

‘I LIKE HITLER’:  
FÜHRER FEVER IN INDIA

NATE CURRIER

‘He alone, who owns the youth, gains the future.’

Adolf Hitler<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

‘I like Hitler’—it was a strange experience hearing these words, sitting under a *palapa* roof and interviewing my first informant in Madurai, South India. I realized that I had never heard them out loud before. Stranger still, I knew that others shared her view.

There is a curious new fad beginning to surge in India. Adolf Hitler, the genocidal leader of the Third Reich, murderer of millions of Jews and the world’s most notoriously loathsome villain, has a following. They are not neo-Nazis, bound together primarily by antisemitic and other racist sentiments. In fact, there is no recognized neo-Nazi chapter anywhere in India. They are something different, and in some ways even more frightening – pure Hitler fanatics, respectful, admiring, and forgiving of the man and his unforgivably violent career.

In the spring of 2013 I chose this topic as part of an anthropologically based study-abroad semester. It was a curiosity to me, and one with very little research surrounding it. My methods were simple: read anything and interview anyone even tangentially related to the topic. This included a history professor, two elderly freedom fighters from the Indian National Army (INA), a retired government employee with a Master’s in Western History, four Hitler fans – two male and two female – all of whom were students, and two other students vehemently opposed to Hitler but, as it turns out, still with some very positive things to say about him. Two Hitler enthusiasts especially, Ananya and Vignesh,<sup>2</sup> epitomized what I believe are the most common categories of Führer fans one is likely to find. Ananya was largely ignorant of the man and his history: she could not

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<sup>1</sup> Speech at the Reichsparteitag, 1935.

<sup>2</sup> All the names in this article are pseudonyms.

always explain her admiration for him, but supplied many superficial rationales, a number of them historically inaccurate. Conversely, Vignesh had read books on the subject and knew all about the Führer, being especially fond of his management style, his oratorical skills and his gifts as a strategist. I conducted semi-structured interviews ranging from a few minutes to over three hours in length, some of them unscheduled.<sup>3</sup>

In the past decade, sales of *Mein Kampf* have risen by fifteen percent (Shaftel 2012). The book is unabashedly displayed in windows or on sale at most Madurai bookstores, including both of its malls. It has six different publishers in India. Crossword, a pan-Indian chain of bookstores, has sold 25,000 in the past decade, and its marketing head says that ‘It’s been a consistent bestseller for us’ (Ahmed 2010). Jaico Publishing – the original publishers in India – sells 10,000 copies a year in Delhi alone and reprints a new edition of the book at ‘at least twice a year to meet growing demand’ (Mumford, 2009). Hitler’s image is printed on notebooks, and his name has been lent to clothing stores and cafes (NPR 2012). A man in the tiny northeast state of Meghalaya named Adolf Lu Hitler-Marak is currently running for his fourth consecutive term in the state assembly.<sup>4</sup> In the past three years, Indian cinema has produced various movies about the Führer or using his name, including *Dear Friend Hitler* and *Hero Hitler in Love*. There is a popular Indian soap opera called *Hitler Didi* (‘Big Sister Hitler’), aired Mondays to Fridays at 8.30 pm. In Mumbai, a 10<sup>th</sup> grade schoolteacher asked her class of 25 students to write down their favourite historical figure. Nine said Hitler, over a third of the class. Stranger still, only one student put down Gandhi (D’Souza 2012). These odd, isolated, often comical instances seem harmless until one sees the bigger picture. Hitler has a growing and legitimate fan base in India.

Why? What drives a nation liberated through peace and the doctrine of non-violence (*ahimsa*) to fawn on the world’s most frighteningly successful antagonist? The answers – which range from sheer ignorance to a special fondness for his moustache – can only be fully understood by briefly considering the history of India in WWII.

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes have been taken with the permission of my informants, whose identities will remain concealed. Some of them, aware of the anti-Hitler stigma, specifically requested this. I would like to thank all of my interpreters involved, who will go unnamed as they are quoted in this article, as well as my program advisor, Dr Eial Dujovny. Without them, this project would not have been possible in its final form.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the citizens of Meghalaya are endowed with truly commendable comic gifts. Adolf is running against opponents called Frankenstein, Billykid, Jhim Carter, Highlander and Fairly Bert, among others. John, 2013; *The Guardian*, 2013.

### **Historical background**

India made a huge effort for the Allied powers in WWII, despite the fact that ‘the British government simply took India into the war by proclamation without consulting the Indians’ (Shirer 1979: 211). Late in the war the Indian Army numbered over 2.5 million men, the largest all-volunteer force in history. It made a serious impact fighting in North Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and eventually in liberating Italy from fascism.

Of course many in India did not want to fight alongside their oppressors. In 1939, the same year Hitler invaded Poland, a radical leftist president of the Indian National Congress Party (INC) called Subash Chandra Bose was outmanoeuvred by Gandhi’s political influence and forced to resign. In accordance with Gandhi’s own suggestion (the two remained respectful friends their whole lives) he started his own political party, the All India Forward Bloc. Around this time he was given the title Netaji, from the Hindi word for ‘leader’. Netaji was one of Gandhi’s most important and popular contemporaries, a radical leader some would call a terrorist today, who believed that India’s liberation had to be won through violence rather than granted through *ahimsa*. To put their relationship in an American context, he might be thought of as the Malcolm X to Gandhi’s Martin Luther King Jr. Netaji was placed under house arrest by the British for civil disobedience, but escaped and eventually made it to Berlin via the Soviet Union and Afghanistan. He stayed in Berlin for three years under Nazi supervision, founding the Free India Center and establishing the Indian Legion, a force of some 4,500 Indian soldiers, most of whom had previously fought alongside the British and been taken prisoner by Axis forces. While in Berlin, Netaji sought an audience with Adolf Hitler personally. He thought that they could be strong allies: India would help defeat the British in exchange for its independence after the war. When ‘Hitler finally granted an interview to Bose on 29 May 1942, he crudely clarified that in his view India would not be able to rule itself for another 150 years’ (Mishra 2000: 236).

Disillusioned with the Third Reich, Netaji travelled by U-boat to Japan, where he was greeted by a desperate Japanese government that was already losing ground in the war. They helped Netaji take control of the INA, which fought alongside the Japanese in

Southeast Asia, for the most part unsuccessfully. Netaji died in a plane crash in 1945 on his way to Tokyo. While historians agree that his actual impact on WWII was minimal, he is regarded by many as India's greatest war hero and served as a model for Indian unification. The INA saw Hindu, Christian and Muslim Indians fighting side by side, and it even had a separate women's unit, regarded as the first of its kind in Asia.

Meanwhile, on the home front, India was torn between the violent urge to rise up against the British and Gandhi's call for a non-violent resolution to the question of independence. Before the outbreak of the war, he tried to avoid global conflict entirely by sending strongly worded letters to world leaders.<sup>5</sup> In 1942, he started the 'Quit India' movement, the most forceful act of rebellion in his struggle to oppose the British. He and the entire Congress Working Committee were imprisoned that same year. While both his wife and secretary died in captivity, Gandhi was released with failing health in 1944 by the Raj, who feared the uprising his death in captivity could ignite. At the end of the war a battered British Empire released some 100,000 Indian prisoners and began the transition of power into Indian hands. Gandhi had won. Today he is considered the Father of the Nation, his image printed on rupee notes and literally worshipped in certain parts of the country. He is viewed as a saintly figure worldwide, and his name has become synonymous with peace, freedom and justice. His exploits inspired other freedom fighters like Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, and he was recognized by TIME magazine as the third most influential person of the century.<sup>6</sup> Since influence is not inherently good or evil, a serious debate erupted over whether Hitler should have been awarded the top spot.

To gain some perspective on Hitler's Indian popularity, it is instructive to consider similar instances of treacherous fanaticism around the World. In Russia, for example, Stalin has become 'a consumer icon': his re-emergence 'appears to be broadening, and a more disturbing picture is emerging, one in which the Little Father's actions, character and legacy are being reconfigured and given altogether different attributes' (Whitaker 2012). While there are still mostly negative feelings toward Stalin in Russia, some 'who remember his rule miss the stability it offered, the country's superpower status, not to

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<sup>5</sup> Copies of many of these letters—including his one to Hitler—are on display at Madurai's own Gandhi Museum.

<sup>6</sup> After President Franklin Roosevelt and Albert Einstein, placed first and second.

mention its world-leading public transport system' (ibid). But the root cause of Stalin's popularity is dissatisfaction with Russia's current government: 'in times of economic and political uncertainty nostalgia for the past...yearning for strong leadership emerge[s] and so the legacy of Stalin becomes a cause for celebration rather than anxiety' (ibid).

