

September 24, 2024

Indians and their Selfies

By: Usha Raman

‘The selfie...offers us a window not only to the individual self, but through its deliberate or incidental positioning, allows us to unpack moments in cultural, civic, social, and political life.’

In India, as in much of the world, it has now become commonplace to see people holding their smartphones aloft to frame themselves against or with something or someone; an ordinary act of writing into the digital archive, positioning oneself within geography and culture, marking relationships with one’s identified social world. But even as these images are saved on our phones and hard drives, they lend themselves to discovery, through platforms and the social web, their metadata traceable and trackable.

The selfie is a way of making oneself as we make our place in the world. It is one of those many digital artifacts that has become not only “everyday” in the fundamentally sociological sense of the word, but also the basis for a range of structuring forces ranging from state surveillance to citizenship benefits to the building of belongingness and cultural affinities. In the impulse to take a selfie, there is a desire to be seen, to be noted as belonging to time, place, and public, to imprint ourselves, with the tools at our disposal, on the fabric of contemporary life.

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“Selfie culture” – as some might dismissively refer to this desire to capture and insert one’s image into the unending stream of user-generated online content – has been recognised by scholars of the internet as a phenomenon that recalls a longer history of representing the self. It has, in fact, been described as the quintessential media phenomenon of our times – both as product and process. Rachel Syme, in a [much-read essay](#) on Medium, notes that the selfie taker has “declared, in just a few clicks, that she deserves, in that moment, to be seen”.

But what might the selfie mean in India, a country of 1.4 billion, where invisibility is both a socio-cultural and political condition, and where the right to be seen, heard, and acknowledged accrues to a very small percentage of the population? We often talk about how mainstream media focuses only on the rich, famous, and powerful, ignoring the faces and voices of those marginalised by gender, caste, class, and region – the visible “shining India” and its less visible hinterlands, comprised of those who have not been able to fully participate in modern democracy.

The rapid proliferation of cheap smartphones and data (with over a billion users online according to [one estimate](#)) has given access to the means to lay claim to a corner of the internet and nudge oneself into a space where visibility becomes a distinct possibility. But as in many transitional societies, the desire and pursuit of visibility in the context of India could be a fraught exercise, particularly at the current political moment when certain articulations of identity could come at considerable risk.

The selfie, as an individual expression, affords a route to differentiation from the masses while also marking connection. Social media spaces, while to a large extent governed by algorithms that favour the popular and the paid, have allowed for people (both individuals and communities) to carve out spaces where they become visible to themselves and to self-organised groups. This is the space where the selfie finds a natural home. Initiatives like [FACES](#) from the People’s Archive of Rural India attempt to broaden the popular imagination of what India looks like, but the act of individual selfie-taking is distinct though related to such civic projects. It is driven more by a sense of autonomy and agency that gives control over self-representation.

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As part of a [project](#) that examined how, among other things, digital self-expression through the act of self-portraiture reconfigures notions of subjectivity, intimacy, spatiality, and power, my colleagues and I studied a range of contexts within which selfies emerge in the Indian subcontinent – those personally driven as well as produced in response to socio-cultural and political systems and structures.

Even as the selfie may be a tool for presenting and experimenting with creative expressions of the self, unlike the analogue photograph, the digital and online image is a data point susceptible to biometric control and data mining. Increasingly, it is a mutable object that can also be taken apart and added to, without consent, stored in databases and linked with other types of electronic information. Scholar of human geography Ayona Dutta points to the surveillant possibilities that arise with what we may call the indiscriminate uploading of selfies. The more we claim space online, the more we allow ourselves to be seen, the more vulnerable we are to being watched.

The normalisation of the selfie as something we do, and something we share, makes it a particularly slippery object in terms of mutability, ownership, and fixity. Even as we may set privacy controls on our social media accounts and share our images selectively among carefully curated communities, we also buy into the convenience of using the self-image to mark ourselves present in the polity.

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For instance, the recently launched [Digi-Yatra](#) app – promoted by the Government of India even though [elements of its operations remain opaque](#) – facilitates a shortcut through airport security by uploading a selfie and authenticating it against the biometric identity document, the Aadhar, and busy travellers trade data leakage concerns for the convenience of bypassing long security queues. In the face of convenience, particularly in a country where systemic efficiency is something of a novelty, it is unsurprising that people would trade something as ordinary as a selfie for smooth passage. The slipperiness of the protections afforded by the recent [Personal Data Protection Act](#) passed by the Government of India make it difficult for private citizens to lay boundaries around the use of these images.

The selfie, like much of our digital presence, lies at the cusp of the personal and the political, the public and the private. Depending on the context within which it is produced, it can assume multiple roles. [Gabriel Dattatreyan](#) describes how young men from the margins who photograph themselves in public parks and around monuments in Delhi are doing so as a way of occupying place, fashioning identity and participating in masculine becoming. But then the selfie can also be a tool for control and enforcing work/time discipline, note [Martin Webb and his co-authors](#), when a gig worker offering housekeeping services must upload his image, gloved and masked, for recognition on the platform.

Yet the selfie, as process and product, is agentive and liberating, allowing us to be multiple and various, put ourselves on the map of our city, or nation, drawing ourselves with and among objects and places that speak for us as much as our bodies do. Pooja selfies shared on family WhatsApp groups lay claim to cultural identity even as they may be critiqued for virtue signalling, much like “reading the Constitution on a Republic Day” Instagram reel lays claim to certain liberal politics. This is particularly significant in the current moment in Indian civic life, where claims to citizenship and heritage are hotly contested. Some selfies, argue [Avishek Ray and Neha Gupta](#), construct and display an aesthetic sensibility as they firmly position the self within an “Instaworthy” location. And here, the selfie is also implicated in the capitalist machinery that drives much of the web, particularly when tagged in ways that may feed into commercial endorsements, curatorial influence, and political narrativising.

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In late 2023, several “3D selfie points” were set up across the country, at railway stations and outside federal buildings (including public universities), with life-size images of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, reportedly on the orders of the government. Large cut-outs of the PM with a variety of backdrops representing different national achievements invited passers-by to stop and take a picture, playing on the widespread fascination with selfie-taking. In April 2024, [two men were hit](#) by a speeding car as they posed for selfies on a cable bridge in Hyderabad, prompting a discussion about the downsides of what is often described as an obsession with selfies.

The selfie, thus, offers us a window not only to the individual self, but through its deliberate or incidental positioning, allows us to unpack moments in cultural, civic, social, and political life. The mobile-powered selfie is a statement and a provocation. It gives the marginalised young Indian man to write himself into being by striking a pose against the flashy lights of a mall, a backdrop that symbolises everything that excludes him. It gives the teenager from a conservative family the frame within which she can picture herself with a sense of the glamorous and the forbidden. And when the itinerant worker holds his phone aloft to place himself

alongside the image of the country’s leader, he feels the comforting weight and the attendant privilege of citizenship – or so the hope goes.

Usha Raman is Professor & Head of the Department of Communication at Sarojini Naidu School of Arts & Communication, University of Hyderabad.

This article was first published in [India in Transition](#), a publication of the Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania.