

Truth and Deception in the Digital Age: Navigating the Culture of Misinformation

An Anthology

Edited by *Osama Manzar*
& *Dushyant Arora*



‘Satyameva Jayate’ (Truth Alone Triumphs) is not just India’s national emblem but a profound value that the nation strives for. Yet, is truth genuinely prevailing in contemporary India? And can truth itself be manipulated to serve the ends of misinformation?

Curated by **Osama Manzar** and **Dushyant Arora**, “Truth and Deception in The Digital Age: Navigating the Culture of Misinformation” offers an intersectional examination of the multifaceted challenges of misinformation in India. Through diverse lenses—Gender, Class, Geo-Politics, Public Health, Cinema, and more—this anthology unravels the intricacies and implications of a post-truth society in one of the world’s most complex democracies.

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Our Editors

The Digital Empowerment Foundation helps connect and digitally enable communities that are underserved and at the margins across the country, and works in research, advocacy and policy building in digital empowerment, access, rights and justice.

Along with Osama Manzar, the Founder-Director of DEF, and Dushyant Arora, Partner at Clinch Legal, Preamble Advisors and Authentic Kahaniyan, coordinated with the participants to build the essays that culminated in this book.

Dr. Arpita Kanjilal, Communications and Media Department, DEF, gave shape to the book by compiling the essays, and doing the editing, proofreading and coordination work with the Editors and Authors of the book.

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Disempowering Misinformation: How can we Secure Humanity from this Pandemic?

**By Osama Manzar &
Dushyant Arora**

Just like the World Health Organisation, we need a World Information Organisation. Unfortunately, what is happening is that in the guise of checking misinformation, censorship is being increased, thus furthering misinformation even more.

We are writing this in 2023 in India. At least one generation is alive, which has witnessed a period when “official information” meant either radio or newspapers. Then came television, novel as it initially was, and brought with it state-approved information delivered via a new medium. To cut a very long story short, private news channels, the personal computer, the internet, a limited number of internet-based “news” providers, blogging, the personal mobile phone, and the smartphone came to the party breathlessly and in short intervals. Today, every WhatsApp message, tweet, TikTok video, every bot farm, and every YouTube video could be “news” or “information”.

Earlier, the government was the ultimate arbiter of truth. Newspapers were believed to have extraordinary legitimacy. There were very few producers of information and not too many consumers also. It is not that rumor and propaganda did not exist. It is not that both did not give rise to large-scale violence. However, the number of entities who wielded the power to create misinformation at scale was limited. Today, the number of powerful agents who have the funds, infrastructure, and personnel to create misinformation at international scale has proliferated. Corporations, intelligence agencies, politicians, governments, billionaires, and many others now produce, use, and distribute the message and the loudspeaker.

The number of those who can create misinformation at a national/global scale, without even meaning to, has also proliferated. World peace is at the mercy of the next “viral” WhatsApp message.

There has also been a cultural shift. Truth has long been unequivocally celebrated as the ultimate virtue. In the Indian epic Mahabharata, Yudhishtira is celebrated for his reluctance to speak falsehood. Mahatma Gandhi arguably made truth the foremost human duty. Satyameva Jayate (Truth Alone Triumphs) became India's national emblem. Mainstream Hindi cinema also sang the virtues of truth, literally and metaphorically. The film *Teesri Kasam* had the famous song "*Sajan Re Jhooth Mat Bolo, Khuda Ke Paas Jaana hai*" (Let's not lie friend, we have to face God), and the more masala 'Bobby' sang "Jhooth Bole Kauwa Kaate" (Crows bite liars). A few decades later, you had the then superstar Govinda dancing to "Kaun Kehta hai muh kaala hai jhooth ka, sach hai ye sach bol baala hai jhooth ka" (Who says falsehood is tainted? It is true that lies win the day). A more recent film is titled "Tu Jhoothi Main Makkaar" (You Liar, Me Cheat). This is not to say that the scourge of misinformation is limited to India, but this anthology is examining the challenge from an India-specific lens, and it is important to understand the regional context.

Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) began with a mission to bridge the digital divide. The goal was simple - connect the disconnected. Two decades later, matters are not that simple.

Make no mistake, the number of those disconnected continues to be in the millions. However, the challenge is not limited to empowering the disconnected to access the digital realm. A person who is connected and has access but does not have the skills or tools to distinguish between information, misinformation, and disinformation may well be less empowered or disempowered compared to a person without no access to digital, but with the community structures and the techniques to distinguish between truth and falsehood.

With the advent and explosion of misinformation on the internet, DEF's mission and challenge suddenly expanded manifold. Insofar as empowerment is concerned, the difference between the connected and the disconnected has blurred. It is now essential that the connected be assisted in their journey towards becoming 'Media and Information literate.'

In the past few years, DEF has been expanding efforts towards combating misinformation. One such effort is called Developing Rural Ecosystem Against Misinformation (DREAM). This is a project DEF is doing in

collaboration with the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) in order to counter the misinformation. This is a hyper-local fact-checking initiative rooted in community-level interventions through Community Radio Stations (CRSs) and Digital Community Information Resource Centers (DCIRCs). The project used Community Radios (CRs) as a tool to reach the larger community. Community Radios, as institutions, have a mandate to serve the information needs of the community and can be potential stakeholders in dealing with unintended consequences of an information-dense ecosystem and increase penetration and adoption of mobile phones, the internet, and social media platforms like WhatsApp.

Team DEF was on the ground during the Farmer protests in 2020-2021, rigorously documenting and analysing the discourse. One of the many reports that came out of this effort was titled “*Reclaiming the Narrative: What Farmer Protests & Trolley Times Tell Us About The Media’s Systemic Failure.*” Similarly, DEF documented the engagement, disconnection, and discontent of the migrant workers who walked thousands of kilometers. One of many reports published on this is titled ‘*Following the Migrants Home.*’ DEF also catalogued and analysed the flow of misinformation and propaganda during the Covid-19 pandemic generally.

Once upon a time, authentic information was the norm, and misinformation was the exception. This has changed now. An apt

Today, the number of powerful agents who have the funds, infrastructure, and personnel to create misinformation at international scale has proliferated. Corporations, intelligence agencies, politicians, governments, billionaires, and many others now produce, use, and distribute the message and the loudspeaker.

analogy is law and order machinery being the norm and the Mafia being the exception to the norm. Currently, however, this has reversed. Countless local, national, and global cartels have brought billions of innocent people to their knees with the weapon of misinformation. The crisis is dire and requires local, national, and global crisis management, equal if not greater than that demonstrated during the Covid pandemic. Just like the World Health Organisation, we need a World Information Organisation. Unfortunately, what is happening is that in the guise of checking misinformation, censorship is being increased, thus furthering misinformation even more.

All is not doom and gloom. There is a lot of good work being done. It is obviously impossible to create an exhaustive list here, but two initiatives caught our eye. First, a three-day event was organized by the Nobel Prize (Foundation), which convened Nobel Laureates to discuss the threat of information. It is heartening to see the foundation do its bit to ensure that the world takes this crisis seriously. The second is a toolkit developed by DW Akademie and Namibian illustrator Karel Swanepoel developed the 'MIL Heroes Toolkit', a bunch of visual characters - based on the five Media and Information competencies: Access, Analyze, Create, Reflect, and Act.

The following description from DW Akademie's website is pertinent: *"MIL practitioners around the world can use these visualizations to teach MIL competencies and to make these skills more tangible in terms of visible character attributes. This encourages youth to become MIL Heroes as they can see themselves in the characters. It, therefore, rose the question if the heroes could have potentially higher personal resonance if their personification was contextualised? In this light, we took the opportunity to adapt the MIL Heroes into the Mexican setting when the Mexican MIL Network (Red AMI México) invited the Heroes to Mexico. They made their first appearance at a MIL Hackathon, organized by the tech start-up Tomato Valley and supported by DW Akademie, UNESCO Mexico and the National Electoral Institute. Since then, MIL Heroes have turned Mexico into their new home to inspire youth to become MIL Heroes."*

Fortunately, DEF has partnered with DW Akademie and has developed the Indian version of MIL Heroes and Villains and gone a step further to adapt characters of Heroes and Villains into masks and puppets and the whole MIL toolkit is doing rounds to conduct street plays and learning curriculum through gamification.

Coming back to this anthology, this is also yet another attempt by DEF to analyze misinformation in the Indian context from an intersectional lens.

As you navigate through these pages, you will engage with ten diverse essays, each a beacon of critical thinking, each a testament to the power of informed discourse. The essays, while unique in their focus, are bound by a shared thread — the unwavering commitment to uncovering truth and fostering dialogue.

Arun Teja Polcumpally's discourse on surveillance in "Internet, Cognitive Bias and Dangers of Perception Control," is a stark reminder of the era we inhabit — an era where our digital footprints echo louder than our voices. The essay stirs us to question the role of advanced information technologies in shaping perceptions and their wider implications on democratic systems.

In a profound exploration of the intersection between social media and mental health, Ankit Gupta 'Aseer's "The Dangerous Side of Influence: The Misrepresentation of Mental Health in Indian Digital Space," throws light on the misleading narratives spun by influencers devoid of professional expertise. It's a call to arms—a plea for responsible content consumption and the need for professional mental health practitioners to reclaim this crucial discourse.

Through the lens of legal, policy, and data aspects, Brindaalakshmi K. unravels the complexities of misinformation surrounding transgender rights in India in "Transgender Rights in India and its Long History of Misinformation". The essay reminds us of the inextricable link between the past and the present and the role of historical and legal contexts in shaping contemporary narratives.

A physician-scientist's journey unfurls in Cyriac Abby Philips' "Welcome to a World Without Rules," embodying the challenges of debunking health misinformation in the face of substantial backlash. It's a testament to the courage of truth-seekers in a world fraught with misinformation.

The remaining essays continue this journey, illuminating the landscape of misinformation from diverse vantage points. They reflect on the role of rumours in social hostilities, dissect the impact and ineffectiveness of internet blackouts, and shed light on the disturbing reality of online hate campaigns.

Together, we have the power to chart a course through the maze of misinformation, to restore the sanctity of our shared stories, and to create a world where truth triumphs and understanding abounds.

Delving deeper into the anthology, Intifada P. Basheer's "Rumours in the Age of Social Media: A Study of Targeted Attacks on Migrants in Tamil Nadu," offers a riveting exploration of a politically motivated misinformation campaign that led to a mass exodus of migrant labourers. The essay reveals how, within the span of a few months, thousands of lives were uprooted, and the state's socioeconomic equilibrium was disrupted. This narrative is not just about tracing the anatomy of this campaign; it is also a poignant reminder of human lives caught in the crosshairs of misinformation.

Mani Chander's "With the Rise of Misinformation, Danger Lurks in the Third Pillar of Democracy," pens a disturbing reflection on how misinformation has not even spared the hallowed temples of justice. It is clearly a fallacious and dangerous assumption that only the uneducated fall prey to misinformation.

Mohammed Zeeshan's essay How Hindu Nationalist Propaganda is Derailing India's Global Influence, brings home the reality that all misinformation and all propaganda is simultaneously local and global. The Frankensteins of propaganda being manufactured for domestic politics will spread their tentacles far and wide and will not recognise borders.

"India's Internet Blackouts: An Ineffective Strategy Against Misinformation," by Rumi, forces us to confront a disturbing truth - India, the world's largest democracy, also leads in internet shutdowns. While this practice is often justified as a measure against

misinformation, the essay critically examines its effectiveness and the profound socio-economic impacts it engenders. This essay is a clarion call for a more holistic approach to address misinformation, one that does not compromise the fundamental rights and everyday lives of millions.

Sakshi Wadhwa's "Online Hate Campaigns Against Women: Exploring the Instrumentalization of Women and Denial of the Right to Speak in Online Space," exposes the digital manifestation of a timeless social malady—the persecution of women. The essay paints a disturbing picture of online hate campaigns, particularly those targeting women belonging to persecuted communities. It compels us to reckon with the pervasive stain of patriarchy that mars even our digital spaces and to envision an online world that respects and protects the rights of all individuals to express their views freely.

In the essay "Online Abuse of Sportswomen and Sportspersons from Minority Communities: A Crushing Blow to the Spirit of Sports," Shruti Jahagirdar brings to the fore a trend that tarnishes the spirit of sports—online abuse targeted at athletes from minority communities. By recounting high-profile incidents of such abuse, the essay underscores the need for legal and technological reforms. This piece is not just about the challenges sportspersons face; it is also a celebration of their resilience and a call to action for creating a more inclusive sporting landscape.

Tanya Maheshwari & Sureet Singh's "Media and the Marginalized: A Critical Examination of Class, Caste, and Religious Bias in Indian Media," offers a powerful critique of media representation in India. It shines a light on the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of the working class, people experiencing poverty, and marginalized communities. This critique is a call to acknowledge and address the structural biases that pervade our media and to strive for a more authentic and inclusive representation.

The anthology culminates with Vamsi Krishna Pothuru's "Fighting Fake News on the Ground: Empowering Indian Villages through a Grassroots Approach". The essay provides a beacon of hope in our battle against fake news. It highlights the crucial role of Community Radio Stations, public awareness campaigns, and digital literacy programs in tackling misinformation at the grassroots level. It is an affirmation of our belief

in the power of local communities and a roadmap to a future where every individual, irrespective of their location or socio-economic status, is empowered to discern truth from falsehood.

In an epoch defined by digital transformations and an overwhelming deluge of information, these narratives serve as a compass, guiding us towards a future that is more informed, inclusive, and enlightened. Together, we have the power to chart a course through the maze of misinformation, to restore the sanctity of our shared stories, and to create a world where truth triumphs and understanding abounds. As we venture into this journey, let us carry with us the insights gleaned from these essays and the hope they inspire. After all, the battle against misinformation is not just about challenging falsehoods; it is about safeguarding our collective wisdom, our shared humanity, and our hope for a brighter, more truthful tomorrow.





Chapter 1

**Internet, Cognitive
Bias and Dangers of
Perception Control**

Arun Teja Polcumpally

Abstract

The article aims to provide a conceptual yet simple understanding of the relationship between the Internet and social hostilities. Social hostilities will be explained in terms of cognitive bias resulting from unregulated Internet communication. The relationship between the Internet and social hostilities will be observed by analysing how the control of Internet platforms will provide the power to control public perception. The analysis will use the Pew Research Center reports on social hostilities, State control, and other secondary research material. This essay will contribute to a broader and more vivid understanding of unregulated and over-regulated Internet risks.

Keywords

Internet, Social hostilities, State, Control

Introduction

Gone are the days when only CCTVs were used for public and private surveillance. Surveillance has reached a point where advanced information technologies can influence public or individual perception and even democratic systems (Beens, 2020; Bhattacharjee, 2017; Andersen, 2020; Chakravarthy, 2020). Social media profiles are enough to understand and track an individual's activities accurately. States and private companies track individuals online without looking for their physical presence. An article by the European Commission reveals that a surveillance camera with computer vision technology and an Internet connection can identify a person by their actions and walking style without focusing on their face (Cartwright, 2016). Another sophisticated surveillance is the monitoring and tracking of online behaviour. Websites and online service providers can track users by their browsing patterns. The latter data, combined with the social media data of an individual, is used for political influence.

When online platforms are used to restrict or influence the thought process of individuals, and surveillance technology creates inherent self-censorship, it is a threat to democracy. The scandal of Cambridge Analytica (Wylie, 2019) and the revelations of NSA files by Edward Snowden (Snowden, 2019) strengthened the narratives on how advanced digital technologies corrupt the existing democratic systems. The above assertions and the popular narratives in the media regarding advanced technologies and democracy have gone to such an extent that the novel "1984," written by George Orwell, is thought to have become a reality (Power, 2016). The novel shows an extreme picture of digital surveillance, which can be a reality in the coming years if these technologies are used with an undue advantage for political goals. This article is written with this background and inquires how these technologies impact democracy, focusing on India.

Social Hostilities and Internet Restrictions

A research report released by 'Pew' shows that social hostilities, a societal phenomenon, are indirectly proportional to government restrictions (Majumdar, 2022). The report shows that India is in the top position in social hostilities involving religion but does not appear in

the top list in government restrictions. However, if looked at the report’s baseline years, social hostilities in India and government restrictions are increasing. Table 1 compares the baseline year’s data and the year 2020 data.

Table 1: Comparison of 2007 and 2020 SHI and GRI Indices (Author created the table from the data published in the 2022 Pew research report)

2007		2020	
Government Restriction Index (max 10)	Social Hostilities Index (max 10)	Government Restriction Index (max 10)	Social Hostilities Index (max 10)
4.8	8.8	5.8	9.4

India is not alone here. This has been a global trend. Table 2 shows that all the countries in South Asia and China have increased their government restrictions.

Table 2: Country Wise Comparison of SHI and GRI Indices (Author prepared the table from the data taken from the 2022 Pew report)

Country	2007		2020	
	Government Restriction Index (max 10)	Social Hostilities Index (max 10)	Government Restriction Index (max 10)	Social Hostilities Index (max 10)
India	4.8	8.8	5.8	9.4
Afghanistan	5.3	8.8	5.8	9.4
Pakistan	5.8	8.9	6.4	7.5
Sri Lanka	4.0	7.8	5.4	6.5
Nepal	3.4	4.2	4.7	3.6
Bangladesh	4	8.3	4.8	7.0
China	7.8	0.9	9.3	0.1

The capacity of advanced information technologies to disrupt

democracies worldwide is observed in the introduction. The analysis of the Pew report observes the trend of increasing State control over religious activities. Based on the above, this article delves further into conceptualising how the Internet has changed social relations worldwide.

Background and Problematic of the Digital World

The Internet and allied technologies are so capable that State intelligence agencies must change the process of acquiring Human Intelligence (HUMINT) (Katz, 2020). They probably use Internet communication tracking tools such as XKeyscore, which the US National Security Agency (NSA) uses to monitor the Internet communication of any individual worldwide (Rosenblatt, 2014). In geopolitics, a tussle between the countries is increasingly observed regarding AI development (Lee, 2018), silicon chips (Miller, 2022), and advanced technology transfers. A notable example is the trade tussle between the US and China. The US outrightly banned the export and sharing of advanced technologies. The report of Section 301 investigation of the US Trade Act directly opposes technology transfers to China to secure US hegemony (Congressional Research Service, 2022). The pervasive nature of the Internet is evident from all these events (though limited in this text). It provides capacities to the State and private companies to snoop over individual life. This capacity will restrict an individual's liberty if utilised without any restrictions.

The fears of the State having an undue advantage over Internet communications are also observed in academic publications. 'Bigdata' and 'Business' confluence is termed 'Surveillance Capitalism' (Duberry, 2022). The excessive control of the Internet communication platforms like Facebook, Google search engine, and enterprise-level applications like Amazon Web Services is deemed to result in the charge of 'Platform Capitalism' (Srnicsek, 2017). Such is the impact of advanced digital companies, and the academic narratives reiterate the ongoing question of how these technologies impact democracy and existing social relations.

When these technologies are used in autocratic or theocratic countries like Saudi Arabia or China, these technologies do not surprise or ring

the alarm of danger. However, when such technologies are used within democracies, the core fundamentals will be disturbed. Disturbance of free elections (Kamarck, 2018), violation of privacy and autonomy of an individual (Manheim & Kaplan, 2019), and corruption of public deliberation using misinformation (Serbanescu, 2021) are some examples.

Importantly, the domestic social contract will be impacted. As explained by Rousseau, it is a non-tangible understanding between the public and the State. As a part of the domestic social contract, the public gives away their freedom in exchange for security provided by the State. When advanced digital technologies with pervasive surveillance capabilities are used by the State and a few global companies, and the narratives like Surveillance capitalism (Shoshana, 2018) and Platform Capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017) seem persuasive, people tend to lose trust in democratic systems. There is an increasing distrust among the public owing to the usage of surveillance technologies or the existence of unregulated Internet communication platforms. These fears were exacerbated when States forced themselves to use surveillance systems during the COVID-19 pandemic (Medicott, 2020).

Heuristic observation is enough to wonder about the rise in the authoritarian behaviour of States globally. With the increase in Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems, States are prone to use mass and pervasive surveillance (Feldstein S., 2021), and militaries are researching lethal autonomous weapon systems. Some are already deployed (Russel, Aguirre, Javorsky, & Tegmark, 2020). V-dem, an institute based at the Department of Political Science of the University of Gothenburg, Sweden (Anna Lührmann, 2020), and Feldstein's AI Surveillance index funded by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Feldstein S., 2022) assert that States are prone to use more hyper-surveillance systems to have control over their population. The author's research published earlier concludes that there is a direct correlation between the increase in the usage of digital technology in governance and authoritarianism (Polcumpally, 2022).

It is worrisome that the V-Dem report of 2021 categorises India as an 'Electoral Autocracy.' Freedom house report 2021 categorises India in its freedom index as 'Partially free' (Freedomhouse, 2021). V-Dem ranking considers Internet freedom to be a key factor, which is considered the foundation for democracy. However, attributing personal liberty

A domestic social contract is a non-tangible understanding between the public and the State. As a part of the domestic social contract, the public gives away their freedom in exchange for security provided by the State. When advanced digital technologies with pervasive surveillance capabilities are used by the State and a few global companies, and the narratives like Surveillance Capitalism and Platform Capitalism seem persuasive, people tend to lose trust in democratic systems.

to democracy may be a stretch (Brennan, 2016). Though there are supporting and opposing arguments on the direct correlation between freedom and democracy, freedom to express oneself is a foundation for making political decisions. This is true, at least in capitalistic and participative democracies.

Confirmation Bias, Internet and the Problematic

Apart from the above-introduced risks that democracies face, an imminent danger disturbs the societal fabric within democracies. It is Internet communication that leads to confirmation bias among the public. Unregulated Internet can cause 'filter bubbles,' encouraging the public to consider their biased opinions truths (Burns, 2019). Such phenomena will increase the existing vagaries and vicissitudes in society. Indian government vehemently discarded the V-Dem ranking system and the Internet Freedom Index, claiming that India has robust democratic systems (The Wire, 2021), and the foreign minister Jaishanker asserted that the countries that cry foul are hypocritic (Roy, 2021).

Conclusion: The Debate on the Probable Future of the Democracies

Before concluding the chapter, here are some of the methods that are already in use to understand the impacts and the risks of frontier digital technologies in society.

1. Anticipatory research conducted ex-ante to understand all the possible risks of the technology on society. Some of the examples are ex-ante research on nanotechnology (Guston, 2014) and responsible research and innovation on Artificial Intelligence (Boulainin et al., 2020).
2. Conduct continuous research to understand the risk and impacts of technologies like AI. This is very much like what the US Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework advises (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2023).
3. Inclusion of AI ethics in the AI design, not after the deployment of the AI system.

All three mentioned methods assist in systematically understanding the risks posed by frontier technologies on society and help to bring out certain regulatory frameworks. Information is considered a basic functionary of the social and is increasingly realised in post-industrial society (Kuzmenkov, Starostenko, Soina, & Chekulaev, 2021).

The increase in information consumption by the public and the impacted social interactions lead to various questions regarding the future direction of societies worldwide. One of the many questions brought about by the extensive information consumption by the public is whether the Internet would bring hypernomia or anomia (Kuzmenkov, Starostenko, Soina, & Chekulaev, 2021).

The Dichotomy of Hypernomia and Anomia in the Internet Era

Hypernomia is a stalemated nature of society that is built on strict hierarchies and social order. Anomie is the opposite of the latter, highlighting the anarchy of a society. The same question can also be considered a debate between the Internet and allied technologies pitching Rosenau's social contract against Hobbes' anarchism.

Internet access allowed the public to be informed about almost

anything. Such access will enable people to understand society better and make informed decisions. This technological innovation helped the public to break the information control by a few and create ways to fight social injustices. While advancing society's knowledge consumption, it parallelly deepens societal divides.

The Internet creates filter bubbles with increased content and content generators (Burns, 2019). It is a phenomenon where the public increasingly consumes biased information to validate their selfish arguments. With the increase in filter bubbles, historical myths become truths because people tend to accept them as realities after watching uncorroborated evidence on WhatsApp and other social media. Media houses have also circulated such un-corroborated information. Indian national media 'The Wire' cited a BOOM report showcasing 40 fake national news reports by Indian media in 2020 (Niranjankumar & Chowdhury, 2020). This report hypothesises that the national media gathers information without proper research or validating facts.

Role of Low-Quality Journalism in Perpetuating Hypernomia

Low-quality journalism earned ill-fame for Indian media houses, especially the electronic media, which is criticised for its low standards (Garg, 2020). Recalling the earlier argument '*whether the Internet would bring hypernomia or anomia,*' the filter bubble phenomenon might hypothesise that society, with the help of the Internet, and social media, would strengthen the biased social structures. Perhaps, it might create hypernomia.

The average time an individual spends on the phone is around 4.5 hours per day in India, as per the report sourced by the Times of India (Times of India, 2022). Data consumption per individual is 14 GB per month, per the article published in Financial Express (FE Bureau, 2021). Such heavy Internet usage allows the public to consume information at will. Pew research reports that people are unclear about the correctness of the information they consume on social media (Smith, Silver, Johnson, Taylor & Jiang, 2019).

The statistics presented in the report show no conclusive evidence that social media has more fake news than other media platforms. However, daily life observations confirm the issue of social media-anchored misinformation, at least at an individual level. Misinformation and

filter bubbles should be considered dangerous to maintaining societal peace and order. As described in the article, there is an increase in social unrest and government restrictions on religious activities. In this scenario, misinformation will strengthen the filter bubbles.

AI and Recommendation Algorithms: The New Gatekeepers of Information Today, with the emergence of technologies like AI, recommendation algorithms are increasingly taking over the agency of humans (Schrage, 2020). Though it appears that people have a choice because of their information, only a few realise that the choices are restrictive. The biased results of recommendation algorithms again force us to think that the Internet and allied technologies are reshaping and strengthening hypernomia. No matter how much we argue about the goodness of these digital technologies, their percolation into society is becoming ubiquitous. Now, what matters is how we decide to use them. In the words of Harari,

“... it will not matter whether computers will be conscious or not. It will matter only what people think about it.” (Harari, 2016)

Harari opines that human experiences are interactive outcomes of historical data points. He calls this approach to understanding human social as ‘*Dataism*.’ Harari’s argument is brought to showcase the scholarly debates around the confluence of digital technologies and the new social. If ‘*Dataism*’ helps create robust recommendation

The biased results of recommendation algorithms again force us to think that the Internet and allied technologies are reshaping and strengthening hypernomia. No matter how much we argue about the goodness of these digital technologies, their percolation into society is becoming ubiquitous. Now, what matters is how we decide to use them.

algorithms for Internet companies, digital technologies may create a strict hypernomia, creating a society like Bentham's panopticon.

For some countries like China, strict hypernomia could be necessary to maintain a peaceful and orderly society. Conversely, the US sides with 'anomia', emphasising the free market and individualism. Though India has taken a free market and individualism approach, the recent political developments and the above-discussed outcomes of the Pew report showcase its authoritarian nature. Countries worldwide choose between strict control and freedom, but there is no conclusion on how digital technologies will impact society.