As we shall see, political frustration is one of the most potent contributors to the rise in Hitler's popularity in India. But the major difference between these two instances is that for his Indian admirers Hitler's is a borrowed history. India can feel no 'nostalgia' for Hitler's rule like Russians can for Stalin's. Instead, there is apparently a growing desire to adopt his legacy as their own, a desire spurred on by multiple factors and guided by an inclination on the part of the young especially to escape their own past rather than feel nostalgia for it.

While I am neither a history major nor a practising Jew, my mother's side of the family is Jewish. I have been to Holocaust museums and seen the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen, north of Berlin. Coming from America, Hitler has never been presented to me as anything but villainous. This singular opinion of his character has made him something of an icon of evil for me, which is what makes any differing opinion so fascinating. I have been taught about WWII from a purely Western perspective, and have never viewed Hitler in anything but a negative light.

In literature, as in movies, television and fiction in general, there are often very clear heroes and villains, purposeful representations of good and evil. In real life, of course, this is never the case. We all like to believe that we could oppose obvious villains like Darth Vader, Iago or Dracula in real life. But this stark contrast between good and evil simply does not exist in this real world of undulating shades of grey. Arguably, a close historical exception to this reality is Adolf Hitler. For me personally, he is the clearest embodiment of evil humanity has ever known. The fact that anyone, anywhere, could admire and respect this person—essentially, could root for Darth Vader—I found stunning.

India has the second largest population (by far) of any country after China. It is a rising global superpower with one of the fastest growing economies in the world. The young, who make up over forty percent of its population, will soon inherit one of the most powerful nations on earth. It is also one of eight countries confirmed to possess

nuclear weapons. One can make the case that India has no reason to learn about Hitler and World War II, but I would disagree. WWII is not American history or German history. It is not British history, Jewish history, European history or even military history. It is world history. It explains the mistakes and successes of a world that will very soon thrust a lot of responsibility on India.

While there are myriad factors that could contribute to Hitler's rise in popularity, I have narrowed them down to what I believe are the three main causes: a shifting youth perspective,<sup>7</sup> poor education regarding WWII, and classical cultural influences.

### **The youth perspective**

Before scheduling my first interview, I had already encountered strange opinions on the topic I had never heard before, at least not out loud. When I casually brought up the Holocaust with Saanvi, a Catholic student at Lady Doak College, she paraphrased Matthew 24, in which Pontius Pilate washes his hands of Jesus' crucifixion, and the Jews say 'His blood *be* on us and our children!'<sup>8</sup> While she adamantly despises Hitler, she blamed the Jews for Jesus' death and thought 'that curse of crucifying Jesus, eventually it surfaced up...and I think that Adolf Hitler was an instrument in doing that.'<sup>9</sup> I took her on as my interpreter immediately. Saanvi's Biblical interpretations aside, I do not believe she harbours any ill will towards the Jews at all. In fact, India's 'Jewish community – some 5,300 people – is one of the few in the world to have never been persecuted by its countrymen' (Shaftel 2012). Clearly, other factors were at play here.

While I do not believe that any of my informants are antisemitic as such, their own history seems to make them less sympathetic to the Holocaust and to the plight of the Jews in general. One trend that quickly emerged was the startling ability of my informants to forgive Hitler for his less commendable actions. Ananya claimed that many historical figures kill people, 'but somehow, somehow, they still have a good heart.'<sup>10</sup> Vignesh, a self-proclaimed 'Hitler fanatic', suggested that people 'only see the dark side of Hitler' and that '[j]ust because he caused the Holocaust at the army camps doesn't

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<sup>7</sup> This is undoubtedly influenced by my methodology, since I interviewed no Hitler fans over the age of 21. However, the rise in Hitler's popularity is also primarily among the young.

<sup>8</sup> Gideons International, 1985.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Saanvi conducted Feb.16, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Ananya conducted Feb. 21, 2013.

mean that he's a bad guy.'<sup>11</sup> The levels of sympathy expressed are almost admirable. Ananya, who had never heard the word 'Holocaust' before, related his atrocities to me as she had learned them:

[H]e has been like horrible towards men, like under-caste people. Once I read an article – this is true...he, in a room, he just...pushed all the men inside, naked, and locked the room just full of people and let a poison gas in, and made them all die. So he was, as cruel, but even though he was cruel, he had a kind soul in his heart.<sup>12</sup>

This pale description of the Holocaust provided one of the saddest moments in any of my interviews. However, I found her decision to describe Hitler's victims as 'under-caste' very telling. Ironically, because notions of hierarchy and caste are more pertinent in India than in many places, I believe that some Indians may be more indifferent to the Jewish condition. Even young Indians who may abhor the caste system and feel personally distant from an era when it was nationally accepted must cope with the sad residue of caste-related incidents that plague neighbourhoods throughout the country.

The reality that death is simply a part of politics and that it does not bar a man from having a 'good heart' is a cultural ideal that stems from a long history of oppressed peoples and bloody politics in India. Oppression, coupled with the idea that some castes are destined to be the masters over others – themes that Hitler himself was preaching – have been embedded in the Hindu community and in India as a whole for thousands of years. It is not that Hitler fans in India have anything against Jews personally (or that they believe in the caste system). Rather, they are generally more ready to forgive ideas like oppression and notions of inherent superiority that Hitler personified and to recognize them as common failings of every culture. At the very least, young Indians who eschew a cosmically mandated social hierarchy know what an easy mistake it is for a ruling elite to make.

One pattern that all Hitler fans seem to share is that they are not particularly enamoured of Gandhi. The pull away from Gandhi and toward more violent historical icons might play into what my program advisor and I have termed the Damsel in Distress theory (DID). The main idea behind DID is that nations want to win their own freedom rather than have it won for them, like a damsel in distress. Gandhi understood how

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Vignesh conducted March 9, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Ananya conducted Feb. 21, 2013.

necessary it was for India to win its own freedom, but he could not see any justification in winning it through violent means. Without warfare there is no punishment, and without punishment, no sense of absolution. Many Britons were killed during WWII, but very few for anything to do with India. England gave up its possession of the country through a decision of its own, thus robbing Indian history of its war heroes and the sense of national pride that comes from winning independence violently, for oneself. I am in no way suggesting that India should have foregone *ahimsa*. However, I do believe that Indian nationalist pride has been starved for victory on the battlefield, which has caused some young people to rewrite the country's own history.

Consider the immense respect and admiration that exists towards Netaji. He was a brilliant man and an important civil rights leader to be sure, but his military record was less than spectacular. He became president of the INC Party and was pushed out through Gandhi's influence. He spent three years in Berlin only to be humiliated and publicly written off by Hitler. He managed to patch together a standing army in Japan, only to see it decimated during its first skirmish with the British. Then he tragically died in a plane crash. This is India's greatest modern war hero. Still, my informants insisted that India actually 'gained its independence through violence',<sup>13</sup> or at the very least, that it was acquired through 'a two-pronged attack' of both peaceful rebellion and violent insurrection.<sup>14</sup>

Gandhi, the peaceful father of the nation, is thus being rejected by young Indians for more violent surrogates like Netaji or Hitler. One reason Hitler fits the role of surrogate so nicely is because he weakened the British and 'accelerated the process that brought an end to the British Raj'. Some historians even suggest that he deserves more credit for India's independence than Gandhi (Kumar 2010; cf. Wolpert 1991: 67). He stood up to the British in ways Gandhi never could and that Netaji failed to do. Ironically, Hitler had no plans to make India independent and was actually an admirer of Britain's management style: 'I, as a German, prefer to see India, in spite of everything, under British domination than under the domination of any other country' (Hitler 1925: 313). Of course, this is a nuance of WWII history that very few Indians would be familiar with. But Gandhi is also

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Vignesh conducted March 9, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Sahil, April 4, 2013.



a physically weak figure that a quickly developing superpower does not want to have as its icon: ‘with the ascendancy of the militant Hindu Right, Gandhi’s politics of non-violence [*ahimsa*]...has come increasingly under disrepute as effeminate’ (Wani 2013).

When I questioned another Hitler fan, Poornima, about the state of *ahimsa* in India today, she laid it out in very simple terms: ‘We are on the verge of proving it wrong – we are proving it wrong. Maybe our country could use a little violence. It could use some now.’<sup>15</sup> Gandhi followed *ahimsa* because he believed that a noble goal might become tainted if achieved the wrong way. It was his belief that India’s independence would only be pure if achieved non-violently. As he wrote in 1909 in the *Hind Swaraj*: ‘The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree’ (quoted in Anand 2013). When I asked my informants about the relationship between Netaji and Hitler – if it was right for him to seek the help of history’s most notorious villain – the unanimous answer was that he was doing what was best for India at the time. Forgiveness is even extended to Hitler on the grounds that he was driving toward an end he believed in, no matter what the means. Opinions like these are contrary to Gandhi’s whole philosophy. Gandhi had to work incredibly hard and sacrificed his entire life to keep India unified under *ahimsa*, and that was during his own lifetime. His decrease in popularity can be correlated with a diminishing faith in his philosophy.

