that we create go beyond the spaces in which they came into existence? How can stories cross over from their own bubbles to the other side of a highly polarized world? How can they live, sustain, and even contaminate opposing ideologies – like ink slowly dripping into a glass of water until it turns blue? After all, isn’t this exactly how propaganda has been diffused among the masses by various governments of the past, especially dictatorial ones – in little shifts and triggers and not in explosive events? The parameters of what was considered normal would be quietly stretched out, without us even realizing it. Today these shifts of normalization are seeded in viral images. I am convinced that the photographer today is out of touch with the complete image world. The photographer is still invested too deeply in the baggage of the form and aesthetics of a photograph, and not so much in its many afterimages. The politician, on the other hand, recognizes the larger image system and the

functioning of its architecture. It isn't a coincidence that Modi's usually omnipresent image suddenly disappeared during the dreadful second surge of the Delta variant that we experienced here recently. Now that things seem to have eased a little, he has once again surfaced everywhere, staying true to his algorithm.

I'm often asked, especially by friends and colleagues from Europe, the UK, and the US, where I imagine freedom of expression to still be (well ... freer expression at least). They ask why my photography seems to have been so inconsistent throughout my career, since each work looks different from the others. While my early works were rooted in the documentary, over the years my process has abstracted away into something more metaphorical. The documentary remains part of my method though. It is just no longer always the end goal. In part this syncs with a shift in the sociopolitical environment, as well as anticipating more that is to come. The images in my photobook *The Coast* (2019) were inspired by the kind of visuals that populate social media: broken, fetishistic, violent, tender, beautiful, uncontrolled, voyeuristic, magic, ordinary, doubtful, believable – almost like a snapshot. The book was meant to muddy the waters of what was real and what was not. Doubt was paramount for the book to function. When I first started making the material for the book, I remembered the conspiracy theories I was drawn to as a kid. UFOs, the Loch Ness monster, the Yeti – always common in their unbelievable sightings was that the images presented as evidence were invariably pixelated, grainy, unclear, and broken. No matter how ridiculous the stories around them may have seemed, those imperfect images would always scream blatant truth. And now, decades later, when we have spiraled beyond a point of being oversaturated with images posing as “perfect,” how precious these glitches have become.

Glitches tug at us, draw us closer, whisper to us, manipulate us into believing that they want to share with us their secrets. In today's more fixed, homogenized, and polarized world, where information is meant to be definite and therefore limited, glitches open up fault lines of doubt. These cracks of doubt are the spaces from which we can pull out new layers of understanding. Glitches have this ability to give us a sense of the real in an increasingly fake world made up of images determined by algorithms and patterns. In February 2020, during the New Delhi state elections, Modi's BJP party deployed deepfake technology for the first time. In several videos, the party's chief ministerial candidate, Manoj Tiwari, was seen speaking seamlessly in different languages – a strategy to help campaign to various voting blocks through the

BJP's massive WhatsApp network. When news of the deepfake manipulation broke, the party distanced itself from the technology, claiming its use to have been a “one-off” experiment, while analysts consumed airtime deciphering lip movement and sonic synchronicity.

The last seven or eight years in India have been full of retrospective analysis of the veracity or lack thereof found in an ever-growing landscape of photographs, videos, and other images that populate our political reality. I wonder whether in the future, truth will be located only in the past through examining its glitches. As I write this, I think of my own growing numbness towards images. I also think again of that botched image I made of my hand when I tried to scan myself into the computer some years ago. The wavy disruptions on my fingers made me notice the lines on my hand more clearly. Maybe this field of broken and perfect images also opens up a new range of ways that images might in fact touch us. Maybe this is why, no matter how different my own works look, to me they feel more or less the same. In one photograph I might want to put my arm around the viewer like a friend, in another I might want to take the viewer by the scruff of the neck almost violently. Maybe recognizing codes and algorithms in images is not so different from recognizing the right vocabulary to say the most politically expedient things while in fact being far away from reality. Images are masks, just like the ones you and I wear.

x

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Sohrab Hura is a photographer and filmmaker who uses a journal-like practice to look at personal and political systems. His most recent exhibition, "Spill," is on view at the Huis Marseille Museum for Photography, Amsterdam until December 5, 2021. His curatorial debut, "Static In The Air," is open at Ishara Art Foundation, Dubai until December 9, 2021.

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