No matter the outcome, the impact of digital technologies on society is a choice made by policymakers. Luhmann postulated in his Risk-Decision theory that policymakers will consciously choose what, why, and when to adopt a technology accessing its risk (Luhmann, 1990). In India, some research start-ups focus on AI's impacts on society – 'Digital Futures Lab' headed by Urvashi Aneja, 'INDIAai' an initiative by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY), NASSCOM provides information regarding AI development in India. However, few conduct substantial ex-ante research on the Internet, fake news, and its impacts on society. It is not argued that no one has ventured into this space. Some start-ups like 'Alt News,' and 'Factly' in Hyderabad are working on flagging fake news.

However, there is no serious research based on 'Anticipatory governance methods' and the establishment of 'science cafes.' There is an immediate requirement for such initiatives. They would help in providing research for Internet policymaking. Research with the 'Anticipatory method' would include periodic public deliberations, awareness, and understanding of technology making. It also provides designs for technology companies that would help them incorporate public well-being within the design of their products.

From all the problems mentioned above, it is evident that the fabric of social interactions and the nature of society are changing because of advanced information technologies. In such a situation, it is worth exploring the possible changes to the existing democratic structures.

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Chapter 2

Dangerous Side of Influence: The Misrepresentation of Mental Health in Indian Digital Space

Ankit Gupta 'Aseer'

Abstract

This essay critically examines the role of social media in shaping mental health discourse in India, with particular attention to the propagation of misinformation by influencers. The study presents case studies of prominent social media figures who, despite their lack of professional mental health expertise, have significant impact on the way mental health issues are understood among their vast followers. Their rhetoric often simplifies complex mental health problems to lifestyle issues, inadvertently encouraging victim-blaming and reinforcing social stigma. Misrepresented scientific findings and anecdotal solutions are found to be misleading and potentially harmful. The essay further highlights the danger of self-diagnosis encouraged by over-generalised social media content. In response, the paper calls for more critical content consumption and a proactive role of professional mental health practitioners in disseminating accurate information.

Keywords

Social Media, Mental Health Discourse, Influencers, Misinformation

Introduction

As social beings, we influence each other's perceptions of the world we share. In its sophisticated form, the ability to influence others' judgement is called Rhetoric. Rhetoric is an art of persuasion which is as old as human civilisation. Rita Copeland (2021) describes rhetoric as responsible for stirring emotions and acting as a catalyst for social conversation. Rhetoric evolves with the evolution of communication. Social media is not merely a place to share information but is growing into an entrepreneurial space for individuals to practice rhetoric (Miller et., 2016). Rhetoric, as an art of persuasion, does not hold value judgment. However, what comes under the purview of ethics is its use as a tool for spreading unscientific misinformation regarding important aspects of human life. This essay focuses on the social media misinformation regarding mental health wellness. Health coaches, influencers, motivational speakers, and tycoons from various fields claim to cure mental health problems in their videos without providing scientific evidence. Since mental health in India is shrouded with shame and taboo, misinformation limits the possibility of an evidence-based conversation about mental well-being. Many influencers mention their real-life experiences as a generic cure for all mental health problems. Anecdotal solutions to mental health challenges may be well intended but can put the onus of remedy and recovery solely on the individuals. Through examples of randomly chosen social media influencers' content, this essay aims to destabilise the pattern of misinformed mental health-related content creation on social media.

The Danger of Pseudo-Science: Examining Influencer Impact on Mental Health Discourse

A World Health Organisation (WHO) survey (2015) revealed that one in five Indians may suffer from depression which is around 200 million of the total population in India. Mental health concerns of around 88% of people remain unmet due to the social stigma and unaffordable fees to cover counselling therapy. This gap between assistance and need remains vulnerable to exploitation. Self-proclaimed motivational speakers and lifestyle coaches harness their rhetoric using medical jargon to establish their authority. They use generic terms and common

symptoms of different mental health problems. For instance, let us consider the interconnection of the brain and the gut.

Sadhguru, a self-proclaimed godman and founder of the Isha Foundation, frequently expresses his opinion on mental health over social media. On Twitter, where he has a followership of over 4 million, one of his tweets read, “*#Depression is becoming a pandemic; its origins are complex, from pathology to negative lifestyles. A culture of prevention is vital.*” One of his articles on the website of the Isha Foundation, which has monthly traffic of 1 million, wrote, “*Over the last few generations, our physical activity has decreased substantially. Therefore, maintaining the chemical balance in the system becomes difficult. Depression is just one manifestation of that.*” The rhetoric uses a ‘content-based approach’ to misrepresent scientific findings, a tactic commonly used by influencers with large followings. This approach involves extracting content from the user profile and posts and links between other articles to categorise attributed vertices in a graph. However, the claims regarding health and wellness are often not grounded in evidence. The oft-invoked sedentary lifestyle in tweets and articles may cause other illnesses, but there is no direct evidence of it causing depression or any other mental health illness. Sullivan et al. (2000) use meta-analysis to establish that genetic and environmental factors can increase the chances of depression in individuals. Genetic factors appear to interact with environmental factors in the development of major depression. For example,

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individuals who carry specific genetic variants may be more susceptible to stress or trauma.

Similarly, YouTuber and self-proclaimed motivational speaker Sandeep Maheshwari, popular among school and college students, has made several videos on mental health and its cure. The famous YouTuber is a household name with 27.4 million followers on YouTube and combined followership of over 48 million, including all major social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. One of his videos on YouTube, which has 9.9 million views, is titled “*How to deal with Depression and Anxiety? By Sandeep Maheshwari In Hindi*” The video emphasises the “*bad stomach*” as the root cause of depression. He also said that if one changes their food habits, they will never face anxiety or depression. In various studies, the rise of gastrointestinal issues in individuals living with anxiety and depression has been proven. However, no study has verified or shown “*bad stomach*” as the root cause of depression. Healthy eating and physical exercise may help deal with frustration and sadness but cannot be claimed to be the sole remedy to address any mental health-related illness. Addressing the root cause of anxiety and depression requires a comprehensive approach considering physical and psychological factors.

Furthermore, the video says “*Dusri taraf se ye medicines kya karti hain ki aapko excited kar sakti hain, wo jo chemicals andar jaa rahe hain unki dose badhaate jao...itna excite ho jaoge phadpada jaoge to hosh bhi nahi hoga kar kya rahe ho... matlab zarurat se zyada khush ho jaaoge.*” (These medicines can excite you. You start increasing the dosage, you will not be conscious, and you will feel more happy than necessary.)

Such claims risk reducing mental health struggles to a person’s inability to be happy. They undermine the guided use and potential of anti-depressants. People with severe mental health challenges require anti-depressants to carry on daily life routines. The use of the same does not come as a choice for most people. The video encourages viewers to experiment with anti-depressants which can have serious consequences. Anti-depressants are potent medications that should only be taken under the supervision of a qualified healthcare professional. Unsupervised medication can have significant side effects, and interactions with other medications can lead to serious health problems, including overdose and death.

Victim-Blaming and Shaming: The Consequences of Misinformation by Influencers

As we try to understand the language used by social media influencers in their articles, tweets, and videos, we find that it leads to victim-blaming and shaming—the suggestions and causes mentioned by these put sole responsibility on the individuals for their mental health problems. Without addressing the root cause, the self-improvement approach sidelines and ignores the core systematic issues, such as poverty and discrimination based on caste, disability and gender, contributing to mental health problems.

Instead of acknowledging the root cause of the problem, such claims force people to anchor their emotional and physical feelings to get socially accepted.

One of the tweets read, “*A life of excess is not a good life. Excess of anything leads to #perversion and #depression. #QOTD*” and on the same ground, in an interview on TRS Clips हिंदी (also known as “*TheRanveerShowHindi*”) hosted by *Ranveer Allahbadia*, one guest speaker said “*Children of this generation brought up with luxury, lot more money, lot more comfort, and less in number (siblings)...*” comparing to western nuclear families she further added, “*when you are brought up in prosperity then nothing makes you happy.*” without giving any evidence in support of her claim she further said, “*so, small things happen, and they get into depression.*”

The YouTube channel TRS Clips हिंदी has 975K subscribers. A large number of people listened to this false information. According to a study published in Cambridge University Press, people living in poverty and from lower social classes have more mental health challenges than those from higher social groups. Another study found that the poverty of persons with severe mental illness (PSMI) was strongly associated with stigma, scheduled castes/scheduled tribes/other backward castes, and was relatively higher than persons from strong economic and upper-caste backgrounds. Based on this research, it can be concluded that perspectives about depression are misleading. It deliberately misses the systematic and structural problem and uses ‘network-based manipulation’ to spread false information. As a popular figure, she used her personal story as remarks and the validation of the vast

Social media influencers perpetuate the myth that survivors are somehow responsible for their suffering by placing the onus on survivors for their mental health problems. This can lead to victim-blaming and shaming, further exacerbating survivors' mental health problems.

'followership' of the 'YouTube channel' to legitimize the manipulated content.

Similarly, the content of another tweet and article on mental illness like, *"when you get sad, if you are going to get irritable and angry, and think the whole world is wrong, you are a fool."* and *"Why are you against something? Only because things did not go your way, isn't it? Why should the whole world go your way? Please know the world does not go your stupid way. Either you have no faith in the creator, or you have no acceptance or both, and you have a hyper-sensitive ego. That is why you get depressed."* This puts the onus on survivors for their mental health problems. This trend harms the survivors of the violence spectrum and people living under the structural oppression of caste patriarchy, who may already be struggling with guilt, fear, and shame (Jadhav et al., 2016). Social media influencers perpetuate the myth that survivors are somehow responsible for their suffering by placing the onus on survivors for their mental health problems. This can lead to victim-blaming and shaming, further exacerbating survivors' mental health problems.