Older informants still seemed to possess a special reverence for Gandhi. One 97-year old Tamil Freedom fighter who worked with Netaji personally still harbours a burning rage toward British imperialism: ‘We were slaves!’, he exclaimed at various points throughout our interview, staring me down intently or breaking out into old songs of independence. Like all of my informants, he believed that Netaji’s relationship with Hitler was the right thing to do at the time, but he also understood the Fuhrer’s vileness in the larger historical context. ‘One thing,’ he repeated throughout the interview:

Hitler: Fascist. Mussolini: Fascist. Tojo: Fascist...You must understand! They will not give freedom to any country, they will enslave whole world! This must be understood by the students... Whatever happened should be told exactly, no local pub stories and no extra stories...what exactly happened in WWII should be told to the children at present.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Poornima conducted April 7, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Rajat conducted March 7, 2013.

Both freedom fighters I interviewed who had served in the INA – literally on Hitler’s side – were still adamant Gandhi supporters.<sup>17</sup> An associate history professor of a local college, who blamed ‘video games and the violent media’ for the recent fall in Gandhi’s popularity, offered her thoughts on WWII education: ‘I think these are general things the students should know...everything is intertwined, world history has an impact on them too.’<sup>18</sup>

### **Education**

The most glaring reason for Hitler’s popularity is the lack of education about him. When I first told my fifty-two year old host father about this project, he stared at me blankly for a moment completely mystified. He seemed to possess a vague understanding that something called ‘World War II’ had occurred, but was completely ignorant as to who fought in it, or even its most fundamental background. His severe lack of knowledge was an extreme case, but not altogether unusual. Towards the end of my interview with Ananya, after listening to her wax on about Hitler’s good heart, excellent merit as a family man and nice moustache, I asked her:

NC: What do you know about Germany?

Ananya: Germany?

NC: Yeah.

Ananya: Nothing.

NC: Do you know that Hitler was from Germany?

Ananya: No.

She was also unaware that he had used the swastika as his symbol, or even that he had fought the British. I found this fascinating: to be ignorant and indifferent to Hitler is one thing, but to be ignorant and view him in a positive light seemed entirely nonsensical. ‘I don’t know, I like him,’<sup>19</sup> she giggled when I pressed.

In 2004, high-school textbooks in Gujarat were criticized for offering a ‘frighteningly uncritical picture of Fascism and Nazism,’ according to an article in *The*

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Rajat conducted March 7, 2013; Interview with Napa conducted March 15, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Vera conducted March 12, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Ananya conducted Feb. 21, 2013.

*Times of India*: ‘While a Class VIII student is taught “negative aspects” of Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement, the Class X social studies textbook has chapters on “Hitler, the Supremo” and “Internal Achievements of Nazism”’ (Mehta 2004). I was curious to see how things differed in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

I borrowed an official X-standard social science textbook from an interpreter’s younger brother, stamped by the Government of Tamil Nadu and the Department of School Education. I was initially pleased to see it devoted four full pages to Nazism in Germany. Then I read it. The biography of Adolf’s life began as follows: ‘In 1929 Great Economic Depression also affected the economy of Germany. The Germans were expecting a great leader to save Germany from this agony. At this juncture there emerged a great leader, Adolf Hitler.’ It spoke of his inspiring rags-to-riches story (an aspect of his life unanimously admired by my informants) and described how he had ‘fought bravely [and] was awarded the Iron Cross’ in WWI. It also talked about the early stages of WWII and how the Nazi party had risen to power ‘under the inspiring leadership of Hitler.’

One section did mention that he ‘created a strong unified and highly centralized despotic state’, was cruel to women, outlawed other political parties and removed public liberties. But these facts were interspersed between descriptions about his ‘commendable’ economic work and how ‘Many schools were opened and illiteracy was eradicated’. His foreign policy was described as: ‘forward and aggressive’.

As for the Holocaust, this is what it said, verbatim, spelling errors and all:

The Nazis glorified the German State. Hitler boasted about the superiority of the Nordic race which stood for the rise of all the great culture and had utmost contempt for the Semitic Jews. He wanted to maintain a German race with Nordic elements. He ordered Jews to be persecuted.

That was all. No mention of the death toll of Hitler’s victims, of the concentration camps, of the Holocaust, the gas chambers, the SS or Auschwitz. The quoted words above appear immediately after the heading: ‘Achievements of Hitler’. Even more puzzling was the section on Netaji (his name misspelled ‘Bosh’ in the caption underneath his picture), which read: ‘he escaped from India and reached Germany. He met Hitler, and sought his

help'.<sup>20</sup> There is no mention of the outcome of the meeting, nor that the Fuhrer had openly ridiculed him and India in general.

### **Cultural influences**

One unexpected pattern in my interviews was that my informants continually brought up Eva Braun, Hitler's benevolence as a family man, and his eventual suicide with Braun in the bunker. This theme was surprising because it is not a part of his story that has ever particularly gripped me. Ananya told me that he 'had a kind soul in his heart. Something made him so guilty, that's why he went...and, burst himself.'<sup>21</sup> Hitler's suicide and Braun's decision to follow him seem to resonate very positively in India. Whether or not informants saw any iota of compunction on Hitler's part, his actions in the bunker seem scrupulous, almost romantic to their eyes.

I suggest that this story may strike a romantic chord with Indians because it recalls the cultural concept of *sati*.<sup>22</sup> *Sati*, tritely defined, is 'the former Hindu practice of a widow throwing herself on to her husband's funeral pyre' (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2004: 1227). The practice dates back to at least 316 BCE and was opposed by both the Mughal and British authorities. While it has never been adopted nationwide, it was still popular in various areas across India, especially Bengal, and including Madurai. During British rule 5,997 cases were reported to have occurred between 1815 and 1824 in Bengal *alone* (Sarkar and Sarkar 2007: 33). Although it was officially outlawed by the Indian government in 1987, very rare instances still occur in rural areas today.

Horrendous as this voluntary ritual suicide seems to be, it still enjoys a long, often romanticized history in India and conjures up passionate images of love and devotion. I suggest that Hitler's and Braun's suicides tap into some romanticized cultural consciousness related to *sati*, or to Indian romanticism in general. When I postulated the possible link between Hitler's suicide and *sati* to an older informant she rejected the idea, but offered another in its place: 'It might be because of the love that he had for her. Compare it to Shah Jahan who built the Taj Mahal. He actually died looking at his wife's

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<sup>20</sup> All textbook quotes from: X-Standard Social Studies, Government of Tamil Nadu, 28-29 and 79.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Ananya conducted Feb. 21, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> In Sanskrit, *sati* translates as something like 'virtuous woman', though it has subsequently become attached to the practice of the immolation of widows itself.

tomb...it might be for love.’<sup>23</sup> The Taj Mahal, one of the world’s most impressive symbols of love, is also infamously a symbol of death. It is a mausoleum, and the story goes that Shah Jahan killed all the labourers after its completion so that they could never build another structure equivalent to it.

India recognizes a much closer relationship between love and death than exists in the Western mythos. There are few ‘happily ever after’ love stories throughout classical Indian history and myth. There is sacrifice in the name of love, like Shah Jahan and the goddess Sati, and there is the sacrifice of love itself, like Gandhi, Buddha and various yogis. Even classical feel-good love stories like the Ramayana or the myth of Savitri involve dealings with death. Savitri converses with Yama<sup>24</sup> directly, and Sita undergoes a trial by fire, showing a willingness to die rather than live without love. Love and sacrifice have a strong affinity in India, perhaps unsurprising for a nation built on arranged marriages. This connection may be the reason Hitler’s guilt-ridden suicide and Braun’s *sati* resonate better than Netaji’s marriage or Gandhi’s celibacy.

Tamil Nadu specifically also shares a cultural background of rooting for the villain. While there are many versions of the *Ramayana*, one of the most prevalent in Tamil Nadu is the *Kamba Ramayanam*: ‘In it, Ravana is highly venerated as a Vedic scholar, a connoisseur of music, a warrior – as an epitome of everything moral. In short, Ravana is a tragic hero, not a villain’ (Samudram 2013). As recently as 2010, the blockbuster film *Raavan* put forward this inverted telling of the *Ramayana*. This notion of Ravana as a morally upstanding tragic hero may extend to Hitler as well. There is a long and curious history of Hitler being admired as an impressive Vedic figure. In the nineteen thirties and forties, a Greek nationalist and diehard Hitler worshipper named Savitri Devi<sup>25</sup> was resident in Delhi preaching Nazism and taking part in espionage for the Axis powers. She held ‘that Hitler was an incarnation of Lord Vishnu’ before becoming a driving force behind the neo-Nazi movement after the war (Basu 1999). While Devi is little more than a historical footnote today, I still encountered some unexpected opinions about Hitler’s character.

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Mai conducted March 25, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> The king of death.

<sup>25</sup> Her real name was Maximiani Portas. Apparently, it was eighteenth-century swastikas on the palace of Athens that first piqued her interest in the Aryans, Hitler and the occult.

Maren, a stringent anti-Hitler fan who was *excessively* well versed in India's WWII history, still found him 'magnetic' and irresistibly interesting. 'Girls like bad boys,' she told me. She was especially interested in his personal life, and impressed by how 'he was always eating vegetarian food and almost lived the life of a yogi'.<sup>26</sup> While Maren believed that he was a morally reprehensible character in the end, she touched on a side of Hitler that resonates very well in India. His vegetarianism, along with his use of the swastika and Aryan roots, create a character who, on paper, puts Savitri Devi's admiration of him in a more understandable context.

One of the most reasonable causes of my informants' fandom is also the most frightening: Hitler is the kind of leader they would like to see in office right now. Ananya, Vignesh, Sahil and Poornima all preferred Hitler to Gandhi. When I gave the latter three the choice of who they would rather see in charge of India today, they were all in favour of the Führer.<sup>27</sup> This is not a choice made out of emotion, but rather of frustration. Every single informant I questioned showed disillusionment with the Indian government, especially concerning its massive corruption across all levels. Sahil believes that India is 'still not unified between states' and that past leaders like Gandhi 'could not unify it entirely. In a lot of ways they failed, like with Pakistan.'<sup>28</sup> It is with these issues in mind that Hitler's own management style turns from the sadistic to the efficient. When I asked Vignesh why he would elect Hitler today, he fell into a critique of his own government:

Hitler basically recreated Germany from scrap. Germany was nothing, and Hitler was at the top of his power, and he basically recreated everything, with his strong forces. So, ah, India is actually in a state of very high corruption. Hitler wasn't a corruptionist person. India is totally under corruption. We are not allowed to develop anything. Even when we have to bring out material here in India. For example, even in Madurai. We have to pay bribes to a lot of people.<sup>29</sup>

It is extreme discontent with their own government that attracts my informants towards a supposedly hyper-efficient leader like Hitler. According to Solomon Sopher, the

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Maren conducted March 12, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> I did not ask Ananya, but am very sure that she would share the same opinion. Also, only Sahil preferred Netaji over Hitler.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Sahil, Conducted April 4, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Vignesh conducted March 9, 2013.

president of the Baghdadi Jewish community in Mumbai: ‘Indians are prone to “hero worship”’, and a ‘Lack of examples of strong leadership in India leads the Indian youth to admire Hitler’ (Shaftel 2012). After spending several months there, learning how political leaders like MGR literally sell themselves as heroes and witnessing how modern young Indians idolize professional wrestlers, sports stars and other celebrities, I am inclined to agree. Young Indians, much more so than Americans, are constantly in search of heroes. And it is the voracious attitude of that search that has allowed one of the world’s most heinous villains to slip through the cracks.

### **Discussion**

This project strikes at the very heart of a key anthropological issue, one that Westerners are often confronted with in India: When is it acceptable *not* to withhold judgment? A doctrinaire anthropologist might see no issue in my topic at all. Different cultures have different beliefs; Hitler may be evil to some and misunderstood by others, and neither view can be entirely accurate or forced on the other. In many ways, the textbook is correct: Hitler *was* an inspiring leader, even if he inspired people to do terrible things. Personally, I believe that Hitler has transcended all debate and become the ideal incarnation of evil, just as – perhaps to a lesser extent – Gandhi has become an ideal of good. The question of whether or not it is acceptable for anyone to like Hitler is the underlying anthropological consideration of my project. Can there be a universal, common set of values learnt from world history? Do my informants have any right to insist that Hitler was good, as the British tried to insist that *sati* and the caste system were evil?

