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CHAPTER TWO:

Consumerist pleasures, women's empowerment and inclusivity.

The politics of Indian fashion magazines [2]

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on discussions of politics and the political in mainstream English-language Indian fashion and lifestyle magazines for women. The phenomenon of the lifestyle magazine is comparatively new to India. While the history of women's publications in the subcontinent dates back to the colonial times, the majority of contemporary fashion and lifestyle titles – with their coverage of global culture, global and desi (local) fashion trends, and celebration of conspicuous consumption – originated in the post-liberalisation decades, between the mid-1990s and early 2010s (Sandhu, 2015). The liberal economic reforms of the 1990s opened up the Indian market and attracted international investment to India, boosting the growth of India's middle classes, introducing possibilities for conspicuous consumption and consumerist pleasures, and widening opportunities for individual success – mostly, but not exclusively, for the members of these very middle classes (Brosius, 2010). At the same time, having shed the old, post-independence Nehruvian ideals of combatting poverty in favour of new values of personal success and consumption, contemporary India has been

[2] Parts of this chapter are based on Solomatina, I. (2024). Nationalist Politics versus Global Inclusivity: The Case of Indian Fashion Magazines. In Technology, Sustainability and the Fashion Industry (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 253–268). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032658506-16. A portion of this chapter has also been reiterated in Solomatina, I. (2021). The shaping of Indian-ness. Vestoj. Retrieved from https://vestoj.com/the-shaping-of-indian-ness/.

struggling to redefine itself. The right-wing ideology of Hindu nationalism that, growing in popularity since the 1980s, has developed into the ideology of the state, and has come to co-exist with the consumerist aspirations and globalised perspectives of post-liberalisation India, offers one way to define contemporary India – as a Hindu nation (Kinnvall, 2019). At the same time, having shed the old, post-independence Nehruvian ideals of combatting poverty in favour of new values of personal success and consumption, contemporary India has been struggling to redefine itself. The right-wing ideology of Hindu nationalism that, growing in popularity since the 1980s, has developed into the ideology of the state, and has come to co-exist with the consumerist aspirations and globalised perspectives of post-liberalisation India, offers one way to define contemporary India – as a Hindu nation (Kinnvall, 2019). This hybridity of nationalist sentiment and a state-sanctioned orientation towards economic growth has come to determine Indian popular culture today – visible in post-liberalisation advertising (Fernandes, 2000; Mazzarella, 2003), as well as cinema and music (Kumar & H.M., 2016). Mediating between conservative right-wing values, urban consumerism, and globalised discourses about equality and inclusivity, the Indian fashion press, too, participate in articulating and defining behavioural norms in post-liberalisation, 21st century Indian society – especially for women.

This chapter discusses how politics manifests in women's fashion and lifestyle publications. I begin with a brief overview of the history of women's publications in India, from the late 19th through the early 20th century until the present day. The focus of the chapter then shifts towards key political discourses in India's fashion and lifestyle media. First, I address the discourse around women's role in Indian society, as it is constructed in conjuncture with such issues as women's access to public space, women's career success, motherhood and marriage. Then I discuss the magazines' discourse of India, in which India is portrayed contradictorily as a site of progressive change and a realm of tradition. The trope of India as a realm of tradition is discussed in connection to Orientalist rhetoric. Lastly, the chapter turns to the discourse of diversity and inclusion prominent in the lifestyle magazines, and addresses what it manifests and eludes.

2.2 Fashion and lifestyle media in India: A brief history

The contemporary fashion and lifestyle magazine for women in India is a by-product of late modernity and globalisation. The history of women's publications in India, however, goes back to colonial times. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, numerous women's magazines were published across the country in English and in vernacular languages. Some of them were produced by early Indian suffragists, some by colonial educators, and some by Indian reformists. Echoing public discourses on women's role in society, these magazines discussed issues of women's education, women's position as mothers and wives, but also as citizens. Writing about Malayalam women's magazines in early 20th century Kerala, Sruthi Vinayan and Merin Simi Raj describe the scope of the themes that these local, often short-lived publications engaged with:

> set[s] of articles on education and empowerment, short biographical pieces on accomplished women, glimpses into world affairs through "news-in-brief" and "did-you-knows", food recipes, health and beauty tips, short stories, poems and book reviews or notifications of new arrivals in book stores (Raj & Vinayan, 2019: 403).

Similarly, Mytheli Sreenivas writes that late-19th and mid-20th-century women's magazines in the Tamil language advocated women's education and criticised oppressive traditions (Sreenivas, 2003). At the same time, these magazines, which were aimed at middle-class women, were mainly concerned with improving, rather than upending the patriarchal structures, within which women were expected to live. Their content dovetailed with the efforts of the turn-of-the-century Indian nationalists to modernise the roles of the wife and mother in the context of colonial India. Under the colonial British rule, what was referred to as the 'women's question' was always sharply political. The colonial administration used the image of the deprived Indian woman as one of the reasons for its rule over India (Chatterjee, 1989; Metcalf, 2011; Ray, 2000), pledging to improve the situation of women in the country. The women's question was, therefore, also acutely political for early nationalists, who, advocating for India's self-rule, sought to instil ideas of new, modernised Indian femininity, without challenging society's patriarchal

structures. At the time of India's struggle for independence, women's publications questioned and sought to define the modernised identity of the Indian woman. The reformed Indian woman was imagined in communal terms – Gail Minault, for instance, writes about the work of Urdu-language publications' on defining modernised Muslim femininity (Minault, 1998). Still, the pre-independence vernacular media for women largely reflected upper-caste (in the case of Hindu magazines) and middle-class sensibilities (of Hindu and Muslim readers alike).

While these early women's magazines incorporated fashion and beauty into their programme of modernising Indian femininities, their focus was never on fashion and beauty per se. Researchers note that popular lifestyle media in India acquired a more consumerist angle after the independence and partition of the country in the mid-20th century – new popular magazines like *Saritā* catered to the "apolitical" middle-class city dweller (Mandhwani, 2019), which coincided with the growing urbanisation of post-independence Indian society.

Around the same time in the mid-20th century (1959), *Femina*, the oldest English- language magazine for Indian women, was launched. Influenced by the Nehru's commitment to combating poverty, *Femina* adopted a relatable, trusting tone, and offered tips on homemaking, beauty and DIY fashion techniques. The widest circulating women's magazine in India to this day, *Femina*'s readership consists of lower middle and middle-class women, homemakers and mothers (Thapan, 2009). Generally, women's lifestyle publications after independence and during the Nehruvian era promoted the image of the woman as a homemaker, housewife and mother. In her analysis of pre and post-independence covers of Marathi magazines for women, Ashwini Tambe notes that 'the Anglicised notions of glamour used in the 1930s' were increasingly replaced with themes of 'responsibility and gender-role segregation within households' (Tambe, 2020: 3).

Along with English-language women's publications, India has always had magazines in Hindi and vernacular languages, too. One such magazine is *Meri Saheli*, which is published in Hindi, Marathi and English and targets a wide readership consisting of urban and rural women. With a title that translates as 'my friend,' the publication offers cooking, homemaking and relationship advice, largely eschewing fashion and lifestyle topics, but covering film and television celebrities,

which has traditionally been a favourite subject of Indian lifestyle media (Dwyer, 2010). Up to the 1990s, designer fashion and high fashion featured in most Indian publications in the form of celebrity coverage. As Arti Sandhu notes, the lifestyle magazines published in the decades after independence were heavy on articles about Bollywood celebrity style and news (Sandhu, 2015).

The liberalisation reforms of the 1990s reduced state intervention in India's economy, thus boosting economic growth and resulting in an expansion of the middle classes, large-scale urbanisation and the import of a multitude of foreign brands. The country's new-found openness to foreign influence, concomitant globalisation and increased Western investment led to a series of new fashion and lifestyle titles being launched in the country. Mostly managed – or co-managed – by international publishing houses, these publications focus on promoting the consumption of fashion and lifestyle products, conveying cosmopolitan perspectives and adopting global fashion, lifestyle and social discourses. The fashion that these new titles feature combines Western and Indian (or *desi*) trends (Sandhu, 2015), juxtaposing products by Western designers and brands with those produced in India, and featuring Western celebrities side by side with Bollywood stars. Whereas before liberalisation, the West was depicted as a 'space of contamination' (Chatterjee, 1993) in the political and popular rhetoric, the 1990s engendered new more positive and aspirational attitudes towards the West, Western fashions and lifestyle. The newly launched fashion magazines (created and curated based on the image of the Western ones), sought to educate the reader about Western design, culture and fashion history, while striking a balance between the imported and local (or *desi*) trends and products.

By the 2020s, India has grown into a global production powerhouse, home to a multitude of local designer brands, but also an attractive market for international fashion brands, which now compete with homegrown companies for consumers' attention. With its huge population – since April 2023, the world's largest (Hertog, Gerland & Wilmoth, 2023), – India is a thriving consumer market. It is still, however, riddled with economic and political inequality. As the country's right-wing government promotes discriminatory policies that disadvantage minorities, the political challenges to India's democracy multiply.

The most in-depth analysis of the post-liberalisation Indian fashion press to date is by Arti Sandhu (Sandhu, 2015), who focuses on the hybridity of the local and the global in Indian fashion magazines and the methods they employ to negotiate between traditional rules of respectability and global attitudes towards femininity. Sandhu discusses the educational role of the fashion press in explaining and promoting fashion products and trends in a rapidly globalising society where tradition is still important. Sandhu demonstrates how images of modernity and globalisation are domesticated within the magazines through their juxtaposition with symbols of Indianness. What Sandhu's analysis lacks, however, is an inquiry into the meanings behind the symbols of Indianness and the ways in which they connect to the overall socio-political climate in India and the ideology of Hindu nationalism. While Sandhu discusses the dominant ideas concerning appropriate femininity in India, it would also be necessary to comment on the growing impact of right-wing ideology on the ideas of appropriate femininity in a more targeted way.

With its analysis of how the Indian fashion press reflect on the country's politics, issues of minority disenfranchisement and role of women in society against the backdrop of right-wing politics, this chapter seeks to fill some of the existing gaps in the scholarship. The magazines that I have chosen for my analysis are the English- language *Vogue India*, *Elle India* and *Verve*. These magazines represent the three different types of publishing arrangements possible in India. *Vogue India* is part of the global media company Condé Nast, *Elle India* is published by Ogaan Media Private Limted under a licensing agreement with Hearst Magazines,[3] and *Verve* takes pride in being a home-grown luxury magazine. These three magazines have their main offices in Mumbai, and their readerships consist mainly of middle and upper- class urban women.

Monthly magazines *Vogue* and *Elle India* are mostly dedicated to fashion, and the bi- monthly *Verve* positions itself as a lifestyle magazine that covers fashion and – to an equal extent – culture, travel and lifestyle. *Vogue India*'s print edition

[3] Many international magazines in India operate under licensing agreements; *Marie Claire*'s India edition, for instance, is published under a licensing agreement between Hearst Magazines and the Indian publishing house The Outlook Group.

has an estimated readership of more than 100,000 readers, with about six million readers for its web edition (Media Kit Vogue India, 2024), *Elle India*'s readership is estimated to be slightly under 100,000 readers for its print edition and over a million readers for its digital assets (Elle India Media Kit, 2018). Readership numbers for *Verve* are not readily available but it is safe to assume that the absolute majority of the three magazines' readers are middle-class and live in India's big cities.

The chapter draws on an analysis of texts and images in both the online and print editions of these three magazines published between September 2019 and December 2020. The chapter consists of two main parts: the first discusses each magazine's stance on women's role in society; the second focuses on the inclusivity discourses in the magazines in connection with the politics of the BJP and the ideology of Hindu nationalism and in relation to the disenfranchisement of minorities in India.

2.3 The role of women in Indian society: Through the prism of lifestyle media

Women's role in Indian society: Access to public space and work

Even though the 1949 Constitution of India nominally granted equal rights to men and women, and although feminism in India has developed into a full-fledged and dynamic movement, women's role in Indian society remains contested, exposing disparities along caste, class and religious lines, as well as contradictions between the cultural impacts of globalisation and state politics. The ruling right-wing BJP party embraces and promotes the image of women as preservers of tradition, homemakers, virtuous daughters, wives and mothers, or chaste goddesses to be revered. Similarly, in the mainstream post-liberalisation culture, this idealised role of women as homemakers and housewives is still seen as a desirable norm. Smitha Radhakrishnan's research on women IT professionals demonstrates how, in the early 2000s, despite good education and excellent career prospects, professional women still see homemaking as a priority and consider leaving their jobs when they become mothers (Radhakrishnan, 2008, pp. 7–20). More recent

data on women's employment also shows that, despite rising levels of education among women, their participation in the labour market is curbed both by cultural factors, such as norms restricting their mobility, and structural factors, such as the lack of appropriate job opportunities for educated women (Chatterjee, Desai & Vanneman, 2018). Women who venture into politics or achieve career success, often face gender-based discrimination and criticism. Thus, during the 2021 West Bengal Assembly election, opposition politician Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, received multiple reminders from BJP members that, as a woman, she should keep to the kitchen instead of engaging in politics (Shanti, 2021).

In contemporary discourses on women's role in Indian society, their respectability has played a major role. The issue of women's respectability is prominent in discussions on women's access to public spaces and the professional sphere as well as their role within the family. Women's access to the public space, which has been a salient issue in feminist studies (Currans, 2017), continues to be fiercely contested in India's socio-political discourse. In her research on women's presence in the public space in India, Shilpa Phadke argues that, for women, being outside the domestic realm on their own and without obvious purpose is associated with reputational risks (Phadke, 2013, pp. 54–7). Similarly, Indian mainstream conservative right-wing politicians and media often refer to the potential risks that women face by simply venturing outside and navigating public spaces alone, arguing that the figure of a woman in a public space warrants scrutiny (Sen, 2019). Over the past few years, Indian politicians have offered their views on women's safety in the streets by advising women tourists to avoid wearing skirts, blaming rape on Westernisation and women's inappropriate behaviour, and recommending that women do not go out after dark (Pandey, 2016). In a similar vein, right-wing politicians have disparaged women's public protests, belittling them as acts of attention-seeking (News18, 2021). Notoriously, conservative Indian politicians have been known to shame women who have been sexually assaulted in the streets, blaming them for transgressing the rules of appropriateness by appearing in public without a male family member, dressing 'provocatively,' smoking or drinking, attracting men's attention, or retaliating when verbally or physically harassed – i.e. behaving in an 'unfeminine' way (Saxena, 2016). Phadke emphasises

that in conservative discourses, women's reputations appear to hold more value than women's rights.

The mainstream rhetoric about women's appropriate behaviour at home and in public, employed by right-wing politicians and media, tends to echo the colonial-era ideas about respectable, 'desirable' and 'undesirable' femininity, shaped by the discourse co-constructed by the colonial administration and nationalist reformers of the 19th and 20th century (Ray, 2021, pp. 39–57). In his seminal essay on colonial femininity, Partha Chatterjee says that the so-called 'women's question' became one of the principal matters for the colonial administration as it sought to position itself as the 'rescuer' of Indian women, whom the colonial scholarship portrayed as 'oppressed' by tradition and a 'backward' society (Chatterjee, 1993). In a response to the colonial discourse, Indian reformers of the 19th and early 20th century promoted partial change in the position of women in India (campaigning, for instance, for women to be allowed an education and for widows to be able to remarry), while also praising the spirituality of Indian women and assigning them the role of preservers of Indian tradition. The reformers tasked Indian women with guarding the inner sanctuary of the home from the contaminating influence of the West. Paradoxically, although they championed the Indian tradition, the reformers' ideas of enlightened femininity were strongly influenced by Victorian views on gender appropriateness. The efforts of Indian male reformers were aimed towards recasting women as sufficiently modern and educated wives for Western-educated and forward-thinking modern Indian men. While men were expected to operate outside the domestic realm – be involved in politics, work within the colonial administration, navigate the public space independently – women's exposure to social life, politics, education and employment was limited (Forbes, 1996). This selective modernisation of home, family and women's education led to the disappearance of the ties and connections that had traditionally existed between women of different classes and castes, stigmatising some forms of women's work that were now considered 'immoral' (such as dancing or performing) and stricter regulation of women's presence in public spaces (Sangari & Vaid, 1989). Durba Mitra offers insight into how colonial sociology worked to pathologise the figure of the unmarried, free-moving Indian woman as embodying 'excessive' and 'deviant' sexuality, leading to the intensification of surveillance and control over

women's movements and behaviour in public (Mitra, 2020). More than a century later, India's right-wing government has been engaging in the reinvention of the Hindu tradition and in the process has largely adopted the views of early Hindu nationalists on womanhood and women's role in the society.

However, while women's presence in some public spaces might be seen as 'undesirable,' in others, it is considered a sign of modernity (Tanusree, 2017) – women in shopping malls, boutiques, restaurants and other venues of consumption are tolerated by conservatives and nationalists, as they symbolise India's progressiveness and modernity without contradicting conservative ideas about women's appropriate behaviour. Shilpa Ranade argues that 'having a purpose' justifies women's access to public spaces – as opposed to pointless 'loitering,' which remains the prerogative of men –, and shopping, an activity both acceptably feminine and modern, legitimises a woman's presence in a public space (Ranade, 2007). Ranade suggests that the contrast between men's 'pointless' presence and women's 'purposeful' moving shapes a 'hegemonic' space, of which women are uneasy users.

The majority of public spaces featured in lifestyle magazines are places of consumption, which can be classified as semi-public or not-quite-public: these are restaurants, cafes, shopping venues, museums, galleries and gyms. To access them and belong in them, women need to have certain cultural, social and financial capital – as Shilpa Phadke notes, they facilitate a visible consumption of 'modernity' for women who have the financial means to do so (Phadke, 2013). Access to venues of consumption offers limited possibilities for political empowerment – women may find pleasure and gratification in visiting shopping venues and semi-public spaces while adhering to conservative ideas of gender appropriateness and gender roles (Radhakrishnan, 2008). In featuring semi-public places of consumption, magazines barely question the gendered norms of access to public space in Indian society, nor do they interrogate notions of appropriate feminine behaviour and gendered safety in an urban setting.

Such places, associated with the desirable presence of women, are associated with class and caste privilege, India's post-liberalisation encouragement of consumption, and partial and uneven acceptance of globalisation. In her research on contemporary, women-centred and women-driven comedy, Radhika

Parameswaran (Parameswaran, 2019) indicates that transgression of gender-appropriate and caste-appropriate spatiality is partially allowed for middle-class and upper middle-class privileged and upwardly mobile women. Parameswaran's analysis of the 2016 comedy drama Ladies' Room underscores the ambiguous and liminal position that young urban women occupy in post-liberalisation India, caught between what is perceived as the empowering change introduced by globalisation and encroaching traditionalism of Hindu fundamentalism. Women are encouraged to pursue careers, but within restrictive patriarchal structures; ostensibly free to have extra-marital relationships, women have to contend with judgement within society and institutions; and while they have access to spaces of consumption, entertainment and leisure, their presence there signals both privilege and subversion. In what follows, I discuss how the discourse of women's role in Indian society is negotiated in fashion and lifestyle media – through addressing women's access to public space, their career and their role at home and in the family.

Women and public spaces in lifestyle magazines

Shilpa Phadke argues that in order to challenge conservative ideas about gender appropriateness, women need to actively circumvent the stereotypes perpetuated in society (Phadke, 2020). To normalise the presence of women in the public space, women need to assert their right to move in public spaces without a visible purpose or justification. This is why, for the purpose of my research, it is interesting to focus on the instances in which the magazines feature women outside the semi-public spaces of consumption and thus contribute to normalising the presence of women in public places.

The April–May 2020 issue of *Verve* features an extensive commentary on women who cycle (Dasgupta, 2020, pp. 230–2), focusing on a community of women cyclists in Bengaluru. It presents cycling as an environmentally friendly mode of transportation, but acknowledges that cycling is considered an atypical and even questionable activity for women in India:

> Some of the challenges for female cyclists are the same as those for men.

> Motorists rarely treat cyclists with respect, and, with roads designed specifically to accommodate more cars, cycling in big cities can be intimidating. But as women in India, our perception of safety is further heightened: we're used to hearing about how we shouldn't walk alone on the streets, how we shouldn't be out after a certain time in the evening, or how we shouldn't do things that would attract men to us. This extends to cycling. But what if a woman wants to be environmentally conscious and ride a bike to work? What if a woman wants to reduce petrol bills and have more financial bandwidth? (Dasgupta, 2020 p. 231).

Here, the article asserts that gendered perceptions about what women are and are not supposed to be doing in the public space present as big an obstacle for women cyclists as inadequate infrastructure. Still, the article is encouraging women to cycle, as the rhetorical questions in the quote above outline the advantages of the sport. The encouraging tone of the text is also expressed in the use of the 'we' pronoun in reference to women, appealing to the relatability of the experience. A sequence of things that 'we' as women are used to hearing creates an impression of repetitiveness and the mundane nature of restrictions and prohibitions imposed on women. Cycling, at the same time, is established as a way to establish independence and make political choices. The pronouns 'we' and 'us' also hint at the existence of a bigger community of women cyclists, which is emphasised by including personal accounts from women cyclists, who share their experiences:

> But wherever your calling lies, whether on the road or on a forest trail, go out and ride your cycle. "Men occupy so much room in our public spaces, but please don't let it stop you from being fiscally and environmentally conscious," Saraf [one of the women cyclists interviewed for the feature] pleads. "If you feel cycling is ticking all the boxes — you're saving money, you're taking care of your health, you're being kinder to the earth — then I say, please go do it. Don't let your gender come in the way" (Dasgupta, 2020, p. 232).

The imperative verbs in the quote above ('go out and ride your cycle') seem to have a political implication, suggesting that, in order to overcome the pervasive monitoring in the public space, women need to actively and consciously reclaim public spaces. Cycling is presented as empowering, as it gives women access to more spaces, opportunities and freedom: 'cycling allowed me to move around the city independently, away from my parents' watchful eyes,' writes the author of the article.

The photographs which accompany the piece portray women on or next to their bikes and clad in sportsgear – women are photographed outside the city, on empty country roads, with few or no people in sight. These images raise the question of whether, in order to feel free from the watchful gaze of men or family, women need to leave the city. At the same time, they suggest the sense of freedom that cycling promises.

Cycling is contextualised within India's socio-economic conditions:

> Studies suggest, that for a large part of the populations based in big Indian cities, and particularly for those from economically weaker backgrounds, cycling (and walking) continues to be the more affordable choice of transport. Even then, more men cycle to work than women; the latter prefer to walk. This, researchers say, is partly because of both — women's concern for their safety as well as lower ownership of cycles among them. For those who do have higher incomes, motor vehicles are now more affordable and preferable. (Dasgupta, 2020, p. 231).

Image quote: Verve April-May 2020, 'Along for the ride,'
photo by Krishna Kumar.

Notably, the article hints at the class identities of the women cyclists, situating them in the middle-class, progressive milieu – among the women interviewed for the article there are an environmental journalist, a financial analyst and a researcher. Cycling is thus established as a choice of environmentally conscious, progressive middle-class women, as the article separates the women interviewed for the piece from 'economically weaker backgrounds' as well as 'those…[with] higher incomes' describing cycling as a feminist, progressive, empowered choice and a sign of forward-thinking and progressive change.

Vogue India, too, presents cycling as empowering for women. The magazine's November 2020 issue was dedicated to 'Vogue's Women of the Year.' These are largely Indian women living in the subcontinent and abroad but a few of them talk about cycling as positive and empowering. Among them are Richa Shrivastava Chhabra, 'the woman who helped design a million face coverings for India's essential workers' during the pandemic (Salukhne, 2020, p. 143), Dr Kamala Rammohan, 'professor of pulmonary medicine at Governmemt Medical College, Thiruvanathapuram' (Rajan, 2020b, p. 142), and Dr Gita Gopinath, 'the first female chief economist at the International Monetary Fund' (Singaporia, 2020, n.p.). For Dr. Rammohan, 'Cycling and comic books (from *Asterix* to *Amar Chitra Katha*) have been her stress-busters. While commuting or cooking, her playlist keeps her company' (Rajan, 2020, p. 142). In discussing the benefits of cycling, *Vogue*, too, positions this activity in an upper middle-class milieu, associating it with professional, successful women. It does not, however, discuss the socio-cultural aspects of cycling or address the challenges of navigating the streets by bike – instead, it focuses on women's empowerment, portraying women cyclists as 'can-do' types, who can rise to a professional challenge and are in the control of their lives – an impression emphasised by the vivacious and nonchalant tone of the articles.

Similarly, another issue of *Verve* publishes a feature on women pursuing outdoor sports (Desai, 2020, pp. 172–5). Titled 'Two-track minds,' it covers three professional women who are also successful athletes and celebrates 'women's impressive stamina to push their bodies for high-intensity outdoor sports while maintaining a 9-to-5 schedule.' Again, the article focuses on middle-class women, who 'have managed to strike the fine balance between chasing the highs of endurance sports and pursuing a full-time career,' but does not address the gender and class-related implications of pursuing an outdoor sport. Instead, the article adopts an upbeat, celebratory tone, focusing on the narrative of success and suggesting that public spaces – in and outside India – are open and accessible for the three women: 'After finding success in India, it was a natural progression for the three sportswomen to challenge themselves abroad. And alongside the competitions came the chance to explore new destinations.' The language of the piece foregrounds the impression of speed, challenge, achievement and self-reliance – women 'push their bodies,' 'chase the highs of endurance sports' and 'pursue careers.'

Women in the workspace

In the aforementioned November 2020 issue of *Vogue*, which focuses on professionally successful women, the inclusion of cycling is particularly interesting, as the women who cycle are also presented as accomplished and independent – they navigate spaces of authority that have historically been less accessible to women: the higher echelons of politics, business, finance, science, art and culture. Notably, the issue features, among others, KK Shailaja, a popular politician from India's Communist Party and former Health Minister of Kerala; Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, India's richest businesswoman; Indya Moore, a successful non-binary actor; and Megha Majumdar, the author of *Burning*, an acclaimed novel with a pronounced anti- right wing position. These profiles present women as strong, decisive, resilient, hard- working and entrepreneurial, capable of assuming control of their mobility – in the public space as well as up the career ladder.

One profile from this issue of *Vogue*, of the actress Vidya Balan, reads:

> That's the thing about Vidya Balan and her character choices – she doesn't play them, she is them. And they are a force of nature to reckon with much like the woman herself.... 'I live my dream every day,' Balan says, her voice ringing through my phone – strong, soft, self-assured – from her Mumbai home to mine. 'I've been drawn to acting since the age of eight. I'm glad it worked out for me.' As she talks about her craft, this prodigious performer, a Padma Shri and National Film Award winner, is more Alice-in-Wonderland (curious and yearning for excitement) than established hall-of-famer (Mankani, 2020, n.p.)

Vidya Balan's profile frames the actor's story as a journey towards success, paved by talent, hard work and self-belief. The profile offers an insight into Balan's past, plagued by body shame and a lack of confidence:

> The journey to becoming the woman who plays by her own rules today came with its own set of teenage drama. "I was a shy, introverted girl because I was fat. I wanted to be invisible. By the end of my teenage years, I lost weight by gymming" (Mankani, 2020, n.p.).

It then goes on to highlight her strength and authenticity as the key to her success ('it's her realness that has trumped preset beauty and fashion standards';

'a body positivity champion just by being herself'; 'for Balan, the easiest thing to be is yourself'). The tone of the profile is enthusiastic and laudatory (Balan is referred to as a 'prodigious performer' and a 'force to reckon with'), and the author's description of Balan's voice focuses on her confidence, but also feminine softness – 'strong, soft, self-assured' –, evoking the post-feminist ideal of an assured, accomplished and conventionally feminine woman (McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2017).

The profile of the economist Gita Gopinath similarly draws on postfeminist and neoliberal-feminist (Rottenberg, 2017) discourses of success, emphasising her exceptional talent, strength and hard-working nature. It portrays her as a woman who skilfully juggles family responsibility and career challenges: 'she's squeezed our conversation into the early hours of her busy morning, between her 17-year-old son Rohil's first day of school as a senior and her first Vogue cover photo shoot' (Singaporia, 2020, n. p.). The profile catalogues Gopinath's accomplishments and accolades: 'a feminist icon today, Gopinath is living her dream – she is the first woman of Indian origin to be granted tenure at Harvard University's renowned economic department, and the first female chief economist at the IMF.' Here, Gopinath's personal career achievements are presented as traits of a feminist icon, evoking Catherine Rottenberg's discussion of neoliberal feminism's celebration of individual growth as a sign of women's advancement in society (Rottenberg, 2014; Rottenberg, 2017). The profile combines neoliberal feminist (Rottenberg, 2017) praise of Gopinath's achievements with a marked emphasis on her Indianness:

> The last thing you expect to be discussing with one of the world's leading economists is fashion accessories. But Gita Gopinath is telling me why the traditional Indian jhumka (IS: earrings) has been her faithful companion, be it when she's heading court at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, schooling Trevor Noah on The Daily Social Distancing Show in the Great Lockdown and what this means for our global economic future, or as she Zooms in from her home in Boston through my screen. 'I'm just one of those people that if something works and I like it, I stick with it,' she says animatedly, her jhumkas almost nodding in agreement. But from earrings to life goals, the one thing Gopinath does with ferocious intensity is stick to being who she is, owning her agency completely (Singaporia, 2020).