Unpacking #MentalHealth: The Unseen Risks of Instagram's Mental Health Movement

There are over 47 million posts on Instagram under the hashtag #Mentalhealth. Unlicensed mental health coaches and influencers share basic symptoms of mental health problems, such as overthinking as a high-functioning anxiety or feeling disconnected from people as a

dissociative disorder. These are the symptoms of given mental health problems but generalising it to every individual can have dangerous consequences.

As a Canadian physician, author, and expert on trauma, Dr Gabor Mate said, “*Trauma is not a disease, so it cannot be cured, no matter what symptoms are. To heal trauma, it is important to figure out the cause.*” (Mate, 2022). A sixty-second video, a five-minute long article, or a speech cannot help you to identify the cause of your mental health problems. It requires a structural system and trained experts to identify the cause to heal the trauma or other mental health problems.

There is a need for conversation around mental health to dissociate the stigma attached to it, and social media plays a vital role in it. However, generalising it for every individual can force them to self-diagnose. Self-diagnosing can be dangerous because it may lead to one missing other medical problems or may leave one believing they have a more severe mental illness than they do.

The Power of Informed Consumption: Confronting Misinformation in Mental Health Discourses

Some consumers experience momentary relief or validation from the kinds of videos discussed in this chapter. They may feel bad about consuming misinformed content or go on to defend the content creator. In such a scenario, misinformation may seem powerful with all its rhetoric. However, the human spirit of curiosity and questioning offers not only a great defence but also is capable of disabling misinformation. As consumers, we may ask ourselves, how is this content effective? What are the motives and qualifications of the speaker on the subject matter? Does the speakers’ information corroborate with further information online? In addition, professional mental health practitioners must use social media to counter the misinformation with empathy.

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Chapter 3

Transgender Rights in India and its Long History of Misinformation

Brindaalakshmi K.

Abstract

This essay explores the complex layers of misinformation surrounding transgender rights in India, focusing on the legal, policy, and data aspects. It discusses the challenges faced by transgender individuals in accessing their rights, particularly in obtaining identification documents in their self-identified gender. The essay delves into the historical and legal contexts that have contributed to the misinformation, including the colonial-era laws and recent legislation like the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019. It also highlights the impact of digital identification systems like Aadhaar and the role of social media platforms in perpetuating misinformation. The essay concludes by discussing the implications of this misinformation on policy formation and the inclusion of transgender persons in society.

Keywords

Transgender Rights in India, Gender Identity, Legal Challenges, Policy Issues, Digital Identification, Data Misrepresentation

Introduction: Unpacking Layers of Misinformation and Discrimination

A Hindustan Times story headline on May 30, 2021, reads, “5.22% transgender persons vaccinated till now; misinformation, lack of digital knowledge impeding inoculation: Activists.” This story goes on to explain the challenges faced by transgender persons with accessing COVID-19 vaccination in India —including the lack of access to valid identification documents in their self-identified gender and preferred name, which is required to be vaccinated. This is one of the many instances of transgender persons having limited access to their rights due to a lack of knowledge and wrong information. Most often, misinformation about transgender persons is a two-way street in a country like India.

On the one hand, the Government of India passed a law like the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 to protect the rights of transgender persons, while on the other hand, government officials continue to discriminate against transgender persons even during the identification-document changing process. Simultaneous efforts to create social awareness about transgender persons are crucial to managing misinformation about this group. Often the lack of awareness and correct information about transgender persons leads to stigma, othering and discrimination. This results in an access gap for transgender persons even with procuring their identification documents and understanding and accessing their constitutionally sanctioned rights like healthcare, education, and livelihood.

Understanding the Transgender Identity

In this essay, I will unpack some of the layers of misinformation — legally and consequently in policy and data — that have existed within the State systems with respect to transgender persons and its impact on their ability to procure identification documents in their self-identified gender required to access their rights. I will also trace some of the other influences that enabled this continued system of misinformation, like the introduction of Aadhaar and the digitisation of accessing rights in India.

The lack of clarity begins with understanding who is said to be

transgender. Usually, an individual's gender is assigned at birth based on their sex. A transgender person is anyone who does not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth. A person may be assigned male or female at birth and identify as any gender, be it man, woman, bigender, agender, transgender, non-binary, gender fluid, or genderqueer, among others. Intersex persons may or may not identify as being transgender. Many identify with the gender assigned to them at birth. However, there is limited awareness about diverse gender identities beyond men and women and intersex variations.

The Impact of Legal History on Transgender Identity Recognition

This limited understanding has impacted the ability of transgender persons to procure identification documents in their self-identified name and gender. The history of criminalisation under laws such as the Criminal Tribes Act 1871, and Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), among others, have not created a favourable social image for transgender persons. Subsequently, the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed, and the Supreme Court of India read down Section 377 of the IPC. However, owing to social ostracisation, many transgender persons are dependent on sex work and begging. So the social and public understanding of transgender persons has been tainted by the limitations experienced by them due to societal discrimination based on a limited understanding of who they are as individuals.

Transgender persons have limited access to their rights due to a lack of knowledge and wrong information. Most often, misinformation about transgender persons is a two-way street in a country like India.

Misinformation and Discrimination: The Colonial Era

Lack of clarity and a degree of misinformation can be traced throughout the legal developments related to the rights of transgender persons in India, beginning with the colonial era. As a population group, transgender persons have a history of criminalisation since the colonial era using laws such as Criminal Tribes Act 1871. This law sought the 'surveillance and control of certain tribes and eunuchs'. Further, building on the Buggary law of 1533, the British introduced Section 377 in the Indian Penal Code in 1861, criminalising homosexuality. Despite the Criminal Tribes Act being repealed after independence, the State continued to view transgender persons through the lens of suspicion using other laws that continued to criminalise them, like the Karnataka Police Act, Telangana Eunuchs Act, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.

In 2014, the right to self-identify one's gender as male, female or transgender without any medical intervention was recognised by the Supreme Court of India in its National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) Vs. the Union of India verdict (*Supreme Court of India, 2014*). For the first time, this verdict acknowledged the need to introduce an additional gender category on identification documents and application forms for individuals identifying outside the binary of male and female. It listed nine directives to be implemented by the State and central governments to include transgender persons, a historically criminalised and silenced population group.

The NALSA Verdict: A Milestone in Transgender Rights

Relevant quote from the judgment

".....We, therefore, declare:

- (1) *Hijras, Eunuchs, apart from binary gender, be treated as third gender for the purpose of safeguarding their rights under Part III of our Constitution and the laws made by the Parliament and the State Legislature.*
- (2) *Transgender persons' right to decide their self-identified gender is also upheld and the Centre and State Governments are directed to*

grant legal recognition of their gender identity such as male, female or as third gender.....”

Implementation Gaps and Continued Challenges

Gendering of Development Data: Beyond the Binary (*Brindaalakshmi K., 2020*) shows the lack of uniform implementation of the NALSA directives across all Indian States. This lack meant that not all transgender persons in all States could self-identify their gender to procure a valid identification document. Several study respondents noted a lack of awareness among government officials about the NALSA judgement or the need to implement its directives.

Unlike the NALSA verdict, the definition of transgender in the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 (Hereinafter ‘Trans Act’) was expanded to include several transgender identities.

“(k) “transgender person” means a person whose gender does not match with the gender assigned to that person at birth and includes trans-man or trans-woman (whether or not such person has undergone Sex Reassignment Surgery or hormone therapy or laser therapy or such other therapy), person with intersex variations, genderqueer and person having such socio-cultural identities as kinner, hijra, aravani and jogta.”

The Need for Medical Validation: A Persistent Barrier

Although the definition in the Trans Act recognises an individual’s self-identified gender identity even without undergoing Sex Reassignment Surgery or any other therapy, Section 7 of the statute requires an individual to undergo surgery to identify within the binary of male and female. The law prescribes a two-step process for individuals to change their name and gender. While the first step to changing one’s gender to ‘transgender’ as gender identity does not require a medical process, identifying in the binary requires medical validation.

After severe pushback from the trans community, rule 6(1) of the Trans Act now demands a medical certificate for medical intervention towards a gender-affirming procedure, which could also be a certificate from a mental health professional. Unlike the statute, it does not mention sex reassignment surgery. The difference in the need for medical validation

Gendering of Development Data: Beyond the Binary shows the lack of uniform implementation of the NALSA directives across all Indian States. This lack meant that not all transgender persons in all States could self-identify their gender to procure a valid identification document.

between the NALSA verdict, the Trans Act and its rules has enabled an atmosphere of continued confusion and mystery surrounding the process of changing name and gender for transgender persons.

Misrepresentation in Census Data

The data collected during the census of 2011 has further widened the rights access gap for this historically silenced community. The Census of 2011 was the first time transgender persons in India were enumerated under the 'Others' category (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011). Primary Census Abstract data of 2011 identifies a total population of 4,87,803 persons in India who identified their gender as 'Other', that is, neither as 'Male' nor as 'Female'. The Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, Ministry of Home Affairs, clarifies that the 'category of "Other" would not only include transgender but also any person who desired to record sex under the category of "Other" ... [and] that transgenders might have returned [sic] themselves either male or female depending on their choice. However, this data was insufficient to make policy decisions for including transgender persons. The 'Others' category included data on several different groups, including intersex children. There was a lack of distinction between sex and gender in the data collected. Not all transgender identities were included. Thus, the data collected by the census of 2011 was a gross miscalculation and underrepresentation of the transgender population in India. Any policy formulated, based

on the census of 2011 was misinformed, leading to inadequate fund allocation for the inclusion of transgender persons, directly impacting their access to rights. The next census was due in 2020 but was deferred indefinitely due to COVID-19. The next census will be an e-census with individuals self-enumerating using a mobile application downloaded on their phones (*FP Explainers, 2022*).

The introduction of Aadhaar, a biometric-based digital ID, in 2009 (Perrigio, 2018) and its linkage to welfare access have worsened the situation, especially for marginalised communities. In 2017, the Government of India mandated linking every individual's Aadhaar to their Permanent Account Number (PAN) (Socio-Legal Information Centre, 2018). Although Aadhaar had an additional gender category, the PAN card did not have one till the Supreme Court ordered its inclusion.

Challenges in Digital Identification

Even with the addition of another gender category on most forms and the State's attempt to standardise the process of changing identification documents in the Trans Act, the digitisation of this process for a community with low literacy and digital literacy rates continues to widen the access gap. Respondents of the study, *Gendering of Development Data in India: Post-Trans Act 2019 (Brindaalakshmi K, Under review)*, noted in late 2021 that individuals often need the support of community-based organisations to fill out the application

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forms. There is often a delay in receiving OTP as part of the registration process on the website, which sometimes takes several days.

The respondents to the study mentioned above also noted that many District Magistrates (DMs) who are supposed to approve the gender change applications were not aware of the provisions of the Trans Act. Further, respondents highlighted that in some cases, the DMs are unaware of their login and passwords assigned to them for this application approval process. In other cases, applicants are forced to appear in person due to undue delay in the approval process. Often such in-person applications have been rejected if the person did not have the appearance commonly associated with the gender mentioned on the application form. There have been instances of trans men being subject to intrusive physical checks owing to the general lack of sensitivity and awareness of government officials and doctors perpetuated by the general misinformation about this population group, added respondents. Further, there continues to be a lack of clarity among transgender persons about the process for changing their identification documents.

Similarly, private data systems continue to exclude transgender persons (Brindaalakshmi K, 2020). Not all services have included an additional gender category on different forms to access their services. Even with those with an option, services like banking, healthcare, and travel websites, among others, continue to depend on government-issued identification documents to validate a person's identity. This continues to limit the access for transgender persons to their rights.

With access denied, transgender persons remain outside these systems, and thus data collected by private firms remains a misleading source for policy formation.

The Role of Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms and their data add another layer of misinformation to this complicated mix. Indigenous transgender identities such as hijra, kinnar, and aravani, among others, are often used as slurs to insult people in the offline world. Even on the Internet, transgender persons experience violence when they disclose their gender identity.

With the introduction of Aadhaar, individuals are expected to turn

different parts of their bodies into data to access State welfare. Being a part of the dataset has become crucial. The inability to become data bodies has meant exclusion for the most vulnerable dependent on the State. The introduction of Aadhaar and the constant vacillation between its mandatory and voluntary usage for accessing different services over a decade, especially for privacy-sensitive services like Antiretroviral Treatment (ART), has created a cloud of confusion. Apart from the layers of biometrics in Aadhaar — fingerprints and iris scans — required to validate a person's identity, transgender persons are also expected to undergo additional medical validation based on their gender identity.

The Price of Identification

Human rights violations like body checks, inappropriate questions and risking their privacy are the price they are expected to pay to be recognised as valid human beings with a government-issued identification document. The documentation-changing process is more complex for transgender persons living with a disability and Dalit trans persons. They are forced to maneuver through more systemic stigma and oppression associated with their other identity markers, such as caste and disability — each requiring its form of certification. These complex processes have shaped the understanding of consent and the understanding of agency for individuals at the margins dependent on the State welfare for critical services.

Data sets drive decisions using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML). Suppose the misinformed data sets on transgender persons are used to train machine learning models. In that case, understanding transgender persons and their needs within these digital systems and their use to design policies or programmes for the inclusion of transgender persons becomes questionable. Data is expected to give the story about a population group. Medical validation and procedural requirements continue to gate-keep the ability of transgender persons to enter data systems using their identification documents in their self-identified gender and name, thereby influencing any possibilities to change the data story (or the absence thereof) and the surrounding narrative using data in favour of transgender persons and their rights. Due to the shifted focus on data, there is continued perpetuation of misinformation on transgender persons, leading to disinformation about this population group due to negligence by the State.

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AYURVEDA

**& OTHER ALT
MEDICINES**

**EVIDENCE
BASED
SCIENTIFIC
MEDICINES**



Chapter 4

Welcome to a World without Rules

Cyriac Abby Philips

Abstract

This paper presents a narrative on the challenges faced by a physician-scientist in India seeking to debunk health misinformation surrounding traditional and alternative medicines, particularly on social media platforms. The author documents the widespread usage of these therapies leading to severe health repercussions, including liver injuries. In an attempt to disseminate scientific and evidence-based information, the author faces substantial backlash, from institutional censure by regulatory bodies to personal attacks from within the medical community.

Keywords

Health Misinformation, Alternative Medicine, Public Health, Scientific Temper, Regulatory Backlash

A Mysterious Illness and the Search for Answers

The cause of jaundice and severe hepatitis in the young man was unclear. After multiple investigations and repeated medical consultations, Kiran was admitted under me, all of us trying to decode the reasons behind his mysterious illness. Deep-dive investigations into common causes for jaundice were negative. He never drank alcohol, smoked, and did not consume prescription medicines. It started with losing his appetite. Days later, he noticed the urine was dark and deep yellow. The yellowish tinge of the eyes came a couple of days later, and then reality hit. Something was seriously wrong.

As his liver damage surged and jaundice deepened, he was referred to us for a parallel workup for possible liver transplantation. I met his young wife, Neena, and spoke to her about needing a liver biopsy. Laypersons tend to misconstrue the need for biopsy as a search for cancer. I assured her that it was not so in her husband's case. In persons with acute hepatitis and jaundice without any identifiable cause(s), a liver biopsy is a light at the end of the tunnel. Once we let the liver speak under the microscope, it tells us stories – at times terrifying and sometimes hopeful.

In a progressively deteriorating Kiran, we perform a technically challenging liver biopsy. Since his liver was failing and blood thinning, a direct, across-the-skin liver biopsy would have been risky. Instead, a small wire was inserted into Kiran's liver through a vein in the neck. A biopsy needle was guided into the liver to sample tissues for examination under the microscope – a technique known as trans jugular liver biopsy. Meanwhile, Kiran was put on aggressive liver support treatment. A few days later, I was called into the senior pathologist's office to look at Kiran's liver tissue under the microscope. I could not find many liver cells.

'Necrosis,' the pathologist tells me, guarded.

Necrosis is when large areas of liver cells are lost, leaving behind a void of inflammatory cells and evidence of early scar tissue formation. It means the liver was not coping with the injury and would give away soon.

However, there was something more. The necrotic areas were infiltrated by a particular type of inflammatory cell – called eosinophils. In the liver, eosinophils come to damaged areas, commonly when the insult is due to a specific cause: drug-induced liver injury. Nevertheless, time and again, Kiran and his wife had denied using any drugs or supplements in the recent past. So, we decided to change our approach to questions.

A Clue Emerges

I asked Kiran if he had recently been on anything new, food or otherwise, any change in his dietary habits or if he was on any preventive measures. A few minutes of deep thought later, and whipping out the phone, I was shown photographs of two medium-sized amber-colored glass bottles with sticker labels slapped on them. They read – “Sarsaparilla MT-Q” and “Berberis MT-Q,” both, Homeopathic herbal mother tinctures.

Kiran and Neena considered it irrelevant to disclose this ‘bit of information’ since it was Homeopathy, which was traditionally “well-known” to be side-effect free and safe for long-term use. Mother tinctures are alcohol-based solutions containing fresh medicinal plant extracts, which Homeopathic practitioners, according to their inane principles, consider ‘low potency.’ When diluted multiple times over until the active compound is watered down to oblivion, they believe that to oblivion, they believe the formulation becomes ‘more potent’ and hence extraordinarily effective, without associated adverse effects. Kiran was prescribed strong mother tinctures for his incidentally identified, wholly asymptomatic kidney stones. One month after starting both formulations, his symptoms had surfaced - a temporal correlation was apparent. Using a unique medical scoring system

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known as the RUCAM, short for Roussel Uclaf Causality Assessment Method, complemented by the liver biopsy finding, I found that Kiran had developed severe Homeopathic-formulation induced liver injury, prescribed for a condition that did not require active medical management in the first place.

Two weeks in the hospital and multiple nerve-racking decisions on aggressive management later, Kiran's liver tests started to normalise, and he was discharged. However, after a week, I got a distressing phone call from Neena. Kiran was showing a recurrence of symptoms. He was lethargic, ate very little, and had made his bed a sanctuary. Something sinister that I did not expect was about to happen. A review of new blood tests revealed that Kiran was becoming anaemic rapidly, with the white cells and platelets progressively falling. I asked my Haematology colleague for help. After rapid investigations, including a bone marrow biopsy, I sensed the dread flowing through me as I received a diagnosis from the Haematologist.

'Aplastic anaemia,' he tells me as my mind wanders off distantly. A young wife. A new family life. Dreams. Togetherness. Everything was at stake—all of the burdens on my shoulders. Aplastic anaemia is a condition that occurs when the body is unable to produce new blood cells because the bone marrow fails – making the person prone to life-threatening bleeds and severe infections. Kiran had something worse. A condition called HAAA or hepatitis-associated aplastic anaemia, usually seen with viral infections but exceptionally rarely, notable after drug-induced liver injury – in his case, the alternative medicines he took for 'did-not require treatment' kidney stones. HAAA is a devastating disease – it comes without warning and leaves with the patient towed in hand. Only a bone marrow transplant is curative.

I composed myself and spoke with Neena about what the future holds. A very rational woman, she knew that without a bone marrow transplant, her young husband would die, leaving behind a scarred void held together by lasting memories in her. I tried to imagine the hurt by placing myself in her shoes and could not come to terms with it. The search for a donor began, but time was running out. Kiran needed over six admissions for platelet transfusions because his counts dropped below 5000 per microliter of blood. Cyclosporine immunosuppression was initiated to control Kiran's immune system and help the body build blood cells. It worked for a while until the infections crept in. The

first infection was bacterial pneumonia which we battled with a host of antibiotics. Kiran grew weaker day by day. His appetite was reduced, and he needed tube feeding.

“He will not tolerate Cyclosporine anymore,” the Haematologist tells me.

The second infection was a drug-resistant form of a dreaded bacteria called Klebsiella in the blood, which a high-end and expensive antibiotic took care of, only to predispose Kiran to something we knew would happen but not so soon. A fungal infection in the blood; it was uncontrollable, and Kiran rapidly progressed to multiple organ failure. He was put on a ventilator, and his blood counts dropped so fast and so severely that he bled into his brain and died on the ventilator. All because he was treated with a couple of alternative medicines with no evidence of effectiveness and for a disease that did not require treatment in the first place.

The Longest Journey

After Kiran died, I spoke to Neena’s brother for a few minutes. I could not come face to face with Neena because she was grieving in the wardroom, and I knew I would struggle to get words that comforted her. They took Kiran’s body away in the early evening while I stared at the vast and bare ground from my office windows, where I met Kiran many times and gave him the best hope against death. However, death won, and I was left with a sense of satisfaction without any absolute satisfaction. Satisfaction that I could serve Kiran and Neena on their dark journey, dissatisfied that the darkness consumed us all. Kiran’s face settled in the corner of my heart for eternity, for me to play it like a sad tune in a bittersweet loop along with the many others whose journey I was grateful and honoured to be part of. I published Kiran’s ordeal from a scientific perspective in the British Medical Journal as a peer-reviewed report in March 2022.

Kiran’s story was not an isolated one. It was only the tip of the iceberg. In a developing country like India, where public health enjoys the lowest priority compared to other politico-cultural and socioeconomic needs, educating the masses on informed decisions in the context of righteous medical care becomes one of the physician’s duties. Nevertheless, venturing into such an aspect of medical care – public health education

When the majority in India considered traditional complementary and alternative medicines natural and safe, my disruptive, scientific, peer-reviewed work on herbal drugs in 2017-18 revealed that herbal supplements were associated with severe liver injury, some leading to liver failure and death or needing liver transplantation

alongside clinical work comes with a price that not every medical doctor is willing to pay.

When the majority in India considered traditional complementary and alternative medicines natural and safe, my disruptive, scientific, peer-reviewed work on herbal drugs in 2017-18 revealed that herbal supplements were associated with severe liver injury, some leading to liver failure and death or needing liver transplantation. When such public health-oriented evidence-based data come to light, health regulatory authorities in a sane country would assimilate the evidence, weigh the risks and benefits of implicated alternative therapies and provide a succinct Statement for bettering public health. But not in India!

The Truth Shall Get You Persecution

When the Ayurvedic herbals-related liver injury paper went viral on social media and a prominent national newspaper ran it, the Ministry of AYUSH, the supposed regulatory watchdog of complementary and alternative therapies in India, was quick to send intimidating letters of concern to me, the corresponding author of the scientific paper as well as senior editors of the media who ran news about the publication. Multiple letters and responses were shared between both parties. The daunting letters from AYUSH centered on only one concept – that traditional and cultural healthcare practices could not be challenged. Instead of

understanding the impact of ineffective, belief-based, unscientific primal healthcare practices on public health, the authorities who were supposed to safeguard public health were adamant and tried to derail the published study and its contents by cherry-picking dispensable limitations of the study. The newspaper's senior editor and the reporter were dragged to a magistrate court alleging defamation.

This was the first shocker in my professional career and one that fuelled my current passion for public health education and medical science communication. Because the regulatory authorities who were supposed to be 'public servants and vanguards of health' would not stand with science and evidence, it was up to the physician to take up arms and revolutionize healthcare education more excellently. After six months of meaningless but harassing letters from the AYUSH Ministry, the last of which went to the mind-numbing extent of accusing authors of not conducting the study in the presence of an Ayurveda practitioner and hence not publication worthy, I decided to block their email addresses to maintain my sanity and thought the worst was over.

A few months later, I was visited by police officers from Thiruvananthapuram during outpatient hours. A First Information Report (FIR) was filed against me by the owner of a prominent private Ayurveda company. The FIR alleged that my peer-reviewed published work on Ayurvedic herbals was cooked up and deliberately targeted at

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the major Ayurvedic pharmaceutical company to defame it purposefully. One of the company's products, advertised and promoted for arthritis, had featured in my scientific publication and was found to have high levels of Arsenic in it. Apart from the police visits that disrupted my routine patient work, it led to harassment of my lab members, specifically, the pathologist who first identified biopsy patterns of liver injury due to Ayurvedic herbals. The lab work took a toll because legal threats distracted people from working further on the topic, and my pathologist left the country to work elsewhere with peace of mind. I lost a good colleague in the process – a part of the price I had to pay for trying to improve public health education and scientific temper within the general and patient population.

First, Do No Harm

In the subsequent months, our work started to bear fruit. Many other physicians were able to identify causes of jaundice, hepatitis, and also reasons for sudden complications among patients with pre-existing stable liver disease associated with the use of herbal drugs. Our clinical unit became an apex treating centre for herb-induced severe liver injury patients. We salvaged the lives of some patients who developed severe liver injuries due to AYUSH-related practices. Still, most, especially those with pre-existing liver disease, either died or received liver transplantation. Subsequently, in the following years, we published clinical outcomes in patients with cirrhosis and severe liver disease who opted for AYUSH-based treatments and demonstrated that the use of Ayurvedic herbals was associated with worsening disease-related complications, higher and insensible financial burden and avoidable deaths or liver transplantation. Through our work, we revealed that the traditional and proprietary herbal drug industry was aimed at the business of healthcare business without embodying the science and art of patient care. This was precisely what the humanism and art of clinical medicine did not stand for – using ineffective treatments with the potential to harm – in principle, the mantra, “first, do no harm,” was immensely violated.

Why was there a need to ‘create’ patients? Many patients we saw daily in our clinic diagnosed with herbal or alternative medicine-related liver injury were utilising those therapies for acute or chronic illnesses solely based on advertisements, promotional activity, or misleading

social media testimonials. Since social media was a cesspool of misinformation regarding medical science and healthcare, I took it up as a portal for battling misinformation.

A World without Rules

When I started using social media to fight against misinformation, YouTube was the obvious choice. I was featured as a guest speaker on the science-based, misinformation-debunking Malayalam channel “Lucy.” The video garnered approximately two lakh views, disrupted a lot of traditional and cultural thinking about herbal therapies, and pitted the layperson against rationality, logic, and evidence in healthcare instead of faith, beliefs, and testimonials. Many people across the country started to realise the importance of scientific temper. However, this also came with a price. The AYUSH Ministry threatened defamatory proceedings for allegedly “denigrating” Ayurveda. Even the National Medical Council got involved. I was accused of professional misconduct for calling Ayurveda pseudoscience by the Kerala Ayush Council. The State Council for Indian systems of medicine, via the modern medicine Council, served me a show-cause notice to prove my Statements on herbal liver injuries. Instead of looking at the good for public health emanating from my years of research, all of these regulatory and authoritative departments decided to investigate me, conveniently ignoring the public health concern. However, ultimately, science won, the modern medicine Council dropped all charges against me, and the decision was forwarded to the Ayush Council and Union Ministry in October 2022. But through that ordeal, I lost precious clinical work hours, lost out on seeing referred patients, had to spend money out of pocket on lawyers to help me draft responses and had to cancel outpatient work, and left my in-patients with the junior team to travel and seek advice on dealing with the legality of it all.

Targeted for my Religion, Region, and more.

