I have tried to show how gender was central to the creation of a sexualised and communalised Hindu identity in colonial UP. Hindu publicists sought to establish the honour, prestige and respectability of the Hindu household and family, to work out a definable community identity and a vibrant Hindu nation. The period was marked by conservative sexual politics and a growing fear of romance and bodily pleasure. This was reflected in the devaluation of specific literary styles and women’s entertainment. Literary works were subject to new aesthetic standards and women’s popular and oral cultural practices to a moral ethic. Cultural representation occasionally spilled into social settings, and there was a geographical displacement of prostitutes and dais.

Through their writings, Hindu publicists were able to ‘normalise’ disciplinary strategies without overt coercion, by gaining access to and commenting upon the mundane. Mechanisms of surveillance were imbued with new meanings via reworked codes of conjugality, law, clothes, hygiene and health. The vast didactic literature of the time reveals shifting narratives of respectability and chastity, stressing changes in the social and customary behaviour of women and a realignment of gender roles. These reformist endeavours implied the need for insidious control over women even as they had an affinity with Hindu nationalist civilising rhetoric. Liberal Advocacies such as education for women, doing away with purdah, and widow remarriage were subverted: reforms were often synonymous with regulation. The formal script of reforms moved in a pendulum,
throwing up limited avenues for women but frequently ending up prescribing further gender and sexual norms, or vindicating community authority.

The rhetoric of respectability and community identity did not just enclose women. It also laid bare the crisis of Hindu men and their anxieties. Denunciation of male-male bondings, alternative sexualities, and advertisements for aphrodisiacs jostled with promotions for sexual containment of the male and brahmacharya for national regeneration, and of assertions of masculinity in language debates. Hindu publicists desperately needed to promote masculinity: it enabled them to conflate denunciations of weakness and the cowardice of Hindus with images of the cruel and lustful Muslim male.

Hindu publicists were culturally adjusting and responding to new opportunities and tastes, considerably influenced by the West, with a drive for 'modernisation' and 'civilisation'. At the same time, the anxiety and economic insecurity felt by a number of castes led them to seek 'indigenous' and 'traditional' methods of cultural distinctiveness and respectability. Thus, their vocabulary embodied a modern India without jeopardising tradition, as the apparent oppositions of indigenous and Western, moral and material, Hindu piety and science—all remained points of reference. Both domestic and public arenas were important for articulating this distinct Hindu identity. Equally significant—as seen in discussions around Holi, prostitutes, education and the law—colonial authorities were often influenced by and drew from indigenous concerns. In fact the patriarchal inclinations of Western and Hindu voices often converged and overlapped.

Identities are not fixed or singular. The projection of a cohesive Hindu community identity had constantly to negotiate with other collective identities, such as caste and class, for in social ways Hindus are vertically and horizontally divided. Yet caste distinctions and communal divisions are not necessarily contradictory. They can co-exist in an uneasy relationship, with a constant shifting of emphasis according to context and moment. It has been argued that identity is the very process by which the multiplicity, contradiction and instability of subjectivity is signified as having coherence, continuity, stability; as having a core—a continually changing core but the sense