Serving as an introduction to the profile, this paragraph praises both Gopinath's many commitments and her authenticity, expressed through her dedication to 'the

traditional Indian jhumka.' The cover of the magazine portrays Gopinath looking determined and staring directly into the camera, unsmiling, her hair caught in the wind. Her jhumka is not visible, but her gray coat, cinched with a belt, makes for a look suggestive of military discipline. While the cover photo invites an association with a free-thinking visionary in the tradition of Romanticism, the article alludes to the neoliberal feminist celebration of self-reliance as Gopinath is said to 'own her values' and 'own her agency completely.' 'Living a dream,' in Gita Gopinath's profile, is portrayed as being a tremendously successful professional, who remains true to family values and preserves a connection with the Indian culture.

Image quote: Vogue India November 2020, photo by John Huet.

The same issue of *Vogue* contains a profile of KK Shailaja, Kerala's former Health Minister, whose actions proved highly efficient during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. While celebratory of Shailaja, the profile affords a rare (for this magazine) critique of the Indian government's response. Shailaja is described as one in 'a handful of women leaders who responded accurately to the crisis.' The article also represents the politician as the centre of her family because of her more challenging career: '[Shailaja's] family has created a routine around her wayward work hours' (Rajan 2020a, p. 137).

Representations of women in *Vogue* and *Elle* engender celebration and praise of strength, resilience and success, and normally have an upbeat and enthusiastic tone, presenting 'positive' developments in women's lives and careers, with a focus on upper-class and upper middle-class women. Such accounts of feminist empowerment are aligned with popular feminist and post-feminist representations of achievement and success, and rarely make mention of unpleasant or adverse

developments, let alone failure.

At the same time, when the magazines let their vocabulary of popular feminist empowerment and neoliberal positivity slip (Binkley, 2014; Gill & Kanai, 2022), these lapses expose a devastating imbalance of power in Indian society and the ubiquity of gendered obstacles that stop women from achieving success. Thus, *Vogue India*'s October 2019 issue includes a feature titled 'Enough is enough', narrating the story of #MeToo in Malayalam cinema and the establishment of the lobby group Women in Cinema Collective that represents the interests of women actresses in the regional industry. The creation of the group was spurred by a sickening incident – a male film star had hired a hitman to abuse and rape his colleague on camera, with the footage subsequently picked up by local broadcasters. While the article applauds the women's initiative, it admits that the actress that had been abused had been dropped by brands she had previously been an ambassador for and had not appeared in any new films – her male abuser, however, had not only escaped imprisonment, but also continued to be cast for roles:

> In fact, the men who run the Malayalam film industry have a history of casting out people they disagree with. The sexism and gender discrimination of this group is really only an extension of social norms in the region. Kerala is not a matriarchy, as we so conveniently misrepresent our history. Domestic violence targeted at women is rampant; though women are highly educated, the unemployment rate among them is higher than for men; income disparity is blatant; and tellingly, there are few women in positions of power. When I met WCC members last year, my first question was about the repercussions to their careers. 'There is no going back to the way it was,' was the unified response (Rajan, 2019, n.p.).

The article takes an unsentimental and direct approach to the rampant sexism in India's film industry. It diverges from the magazine's usual upbeat tone in favour of a simple and straightforward (and therefore more horrifying) account of the crime that preceded the foundation of WCC (Women's Cinema Collective) and its feminist campaigning, as well as the challenges that women face in the Malayalam film industry and Kerala more broadly. Here, the language of empowerment, characteristic of popular feminist discourses, and narratives of success (which are explored and critiqued in more depth in the fourth chapter of this work) become invalid in the face of grim reality, where women's agency and success continues to be kept in check and restricted by dominant patriarchal

norms, the oppressiveness of which is emphasised through a brisk and intense description of women's position in Kerala's society: 'domestic violence is rampant… income disparity is blatant.' This refusal to portray the issue in a sentimental way allows the feature to capture the political urgency of the matter at hand, but also to soberly assess the realities of women's careers in cinema.

Women's role at home and in the family

Just as the magazines address women's access to public spaces and the professional sphere in post-liberalisation India, equally, the portrayal of domestic spaces in fashion and lifestyle magazines attempt to renegotiate the traditional representation of home and family as the space of duty for women (Ray, 2021). *Vogue*, *Verve* and *Elle India* all favour the genre of 'home visits' – short online features or long-read print articles about celebrities' homes. One issue of *Elle India*, for instance, features the home of Priyanka Raja (Ray, 2019, p. 74), *Vogue India* focuses on the home of Mindy Kaling (Basu, 2020, p. 121), and an issue of *Verve* takes the reader into the home of Sonia Singh, editorial director of TV channel NDTV (Jahagirdar-Saxena, 2020, p. 98). These articles tend to emphasise the personal pleasure that women take in being at home, decorating their homes and 'unwinding' at home. Thus, in *Verve*, Sonia Singh is photographed as she lounges on a sofa, surrounded by art pieces, wearing loose- fitting satin trousers, an airy blouse and smart high-heeled shoes, her hair impeccably styled. Notably, she and the other women featured by the magazines are not portrayed as homemakers or housewives, but as working women – it is their professional achievements that awaken editors' and journalists' interest in their homes in the first place. The absolute majority of the women whose homes the magazines choose to feature live in what Gyanendra Pandey calls 'idealised, monogamous, conjugal marriages' – which are mainly Hindu and always heteronormative (Pandey, 2020, p. 406). These women might be trailblazers in their careers, but their portrayal hardly challenges the dominant normative image of a Hindu, upper middle-class woman, wives and mothers.

Vogue's January 2021 issue, with its focus on maternity provides an example of the magazine' discourse on motherhood, which draws on the rhetoric of popular

feminism but avoids questioning women's role in society. The issue aims to reframe pregnancy for modern times – as being compatible with work and career, fitness and a dynamic lifestyle. It also presents it as a time of heightened aesthetic vigilance (Dosekun, 2021), during which women need to adjust how they dress and take care of themselves in accordance with the exigencies of contemporary womanhood.

> A modern maternity wardrobe should stay true to style but also work for your life and the times we live in. Take inspiration from these five stylish mammas who embraced the challenge of dressing up their bump.
>
> The latest trend in maternity wear? Clothes that last well beyond the third trimester. The notion of swapping your entire wardrobe for shapeless sack dresses is a concept as dated as air-kissing (Dalamal, 2021, p. 42).

This short passage establishes that contemporary women do not have to compromise on their style, unlike previous generations of women, or, indeed, on their dynamic lifestyle, as implied by 'the times we live in.'

Similarly, another article recommends maintaining a regime of regular workouts during pregnancy:

> The sad truth among a lot of women is that pregnancy often works as a get-out-of-gym card. And the falsehood that exercising during pregnancy is a bad idea works like an overblown superstition. 'Walk, run, dance, lift weights, do yoga, Pilates – modify and adjust. Scout a good trainer who knows how to work with pregnant students and you will feel more safe and fearless,' says Tanvi Mehra Mangalorkar, yoga teacher and dancer, and founder of fitness space Tangerine Art Studio in Mumbai (Som, 2021, p. 60).

In both of the examples above, modern pregnancy is portrayed as a site where dated stereotypes are challenged and rejected, but also as a site of labour and consumption. The second excerpt is replete with affective characterisations of past attitudes to pregnancy – 'falsehood,' 'overblown superstition' or 'sad truth,' encouraging the reader to embrace a new, contemporary and dynamic way of being pregnant. Pregnancy is situated within the industry and infrastructure of aspirational fitness spaces, complete with trainers and yoga teachers. Pregnancy is also described as a distinctly upper or middle-class experience, which demands

a fashionable wardrobe or a 'good trainer' for workouts. It thus becomes a site of aesthetic labour (Elias, Gill & Scharff, 2017), as it requires optimisation, adjustment and work on the self.

In its discourse on motherhood, the magazine claims to present a modernised and empowering idea of pregnancy and maternity, emphasising its new 'honest' take on motherhood:

> Motherhood has been glorified into an unattainable ideal of superwoman martyrdom for far too long. But women today are shedding the trappings and guilt, and rewriting the narrative into a more honest, complex and diverse take on what it really means to be a mother today (Som, 2021, 61).

That said, the maternity issue does make one mention of postpartum depression and describes the challenging experience of parents whose child has Down syndrome; the overwhelming mood, however, is that of joy, from references to newborns as 'bundles of joy' to the many representations of happy mothers – selfies and portraits of smiling pregnant women and mothers with children populate the pages. Amidst these celebrations of maternity, certain perspectives are conspicuous by their absence – first, the absence of queer couples with children, and, second, the absence of women who are, for whatever reason, *not* mothers. The magazine does not offer or elaborate on the option of not becoming a mother. However reformed, modernised and nuanced the takes on motherhood are, they do not attempt to deconstruct the idea of a family as a heterosexual union that procreates.

Whereas claims of change and progress are omnipresent in *Vogue* and *Elle India*, showing current time and contemporary India as better and more tolerant, this take evokes the cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) of neoliberal discourses on change. *Verve India* appears to complicate the discourse about positive change as it explores women's traditional duties at home. An article called 'Guilty Pleasures' written by Sohini Chattopadhyay examines Indian cinema and popular culture for examples of women relishing their food (Chattopadhyay, 2020, pp. 26–9). Noting that such examples are rare, the article dwells on the misogynist implications of the custom that requires women to eat only after their entire family has done so, which, as the article goes on to state, contributes to malnutrition among women

and girls in India. Looking into the darker, coercive side of domesticity, the article also steps outside the normative middle and upper-class domain by referring to a custom that disproportionately affects women of lower classes. It also offers an insight into the broader scope of persistent structural difficulties that hinder women's success – such as class-based and caste-based obstacles, which are seldom discussed in detail in Indian fashion publications with middle-class audiences.

However, while the magazines may downplay the burden of the woman's domestic duties as a housewife, wife and mother, they celebrate consumption labour as an aspect of domesticity, highlighting desirable and seductive commodities at home. The genre of home visits offers magazines an opportunity to showcase celebrities' wardrobes and bathroom shelves, interrogate them on their favourite beauty products, decoration and design pieces. While representations of home emphasise notions of pleasure and enjoyment, they also transform domesticity into a commodified sphere, where pleasure is achieved through knowledgeable, informed and sophisticated consumption of beauty and design products. This combination of commodification and pleasure is in keeping with the genre of the fashion magazine, which has always sought to link consumption to enjoyment (see Arnold, 2008 for some examples). It also sustains post-feminist (Gill, 2017) and popular feminist (Banet-Weiser, 2018) ideas that contemporary femininity is visible, fashionable and aspirational.

The fashion magazines' tendency towards positivity and fantasy hinder their political engagement, which would require embracing the complexity of national and global socio-cultural realities. The magazines' penchant for the fantastical and spectacular is also evident in their presentations of India, which, drawing on Orientalist stereotypes and imagery, accord with the Hindu nationalist ideology of the state. The next section delves into the issue of the magazines' self-Orientalism, discussing its relationship with the ideology of the state, also addressing the issue of the Hindu nationalist politics and discourses around diversity and inclusion presented by the magazines.

2.4 Orientalism, Hindu nationalism, globalisation

Fashion magazines and self-Orientalism

A fashion editorial from *Vogue India*'s January 2020 issue, which shows singer Katy Perry photographed in Mumbai (Vogue India, January 2020, pp. 172–183) presents the city in its full grandeur, with its distinctive Victorian monuments featured prominently in the bright afternoon sun. As Perry steps out in clothes made by Indian designers, accessorised with chunky jewellery, the distinctive arc of the Gate of India and the foreboding Central Station hover in the background. Along with Mumbai's architectural sites, the photoshoot includes images of the city's inhabitants: a street vendor, a few passers-by, motorcyclists, a group of children dressed in eclectic costumes, and women performers in traditional clothes.

The street vendor and motorcyclists appear as part of the background, mere props in the urban landscape, bringing to mind Christopher Pinney's writings on

The editorial, featuring Katy Perry, in *Vogue India* January 2020, photographed by Greg Swales. Photograph of the magazine's centrefold by the author.

how photography in colonial India indexes social groups (Pinney, 2015) and Linda Nochlin's discussion of Orientalist imagery (Nochlin, 1991). Here in *Vogue India*, we see a street vendor peeking into the camera and a group of motorcyclists captured as they wait at a traffic light. The camera seems to have caught them by surprise, their postures awkward and unrehearsed in contrast with Perry's carefully staged poses. The mood of the editorial, with its saturated colours, spectacularly shot landmarks and photos of women performers in traditional costumes, evokes the 'Incredible India' branding campaign in that it 'presents marketable, generic locations and experiences, but is simultaneously characterised by Orientalist representations,' as noted by Edwards and Ramamurthy (Edwards & Ramamurthy, 2016, p. 325). The 'Incredible India' tourism campaign, launched by India's government in 2002 and promoted ever since, enhances the image of India as a land of spirituality, exotic customs and ethereal beauty. In *Vogue*'s editorial, reference to India's spirituality is channelled through a portrait of Perry (the cover photo for

The editorial, featuring Katy Perry, in Vogue India January 2020, photographed by Greg Swales. Photograph of the magazine's centrefold by the author.

the issue) that captures the singer with her head covered, gaze turned upwards, and an expression of reverence and bewilderment on her face. The accompanying feature, based on an interview conducted 'at Botticino, the Italian restaurant at Bandra Kurla, Mumbai,' delves into Perry's obsession with meditation (dubbed by the author as 'the Hindu practice repackaged by David Lynch' (Mahindru, 2020, p. 176) – a description that implies the global popularity of the religious, markedly, Hindu custom) and her 'infectious positivity.'

The editorial for the feature epitomises the ambivalence with which magazines approach the intersection of the global, local and national. The magazines (especially the international titles *Elle* and *Vogue*) cover a melange of international and local topics, highlighting foreign and Indian brands, trends and celebrities. However, in portraying the entanglement of the global and the local, at times, they risk reiterating Orientalist stereotypes. For instance, *Elle India*'s November issue has interviews with designers Christian Louboutin and Jean-Charles Castelbajac, where each speaks about his impressions of India. While Louboutin, in an interview titled 'Orient express,' cites the bright colours of India as his inspiration (Iyer, 2019, p. 54), Castelbajac is said to have 'discovered Dharavi [India's largest slum] and fallen in love with the chaos that defines this country' (Sinha, 2019, p. 70). Such representations repeat themes from Orientalist discourses on India, focusing on spirituality, chaos, saturation of colour and sound, and ignoring its socio-political reality. Such portrayals emphasise the image of India as a place of strangeness, which is available to those working in the Western creative industries, visitors who are entitled to use the country's exoticism as a source of inspiration or surprise. Western designers and Katy Perry are shown as visitors navigating India's 'loudness,' 'chaos' and 'brightness' for pleasure and enjoyment, evoking Wendy Brown's observation on 'organicist' (non-Western) and 'liberal' (Western) cultures:

> For the organicist creature, considered to lack rationality and will, culture and religion (culture as religion, and religion as culture – equations that work only for this creature) are saturating and authoritative; for the liberal one, in contrast, culture and religion become 'background,' can be 'entered 'and 'exited,' and are thus rendered extrinsic to rather than constitutive of the subject (Brown, 2006: 153).

At the same time, this conflation of (self-)Orientalism, global openness and the specifically Hindu brand of Indian spirituality are characteristic of post-liberalisation India, where stereotypes about Indian culture are mobilised by advertisers to create compelling and memorable representations of the country that avoid challenging the ignorant and simplified ideas about it that prevail in the West (for some examples, see Fernandes, 2006; Mazzarella, 2003).

The discourse on sustainability offers an illuminating example of how the (self-) Orientalising gaze, neoliberal entrepreneurial approach and nationalist discourse have become interconnected. Here, I am inserting the self in '(self-)Orientalising' in brackets in order to acknowledge the gap between different communities in India, as well as the continuing discrimination against indigenous and tribal people, whose cultures continue to exist on the margins of the dominant Brahmanic Hindu tradition. Particularly noticeable in *Vogue*, the sustainability discourse includes references to India's exceptional craftsmanship, which is a source of national pride and global acclaim, but also depictions of artisans as bearers of an unchanging and ancient art that can only be updated or modified through the interference of an entrepreneur or designer. Indeed, the promotion of craftspeople's communities by fashion designers and entrepreneurs is a recurring trope in *Vogue India*. 'Our karigars (artisans) are one of the pillars of our brand, just as artists are the pillars of the rich legacy of India. We do believe it is our utmost responsibility to support, sustain and celebrate them now more than ever,' says the founder of the Chankaya School of Embroidery in an interview (Gupta, 2020a). 'We saw the urgent need to raise the industry's attention to the plight of the Indian karigar. It's known that decades of craft and textile heritage in the country has ensured we have some of the most skilled craftspeople in the world' (Vaidya, 2020), reads the publication's piece on the impact of the pandemic on craftspeople. Elsewhere, the brands Paro and Bloni are praised for their work to sustain craftsmanship and help artisan communities:

> The power of handmade clothing, backed with centuries of craftsmanship is unparalleled. Paro, a sister brand from the house of Good Earth, celebrated this very craft and heritage with a focus on nature in their collection of luxury beauty products, homeware, jewellery, linen and apparel. [...] At Bloni, Akshat Bansal is unafraid to break the norms of fashion and design, yet maintain ethical code via hand processes and regenerated materials. This year, the NIFT and Central Saint Martins-trained designer has forayed into urban menswear, expanding his audience. The Hisar-based flagship store opened doors with an intention to revive craft and celebrate artisans, with the launch collection of tailored jackets, kurtas, bandhgalas, sherwanis and shirts (Gupta, 2020 b).

In all of these examples, craftsmanship is presented as an object of India's national pride and part of its 'rich legacy' and, at the same time, the artisans, 'karigaris,' are continuously portrayed as endangered communities, plagued by poverty and lack of education, a situation which established fashion designers are either called upon to rectify or lauded for improving. According to the articles, designers are dynamic innovators, able to promote and modernise crafts that are steeped in tradition.

A feature in *Vogue*'s September 2020 issue, entitled 'Weaving a legacy' relays the story of the label Tantuvi that reinterprets traditional weaving in a fresh and commercially successful way:

> Started in 1998, Tantuvi is an initiative to revive the dying weaving traditions of Varanasi. Derived from the Sanskrit word for 'weaver,' Tantuvi has been working with weavers who incorporate techniques used by their ancestors to produce fresh pieces for over two decades. While age-old techniques were economically unfeasible for the weavers, the label stepped in to ensure that the pieces produced using these techniques also appealed to the design sensibilities of younger audiences (Vogue India, September 2020 b, n.p.)

This excerpt, emblematic of the magazine's take on artisans and traditional crafts, portrays artisans as helpless, lacking both business acumen and the ability to modernise their work – they are associated with 'dying weaving traditions,' 'techniques used by their ancestors' or 'age-old' methods. These associations invoke the colonial discourse of the unchanging non-Western craft, as opposed to the dynamic, Western notion of fashion (Jones, Leshkowich & Niessen, 2003). It is the entrepreneurial involvement of an established designer or label, accommodated by India's post-liberalisation economy, that allows for the production of 'fresh pieces,' which appeal to the 'design sensibilities of younger audiences' and are marked by design savvy and innovation. The celebratory register of the piece – praising the entrepreneurial prowess of the brand – promises India's design heritage a place in the the country's dynamic and neoliberal fashion industry, but only with the mediation of an entrepreneurial actor. The depiction of the artisans

as purveyors of an unchanging, stagnant craft contradicts the history of Indian design, which has been adapting to the demands of the time and the market for centuries (Jay, 2017). Another ambiguous element of the article is the use of a Sanskrit word 'tantuvi' as the name of a brand that works with a Varanasi weaving community that is widely known to be predominantly Muslim (Sinha & Polekar, 2014).

The championing of diversity and underlying unease

Like their counterparts globally, all three magazines profess their commitment to promoting inclusivity and equality. The magazines claim to champion diversity, they discuss colourism, gender discrimination, racism and body-shaming in the Indian context, and their stance is ostensibly pro-feminist, as the first section of this chapter discusses. For instance, *Elle India* has repeatedly addressed the taboo surrounding the subject of periods and period pain, celebrated 'gender-bending' collections from Indian designers, and denounced colourism in India.

In an ostensible bid to champion equality, the magazines express support for the global #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements (referred to positively in all three magazines) and promote women's empowerment. *Elle*'s December 2020 issue proclaims: 'Diversity now,' celebrating the visibility of Indian models on international runways:

> Meet the new generation of Indian models redefining international runways. Dressed in Louis Vuitton, they recount their maiden gigs on global ramps. At a time when we're fraught with challenges – in politics, healthcare and even fashion – it is clear that diversity has to be more than just a moment. Gone are the days when seeing a multicultural mix on the runway could simply be gestural – or appeared tokenistic. While there is still work to be done, designers are increasingly heeding the call and Indian models (along with other ethnicities) are seizing the moment. ELLE spoke to seven Indian models – all dressed in Louis Vuitton's winter classics – to see how this social corrective is gaining momentum (Vij, 2020, p. 115).

In this passage, the rhetoric of positive change implies that diversity has become more than 'gestural,' but is now a 'social corrective' that 'is gaining momentum.' Diversity is portrayed as a sign of the times that is bringing an irreversible

positive change, breaking with the 'tokenistic' gestures of the past. This is expressed through the use of the word 'redefining,' the triumphant claim that diversity 'has to be more than just a moment' and the statement that 'designers are increasingly heeding the call' and embracing diversity. The need for diversity is linked to the political challenges of the time, but diversity itself is presented as fashionable and 'dressed in Louis Vuitton's winter classics.' The article associates diversity and its 'social corrective' with the inclusion of Indian models in global fashion events, seeing diversity as a global process.

Remarkably, a large part of the issue focuses precisely on the political challenges of the post-pandemic world, featuring interviews with writers, philosophers, designers and models, who present their takes on the theme #ImaginingTheWorldToBe. Among the interviewees is philosopher Divya Dwivedi, whose #ImaginingTheWorldToBe is imbued with concern and apprehension:

> We have suffered the persistent tendencies of competitive regionalisms, ethnocentrisms and nationalisms, even before the pandemic, and these tendencies have only been augmented in many countries today. We must recognise these diverse racisms as systemic and institutional practices that are making people suffer unequally. They are endangering the doctors and medical staff, journalists, refugees, minority, and also the majority populations who are subjugated and exploited and are excluded from political participation and knowledge creation (Dwivedi, 2020, p. 59).

Dwivedi's words have a noticeably different register from the celebratory tone of the paragraph cited earlier – here the adjective 'diverse,' rather than conveying positive change, is used in reference to 'racisms.' Even though both excerpts from these different texts make the use of the pronoun 'we' to imply the collective nature of the challenges being faced ('we're fraught with challenges' in the first text and 'we have suffered the persistent tendencies of competitive regionalisms' in the second), and although they both refer to the need for action ('there is still work to be done' and 'we must recognise these diverse racisms as systemic'), their mood and message are discordant. While the first text, focusing on diversity in fashion, implies that such diversity already exists, is happening and is a sign of positive change, the second one warns of changes that are alarming and dangerous. Then,

whereas the first text refers to diversity on the global scale, the second one observes a lack thereof within India.

I believe the differences between the two excerpts not only point to the characteristic inconsistency of fashion magazine content, which seeks to reconcile contradictory statements and discourses, but also indicates how political talk and politicised are adopted in discussions of fashion and beauty, and how the talk of 'diversity' acquires a fashionable dimension. Diversity is increasingly described as a desirable asset, and even though the quote decries 'tokenistic' approaches to diversity, it conveys a desire for diversity as highly visible and glamorous, exemplified by the models' presence on international runways.

The magazine's November 2020 issue, dedicated to 'inclusivity and sustainability' employs a similarly celebratory take on diversity, proclaiming the advent of diversity and inclusivity in a number of cultural domains. It looks at the oppressiveness of the bra and reminds readers of the Western, un-Indian origins of this undergarment (Elle India, November 2020b, p. 52); discusses the importance of self-acceptance and accepting one's skin colour (Shah, 2020, p. 58); features Indian LGBTQI activists (Elle India, November 2020c, pp. 54–6); and presents a range of opinions from Indian designers on their wishes for the future of Indian fashion (Elle India, November 2020a, pp. 43–9). The magazine quotes 22 designers, six of whom speak about the importance of inclusivity. Two of the designers further elaborate on their views: Sabyasachi envisions a 'tolerant India, celebrating what makes us different. This is the future of India and this is the future of fashion. The only thing standing between where we are now and where we could be is, perhaps, a lack of imagination,' while designer Nimish Shah says, 'I think the future of Indian fashion is going to be democratic, distilled and inclusive (as opposed to being consumed by a certain class).' These two quotes loosely refer to the fact that Indian fashion has not been inclusive, but predict, optimistically, a democratic and tolerant future for India's fashion industry.

Religion within the diversity discourse: A dilemma

In a commentary on the lack of inclusivity in India's fashion industry, *Verve* provides a more straightforward reference to the communities that Indian fashion has failed. A piece written by Kallol Datta, a designer known for his reinterpretations of the hijab, speaks out against Indian fashion's long-term disregard of the country's Muslim population:

> We have calls for representation in boardrooms, cinema, art, politics and education. Why not in fashion? Not tokenistic or dangerous gestures – having a random show dedicated to the repeal of Section 377 while homophobia is rampant in the industry is meaningless, as is a show to promote the sari when the sari never needed saving to begin with. We've done irreversible damage by not catering to a segment of the population in this country when we're making clothes. We've chosen to tell them that they don't matter, they obviously do not have any interest in fashion and that we're still interested in their money if they choose to 'clandestinely' come to our studios to place private orders (Datta, 2020).

This opinion piece refers to the upsurge in anti-Muslim attitudes in India. With the rise of the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ascent to power, Hindu nationalist sentiment has been permeating political, social and cultural discourses in the country (Ludden, 2001; Chacko, 2019). While anti-minority violence is on the rise, nationalists and pro-government media increasingly seek to portray India as a quintessentially Hindu nation (Banaji, 2018). While Hindu religious symbols, holidays, traditions and dress are depicted as 'national,' minority cultures are 'othered' and shown as 'foreign' to India. Consequently, Indian sites and cities are continuously remapped by the Hindu right and rebranded as sacred, national and Hindu spaces, turning the presence of minority groups in cities into an aberrant phenomenon (Contractor, 2012). Anti-Muslim and anti-minority conspiracy theories, propagated by right-wing groups and supported by the state, have affected the modes of representation of Muslims in popular culture and advertising. In 2020, jewellery brand Tanishq, owned by the Tata corporation, had to pull an ad featuring a Hindu-Muslim family, after an outcry on social media. In the ad, a pregnant Hindu woman asks her Muslim mother-in-law whether Muslim families arrange baby showers, and in response, the mother-in-law leads her into a surprise baby shower. Conceived as a message of love and unity, the campaign was accused by some social media users of promoting 'love jihad,' in reference to the conspiracy theory which claims that Muslim men marry Hindu women in order to forcibly convert them to Islam. This conspiracy theory, based on the right-wing allegation that the Hindu culture is in danger, has made

interfaith marriages across the country difficult and even dangerous. Likewise, the brand Fabindia's 2021 Diwali campaign had to be recalled after a social media uproar. In the campaign, the brand used the Urdu words *jashn-e-riwaaz* (Urdu is the language associated with India's Muslim population) to describe the Hindu festival Diwali, which led Twitter users to conclude that the ad was offensive to Hindus. Notably, the Hindu festivals Diwali and Holi have historically been celebrated across religious communities.

Similarly, popular films, television shows and media represent minorities and non-Hindus in stereotypical ways. In their analysis of Bollywood's portrayal of Muslim women characters, Nazia Hussein and Saba Hussain remark on the narrow and stereotypical representation of Muslim women as backward, oppressed, mysterious and exotic (Hussain & Hussein, 2015). In contemporary Bollywood films, dress also acquires a symbolic meaning, as the sari symbolises an idealised form of Hindu womanhood and the headscarf represents oppressed Muslim femininity. Historically, however, the sari has been worn indiscriminately by Hindus and Muslims alike (Dwyer, 2000), reflecting the post-independence ideal of 'unity in diversity' (Sharma, 2019) – the garment was not culturally marked as Hindu until the late 1990s and 2000s with the rise of Hindu nationalism.

About 14 percent of India's population are Muslim (Sharma, 2024) and, as such, India is home to the world's third-largest Muslim population and the world's largest Muslim-minority population. Despite these numbers, references to Muslim culture, traditions and fashion are surprisingly scarce in Indian fashion magazines. As briefly mentioned above, *Vogue India* and *Elle India* present a melange of what can be loosely characterised as 'world fashion' (used here following Joanne Entwistle's defintion (2015) in reference to global, Westernised dress) and *desi* wear. The latter mostly comprises Hindu-style festive and bridal wear, occasional everyday saris, and *shalwar kamizes*. As of December 2020, a quick textual search for 'Muslim fashion' on *Vogue India*'s website yields only two results: both articles are dedicated to modest dress as a global phenomenon and neither focuses on modest dress (in this case synonymous with Muslim fashion) in relation to India specifically (Usher, 2018; Vaidya, 2019). While the articles emphasise the fact that modest dress has become a global trend and mention Western designers who

create modest clothes, they avoid referring to India as a market for modest – or Muslim – fashion.

The magazines' coverage of festive and bridal wear confirms the impression that 'ethnic' or 'Indian fashion' means 'Hindu.' What *Vogue* and *Elle India* define as 'festive ethnic wear' are, by default, traditional garments worn for and during Hindu religious festivals. The latter, in comparison to Muslim religious holidays, are featured prominently as fashion events. *Vogue India*, for instance, closely follows what celebrities wear for festivals like Ganesh Chatur, Holi and Diwali, featuring pictures from Hindu temples. Thus, *Vogue India*'s September issues are dedicated to preparing readers for the festive season, suggesting fashions and accessories for the autumnal succession of Hindu holidays and festivals, while Muslim religious holidays such as Eid are ignored. Whereas 'festive season' refers to the Hindu holidays in late autumn, the term 'bridal fashion' seems to mostly apply to Hindu festive wear and jewellery.

Hindu practices act as a proxy for 'Indian' – as is suggested by the January 2020 issue of *Vogue*, laced with references to Ayurvedic practices, yoga and veganism, associated with high-caste Brahmanic traditions. The issue opens with a letter from 26 editors of the magazine's international editions that reads:

> Last year, when 26 Vogue editors met in Paris, our attention focused on addressing and redefining our core values. The conversation steered us in new directions, keeping in mind the geopolitical, cultural and sociological issues that surround us. To begin with: our planet (Vogue India, 2020, p. 48).

The issue of sustainability in fashion is a global one and remains relevant across countries, yet in *Vogue*'s Indian edition, sustainability and mindfulness (another global buzzword from the opening letter) are associated with the practices of high-caste Hindus such as yoga or Ayurveda, championed and celebrated by the far-right.

The endorsement of yoga by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is infamously divisive, as it has further solidified the binary between the tolerant, 'civilised' Hindu and the intolerant, 'irrational' Muslim 'other' (Lakshmi, 2020). Ayurvedic practices have also been embraced by Hindu leaders in order to promote the 'health of

the nation' as a patriotic duty, along with swadeshi, or buying local goods instead of imported ones (Longkumer, 2018). Veganism and vegetarianism have religious and political implications as well; Nilanjana Roy has written for the *Financial Times* about the rise of the 'intolerant vegetarian' and 'the often-murderous campaigns of cow-protection activists, responsible for a wave of terrifying attacks and lynchings of Muslims suspected of storing beef or transporting cattle,' driven by far-right groups like Shiv Sena (Roy, 2017). In India, working with animal products or eating certain types of meat can become motives for caste-based or religion-based discrimination, violence and disenfranchisement, and cases of anti-minority violence against 'cow-eating' Muslims or low-caste people who work with leather and meat are notorious (Ferry, 2020; Sathyamala, 2019). In light of this, representation of veganism, yoga and Ayurveda as positive and synonymous with Indian identity can be seen as inconsiderate at best and discriminatory at worst. Thus, the magazines' content, while it claims to be inclusive, tends to reiterate not just religion-based segregation, but also casteism.

The magazines' approach to sustainability and its articulation in Hindu, upper-class ways is evocative of Jacques Rancière's work on politics and aesthetics and the view that all that is aesthetic also contains political meaning (Rancière, 2005). In this case, the sustainable aesthetic choices described also have the potential to further exclude already marginalised meanings and communities.

At the same time, in describing Hindu traditions and religious rites as normatively Indian, the magazines also commodify them – Ayurvedic practices are used as inspiration for skin care and beauty products, and yoga is described as a self-care regime in terms that are characteristic of the neoliberal promotion of self-care (Gill & Orgad, 2022). In this way, the magazines' discourses on Ayurveda connect traditional Hindu practices with the neoliberal self-care regime of late modernity. In the magazines' descriptions, Hindu practices are presented as highly spiritual and are said to convey ancient knowledge and tradition in what can almost be seen as self-Orientalising ways. Such descriptions replicate stereotypes about India as a place of secret knowledge and mysterious practices that contemporary beauty and the travel industry have been capitalising on (Chandra, 2015). One text from *Vogue India*'s website reads:

Image quote: vogue.in, 2019, May 31, 'I had ghee poured down my nose for this intensive Ayurvedic detox," Shutterstock.

While Ayurveda has been picking up steam over the last few years, it's found new reach since celebrities like Anushka Sharma, Gwyneth Paltrow and Kourtney Kardashian have begun promoting their experiences with oil pulling, dry brushing and panchakarma treatments respectively. But with all that information, it can be easy to start adding practices and products to your regimen without doing the due diligence. We reached out to Dr Taruna Yadav, senior Ayurveda expert, Forest Essentials, Prashanthy Gurugubelli, founder of Daughter Earth and Michelle Ranavat, founder Ranavat Botanicals, to understand the Ayurveda-related mistakes that people could make. Think you might be making some too? Here are the most popular ones (Gupta, 2020).

Here, Ayurveda is discussed in connection with the global and Indian celebrities who have been embracing it as a self-care technique, thus legitimising it as a popular asset in a contemporary woman's beauty regimen. At the same time, Ayurveda is contextualised as a complex set of practices that demand labour, knowledge and research on the part of the woman who would like to try it. References to a 'regimen' of self-care, the need for 'due diligence' and the possibility of 'Ayurveda-related mistakes' that can be avoided by conducting relevant research evoke the neoliberal discourses of self-care which refer to the required careful management of the feminine self, something that has been widely theorised in Western contexts. The paragraph above also makes it clear that Ayurveda has become a site of entrepreneurial labour with 'experts' and 'founders' being called upon to share their knowledge about and experience with the practice.

Another article explains the Sanskrit word *panchakarma* and recontextualises the associated Vedic ritual within the contemporary attitude to self-care, mixing a coterie of Sanskrit terms with contemporary beauty parlance:

> For the uninitiated, Panchakarma is a five-step detox routine that includes five therapies to heal and the body. The first is Nasya, where they pour ghee and smoke into your nostrils to clear the sinuses and chest. Then comes Vamana, where they make you drink a few litres of medicated milk and then vomit it out

> to clear the stomach. Virechana is next, where they give you laxative medicine to clear the liver and intestines. After that it is Basti—medicated enemas to clear the colon—and the fifth one is Raktamokshana, where they use leeches to suck out the toxic blood. I skipped Vamana and Raktamokshana as they weren't needed, but I experienced the other three therapies over the course of three weeks. Panchakarma is very effective, but it is not the easiest experience. So I put together this list of caveats and hacks for anyone who might want to try it (Rai, 2019).

This petrifying set of practices is presented palatably as a globally appealing 'five-step detox routine,' and is reconfigured in the vocabulary of freedom and choice as the author shares her own experience of navigating the panchakarma regimen, remarking that she decided to skip some of its parts. Importantly, the effectiveness of the procedure is evoked, to emphasise its relevance for the self-determining, well-informed post-feminist subject, who makes well-researched decisions on her beauty labour. The article is accompanied by a clean and arty shot of ghee (oil) that is being poured onto a therapist's palm, not dissimilar to a promotional image used by a beauty salon, it seems to mitigate the intimidating description of the panchakarma practice.

Prioritisation of the Hindu culture is also evident in the magazines' descriptions of relationships – as the previous section implied, the relationships typically shown in the magazines are heterosexual, but they are also predominantly Hindu, upper or middle class, and upper caste.

The issues of gender and sexuality within the diversity discourse

As Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak (2012) observes, in a nation-state, reproductive heteronormativity serves as a foundation for nationalism, in which strictly regulated, mono-faith heterosexuality becomes a vehicle for reproducing tradition, religion and gender norms. Representations of gender and sexuality across titles evoke Spivak's argument. In its relationship advice, *Elle India* implies the heteronormativity of relationships. The magazine reiterates gender inequalities and encourages women to do the emotional labour in a relationship (Gill, 2009). For instance, one article focuses on the predicament of women earning more than

their male partners ('What to do when you make more money than your husband'). It recommends women prioritise the feelings of their partner and concludes by saying: 'As his partner, you should have empathy and compassion for his potential feelings of inadequacy and do what it takes to reassure him of your love and admiration' (Elle India, 2019). The magazine also eclipses any mention of female sexuality – speaking of relationships as heterosexual marriages, it omits any reference to sex and sexuality. Similarly, the relationships highlighted by *Verve* are mainly heterosexual, Hindu and upper class. While focusing on women's success, the magazine promotes the idea that women can indeed have it all – a successful career and a beautiful heterosexual relationship. A similar approach is adopted by *Vogue India* – the relationships discussed in the magazine and those featured on its social media are between Hindu men and women, predominantly in marriages. Women in queer relationships are rarely portrayed as protagonists.

One clear example of this is the February 2021 issue of *Vogue* which is dedicated to love and features the stories of more than 60 couples, of which three are same-sex couples. The issue insists that India's society is changing, growing more inclusive and more accepting, which the magazine's cover featuring a same-sex couple seems to confirm:

> In a post-377 India,[4] the country's LGBTQ+ community is finding greater acceptance and is voicing its experiences. Haima Simoes and Shruti Venkatesh, the first same-sex couple to make it to our cover, talk to Neville Bhandara about the need for greater inclusion through a love story that is primed to inspire every generation (Bhandara, 2021, p. 82).