I believe that there are universal truths we can draw from history. When TIME did not declare Hitler the most influential person of the century, one of their editors wrote an article defending the choice. One of the reasons she put forward was that Hitler ‘was simply the latest in a long line of murderous figures, stretching back to before Genghis Khan’ (Gibbs 1999). Monstrous though Hitler was, there have been and will always be others like him. The existence of power-hungry villains on earth will never change; the only thing that can change is how the world responds to them.

When I first started this project, I knew it would provide both comedic and shocking moments regarding the Führer. But the importance of my findings reaches much further than I would have anticipated. There are a few specific character traits that drew my informants toward Hitler: his vegetarianism, his suicide, his successes against the British, etc. But the real attraction they feel for him is an attraction towards dictatorship in general. When I asked Poornima if she would welcome a dictator today, she very coyly responded: ‘I can be [the Dictator].’ When I asked her if she would vote for Hitler as prime minister, she told me: ‘I would rather that he didn’t win and just took over the government.’<sup>30</sup>

The single most alluring aspect my informants see in Hitler is his national pride, something they believe is severely lacking in India. ‘In other countries you just see two main parties, the ruling party and the opposing party’, Vignesh explained to me. ‘Here in India we have a party for each street.... So Hitler’s rules and policies would be a great thing here’.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps Hitler’s growing fan club is nothing more than a harmless fad. The first time you see his face on a notebook or a T-shirt, it is funny. The first time I saw a copy of *Mein Kampf* for sale, it was intriguing. But after the interviews and the research I have conducted, I now understand what each of those T-shirts and copies of *Mein Kampf* means. It is not only representative of a growing Hitler fan base, but representative of a growing youth population in India – a nuclear-armed nation of over 1.2 billion people – that would *gladly* welcome a violent, nationalistic dictator tomorrow. Consider that most of the people buying *Mein Kampf* are ‘Indian Business School Students who are looking to it as a Self-Help book’ – exactly those who one day are likely to be in charge of India’s economic power (Nelson 2011).

## **Solutions**

Luckily, unlike most potentially global problems, I believe that this one has a simple resolution. A huge change could be made with just a minor change in education – not a major overhaul of the system, but simply a more considerate and thoughtful approach to how WWII history is taught. None of my informants are bad or heartless people, but they

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Poornima conducted April 7, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Vignesh conducted March 9, 2013.



have been told a different story than other nations are told, and a historically incomplete one at that. It is my firm belief that simply working *Night* or *The Diary of Anne Frank* into the social studies curriculum would cause sales of *Mein Kampf* to plummet.

After my interview with Poornima, she had to go home and study for her tests. She explained to me how her education system works. Essentially, students have to memorize the entirety of whatever textbook they are given. Then they are tested on different sections and must copy them from memory, verbatim. Their tests are matched with the original textbook by someone who does not speak English, and points are deducted for every single word that is wrong, regardless of content. What this means is that every single citizen of Tamil Nadu with a tenth-grade education has memorized the section on Hitler I quoted above. Think of the possible benefit of simply having people commit the phrase ‘Hitler murdered six million innocent Jews’ to memory, rather than ‘Hitler eradicated illiteracy.’

There is nothing inherently wrong with reading *Mein Kampf* through the right lens. Banning it would only increase its allure, and the best way to understand the mistakes of our collective past is to study them. But when students are looking towards it as a self-help manual or in any way as a guide to live their lives, I believe there is a problem. Hitler’s rising popularity is more than a humorous oddity. It represents a shift in the collective consciousness of India’s youth that could potentially effect the direction of India itself. In the end, perhaps the Fuhrer says it best:

‘The man who has no sense of history is like a man who has no ears or eyes.’

Adolf Hitler

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## **Interviews**

Interview with Saanvi conducted Feb.16, 2013, on SITA roof in Madurai.

Interview with Ananya conducted Feb. 21, 2013, on SITA roof in Madurai.

Interview with Rajat conducted March 7, 2013, in his home in Madurai.

Interview with Vignesh conducted March 9, 2013, on SITA roof in Madurai.

Interview with Vera conducted March 12, 2013, at Lady Doak College in Madurai.

Interview with Maren conducted March 12, 2013, at Lady Doak College in Madurai.

Interview with Napa conducted March 15, 2013, in his home in Madurai.

Interview with Mai, March 25, 2013, in her home in Madurai.

Interview with Sahil conducted April 4, 2013, via phone on SITA roof in Madurai.

Interview with Poornima conducted April 7, 2013, on SITA roof in Madurai.