The upbeat claim of progressive change notwithstanding, Haima and Shruti are the only lesbian couple featured in the magazine alongside an absolute majority of heterosexual and married (or soon-to-be married) couples. The extraordinariness of their relationship is also emphasised by the editor's decision to place their picture on the cover and the mood of the stylised editorial they are featured in. While the majority of couples in the issue are shown as happy and smiling, the

[4] This refers to Section 377 of India's penal code which criminalised same-sex relationships and same-sex sexuality.

Image quote: cover of Vogue India February 2021,
Pyar / Love, photographed by Bikramjit Bose.

editorial with Haima and Shruti portrays them as sombre and vulnerable, clinging to each other, as though for support, and seemingly isolated against natural backdrops of the ocean and the vast landscape. This representation, strikingly different from the way heterosexual couples are portrayed in the magazine, also contradicts the claims of change and acceptance – Section 377 might have been revoked, but its repeal does not mean immediate emancipation, which is also obvious in the magazine's ambiguous representation of the couple, as a tokenistic symbol of change that has not quite taken place.

Again, *Vogue* and *Elle India* appear to be making sweeping claims about change and progress, implying, in the cruelly optimistic manner (Berlant, 2011) of neoliberal discourses, that the present time is a better, more tolerant one. *Verve*'s rhetoric of change appears more restrained and ambivalent, as the following editor's letter in *Verve*'s October–November 2019 issue reads:

> There is a common factor among some of the national events that have marked these last few years and cannonballed India into a particularly momentous period of transition. #MeToo, the overturning of Section 377, the stripping of Jammu and Kashmir's autonomy, the Ayodhya verdict [...] the nexus between them is the deep-rooted issue of identity (Mahindra, 2019, p. 4).

This take refrains from celebrating change and the current time as uniquely progressive and positive, referring instead to complex political events that signify the Indian government's turn to the right – the stripping of Jammu and Kashmir's autonomy and the Ayodhya verdict.[5]

Again, the socio-political realities of contemporary India are revealed through the lapses, inconsistency and contradictions within the publications' discourses. Thus, *Vogue India*'s October 2020 issue, according to the letter by editor-in-chief Priya Khanna, celebrates India's national identity. Few things are 'as unique as our national identity,' reads the letter. 'We asked 13 leading voices [...] to share their ideas of India, which celebrate the country in all its diverse and multifaceted glory' (Khanna, 2020, n.p.). While Khanna's letter alludes to the secularist formula of 'unity in diversity,' which held currency in the forging of Indian democracy from the 1950s to the 1970s (Gottlob, 2007), the actual contributions from these '13 leading voices' challenge its relevance. In fact, several contributions refer to communal strife and criticise how Hindu fundamentalism permeates Indian culture and society. In the piece called 'My India is syncretic,' Mira Nair, director of the Netflix series 'A Suitable Boy,' speaks of the Hindu vigilante backlash to her tweet:

> Charged by the excitement of seeing Urdu for the first time in a subway, I took a picture of this rhythmic dance of languages and tweeted 'Long Live Lucknow!' Precisely 10 minutes later, I was bedazzled again: over 300 messages screamed into my phone. I was being trolled by a swathe of virtual vigilantes for celebrating the India of my childhood – a place that was known for its heterogeneity of

[5] The Ayodhya verdict of 2019 signified a landmark in years of communal violence between Hindus and Indian Muslims. The verdict relates to an incident in 1992 when the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was destroyed by Hindus claiming that its site was the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. Communal riots ensued and the land was considered disputed until 2019, when the Supreme Court recognised it as Hindu, ordering its division between Hindu and Muslim communities with 2/3 allocated to the former and 1/3 to the latter.

> traditions, languages and cultures now elicited rage for the same. What had happened to the India of my past? (Nair, 2020, n.p.)

Unlike the promise of Khanna's editor's letter to 'celebrate the country in all its diverse and multifaceted glory,' Nair's piece suggests that the 'heterogeneity of traditions, languages and cultures' has been eradicated. Indeed, the name of the piece 'My India is syncretic' implies a rejection of the contemporary Hindu-fundamentalist image of India. Similarly, author Pico Iyer's contribution to the magazine, titled 'My India is its ancient wisdom' defiantly argues for the need to acknowledge the 'wisdom of Muslims and Sikhs and Christians and Jains and Zoroastrians and those who take science as the ultimate truth' (Iyer, 2020, n.p.). 'My India is global,' the profile of model Amrit who found recognition and fame in France, mentions how her Indian relatives have shamed her for the darker tone her skin. Paradoxically, each of these articles appear to contradict the claim of Indian 'unity in diversity' made in the editor's letter.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has offered an insight into Indian fashion magazines' engagement with political and social issues in India and globally, drawing on examples from three publications – *Vogue*, *Elle* and *Verve*. The magazines' views on society and politics, as well as their perspectives on gender, feminism and female empowerment, are expressed through the selection of people they feature, the choice of words used to describe those people, and the choice of themes and settings for fashion photoshoots.

Sometimes the magazines directly comment on political, social and societal issues. At the end of 2019, *Elle India*'s and *Verve*'s social media accounts commented on the infamous Citizenship Amendment Act, as well as the protests and police violence that ensued, denouncing both the discriminatory character of the Act[6] and the state's reaction to the protests (Bhushan, 2021). The magazines were critical of the state's ineffective response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and *Vogue* and *Verve* commended opposition politicians' for criticising the state. Significantly, *Vogue* profiled and praised KK Shailaja, an opposition politician who at the time served as the Health Minister of Kerala State, in its 2020 Women of the Year issue.

The magazines also speak enthusiastically about feminism and appear to call for gender equality; they do not shy away from discussing the oppressiveness of some traditions and customs; and they celebrate successful women, championing women's advancement in society and advocating for more access to public spaces for women. In discourses on women's empowerment, fashion and personal sense of style are interpreted as politically significant, as, for instance the profile of Gita Gopinath in *Vogue India* demonstrates. All three magazines adopt the global vocabulary of inclusivity, diversity and empowerment in that they are vocal about the merits and necessity of the global #MeToo movement, include and feature LGBTQI+ activists, and highlight successful and independent women whose lifestyles and independence challenge what right-wing nationalists and conservatives expect of them.

In Indian magazines, discourses around diversity, inclusivity and feminism are perceived as global, as the publications self-consciously attempt to establish and assess their impact on Indian political and cultural life. In the magazines, global discourses on #MeToo or LGBTQI+ rights, are domesticated and explained, as they relate to India's cultural and political realities. The impact of the global focus on equality and diversity is continuously assessed and evaluated – in regards to a widening spectrum of LGBTQI+ rights or growing visibility of women's empowerment.

However, while they ostensibly clamour for inclusion and diversity, the magazines often appear to fail to recognise or highlight the ways in which the politics of Hindu nationalism discriminate against minorities and women. *Vogue* and *Elle* India tend to portray Hindu femininity, Hindu customs and Hindu culture as quintessentially 'Indian,' focusing on upper-class, middle-class, Hindu and heterosexual women, and reiterating what right-wing nationalists and the nationalist

[6] According to the Citizenship Amendment Act, immigrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan who came to India before 2014 and belonged to religious minorities were eligible for Indian citizenship. The Act excluded Muslims.

media consider the norm (Oza, 2001). While these magazines take an ostensibly feminist stance, their feminism can be called 'popular,' following Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018), as it is used to promote neoliberal values. It is also limited, in that it only seems to cater to women who are Hindu and upper or middle class.

In *Vogue* and *Elle India* in particular, it is evident how notions of inclusivity, equality and feminism are articulated in connection with consumption and visibility. Purchasing a product associated with sustainability or a responsible attitude is seen as a political act (Gill & Kanai, 2020); and feminist empowerment is continuously articulated through curated social media presence, publicised behaviour and 'speaking out.' Such phenomena are explored further in the fourth chapter, which also challenges their effectiveness and their political power. In Indian fashion media, however, these phenomena occupy an ambiguous position – they signal the media's connection with global culture and declare commitment to progressive values, without challenging India-specific structures of dominance and oppression.

The magazines (examples have been found in *Vogue* and *Elle India*) reassure the reader that their embrace of diversity is not just tokenistic, but while these magazines readily adopt the rhetoric of empowerment, self-acceptance and inclusion, rarely do they analyse or criticise the reasons for ongoing discriminatory practices in India. There is a dearth of coverage of Indian Muslims, Muslim culture or low-caste Hindus within the very magazines that claim to champion diversity and support minorities. This becomes most obvious in the magazines' coverage of Hindu religious festivals, which they present as occasions for celebration and dressing up, and in their conspicuous silence when it comes to the holidays of India's religious and caste minorities. This contradicts the ongoing references to India as syncretic and diverse.

There is further ambiguity in the magazines' discourse on India. On the one hand, India is presented as transformed by change, as the magazines describe how LGBTQI+ people and women enjoy more acceptance. On the other hand, it is repeatedly portrayed as a domain of tradition, spirituality, sacred knowledge – in an evocation of Orientalist colonial discourses.

There are, of course, differences between how the three magazines approach

politics, feminism and inclusivity. The issues of *Vogue* from the period analysed demonstrate an unselfconscious engagement with diversity and inclusivity discourses and de facto support of the discriminatory attitudes of the right wing. Among the three publications studied, *Verve* appears to offer a more nuanced take on feminism, politics, diversity and inclusion in the Indian context. While *Vogue* and *Elle* tend to present overly optimistic, celebratory accounts of female empowerment and diversity, which appear to echo global neoliberal promissory discourses, *Verve* tends to include more ambiguous and disruptive stories on being a woman in India, including references to marginal experiences of caste and class.