On the Twitter platform, I faced a different and personal kind of hate from trying to educate people on the adversities associated with blind belief in traditional therapies. I was called a “rice-bag,” a derogatory term for Christians (which I learned for the first time); a “commie terrorist” (because of my place of residence); an “anti-Hindu” (because I was judged a Christian Missionary out to convert Ayurveda-

I was called a “rice-bag,”; a “commie terrorist”; an “anti-Hindu”; a “Pakistani,”; “anti-National” – when in fact I was just a doctor-scientist, trying to bring a sliver of hope within the dread and burden that illness forces upon patients and their families, through the medical science by the people had to offer for the people.

worshipping Hindus) and a “Pakistani,” because to Ayush apologists and sympathisers lacking a scientific temper, I was ultimately an “anti-National” trying to destroy the glorious ancient past of Indian traditional healthcare – when in fact I was just a doctor-scientist, trying to bring a sliver of hope within the dread and burden that illness forces upon patients and their families, through the medical science by the people had to offer for the people.

It was not surprising when the backlash against my work and scientific communications came from the Ayush community – from supporters and sympathisers of Ayurveda and such allied alternative practices or Ayush practitioners themselves. When they became vulgar in their responses or abusive, it was expected. As Professor Edzard Ernst would put it, “Ad hominem attacks were signs of victories of reason over unreason.” I did not need to respond to or engage with such arguments. But the unforeseen was vengeful personal attacks from within my own medical fraternity. On Twitter, a cardiologist from Bengaluru called me ‘Hinduphobic’ and proclaimed that I was trying to marginalise Hindus through my ‘attack’ on Ayurveda. Another specialist, a novice freelancing Nephrology graduate from Bengaluru, would always address me as a ‘liver fluke’ instead of a liver specialist. The worst was an oncologist from Ahmedabad who consistently used vulgarity related to ‘body parts’ whenever he tweeted screenshots of me, even after I had blocked him from further interactions. Every one of these so-called

evidence-based medicine doctors never gave a rebuttal to scientific facts on Ayush that I communicate. However, they were trigger happy with getting personal behind their keypads, secretly watching my activity on Twitter from behind anonymous accounts. Doctors who never found it essential to call a spade a spade were far worse than pseudoscientific practices. They were not only a ‘cancer’ on public health but also were intentionally or unintentionally harming patients by not reacting to unscientific practices or trying to silence voices who did so. How so ever, and how much ever the hate for evidence-based medicine and its stronghold in educating people and patients on the ineffectiveness and dangers of alternative practices increases, the realistic research evidence on the adverse events of complementary and alternative therapies like Ayush has been steadily increasing.

In contrast, quality evidence for its supposed benefits has never gone beyond the preclinical stage. It remains stuck, like a ‘frog-in-a-well’ in the form of testimonials and anecdotes. Like Criss Jami once said, “An insincere critic of a sincere person never wins.”

Undeterred On The Pale Blue Dot

But the show must go on, and misinformation will never go away. The only way to curb it is to speak up and call out those who misinform and mislead people – whether it be other doctors, alternative medicine practitioners, or government authorities. There will be more “Kirans and Neenas” in my life and among families misled into thinking herbal therapies are safe and effective.

I will fight this battle for those who cannot until the world is done with me, trying to bring some meaning and purpose into this world without rules and hope that other healthcare workers, too, will take up the challenge of creating a scientific temper and bringing the beauty of compassionate medical care to the people. This will play out like the “unstoppable force and immovable object” paradox. It will be draining. And the fight will not be without consequences – mostly mental, some financial, and otherwise physical. But there has to be someone who will do it for the love of the people – because, in the words of Hippocrates, “wherever the art of medicine is loved, there is also a love of humanity.”

I strive to do this every day. For bettering the lives of patients who become my responsibility. For comforting their families, who become mine to take care of. For dealing with death, scars, and regrets.

And every night I go to sleep, these words echo in my mind and prepare me for a new battle, a new day.

“I know you are tired, but come, this is the way.” – Rumi.

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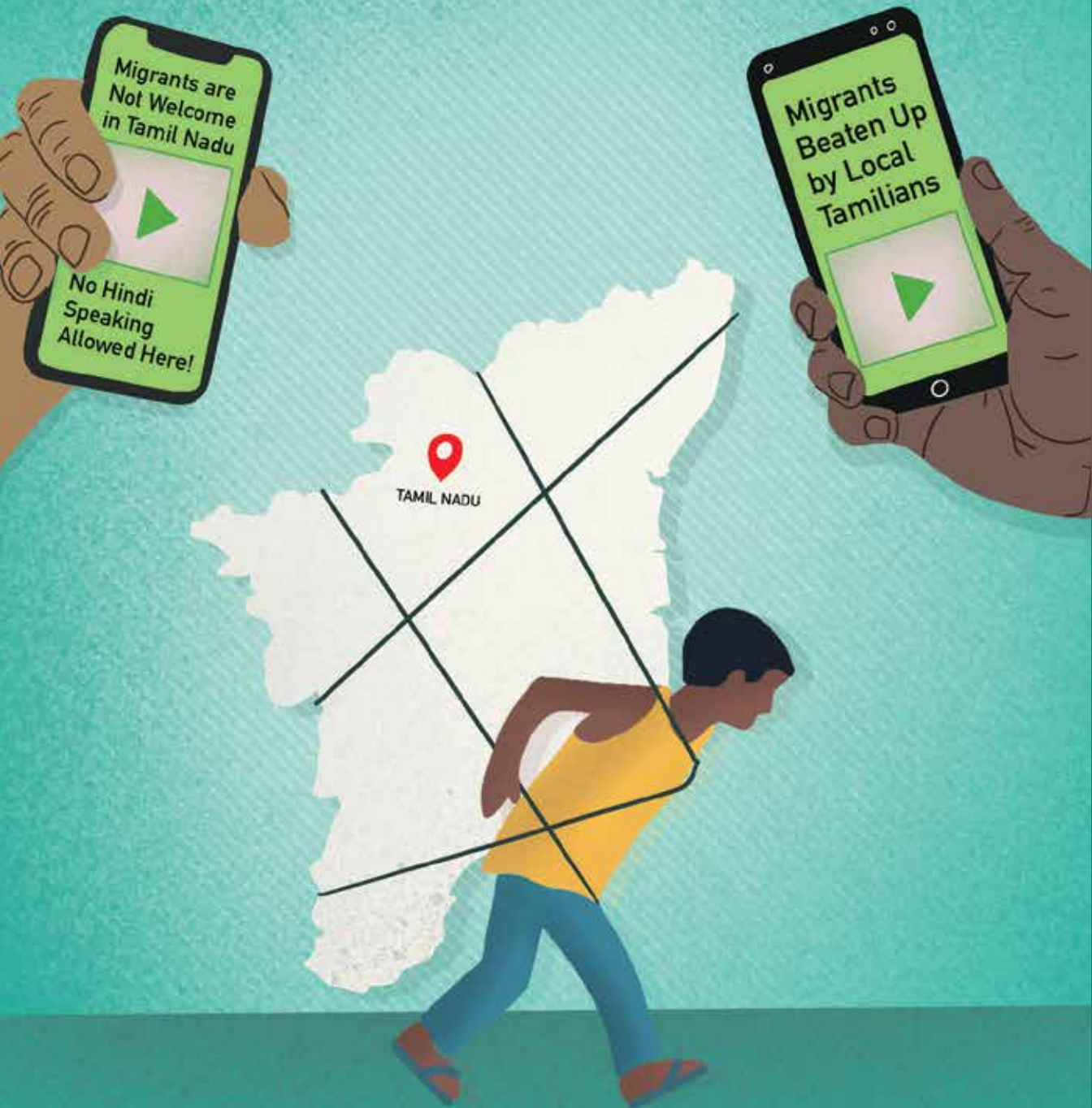
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Migrants are
Not Welcome
in Tamil Nadu

No Hindi
Speaking
Allowed Here!

Migrants
Beaten Up
by Local
Tamilians

TAMIL NADU

Chapter 5

Rumours in the Age of Social Media: A Study of Targeted Attacks on Migrants in Tamil Nadu

Intifada P. Basheer

Abstract

In March 2023, thousands of migrant labourers working in Tamil Nadu left the State, fearing for their lives. According to reports, about 10 lakh migrant labourers live in Tamil Nadu, most hailing from Bihar. These labourers work in the State's manufacturing, textile, and construction sectors, and their abrupt departure impacted the services in all these three sectors. Analysis reveals that politically-motivated fake news and a well-structured misinformation campaign on social media during February-March 2023 proved to be the primary trigger. This essay attempts to trace the anatomy of this misinformation campaign to examine through what means and strategies – and under what circumstances – was such fake news disseminated and why it was effective. The essay also analyses the measures taken up by the Tamil Nadu Police to battle misinformation on social media through fact-checking exercises. Finally, this essay provides suggestions and steps that should be taken by the government, law enforcement agencies, and media organisations to combat and prevent such incidents in the future.

Keywords

Misinformation, Hate Speech, Social Media, Disinformation, Fact-checking, Tamil Nadu, Migrant Labourers

Introduction

On 5 March 2023, Anwar Khwaza was on his way to inspect the construction of one of his to-let buildings in Tamil Nadu's Karur district when he received a nasty shock. The two-storey building, where construction activities had been in full swing until the day before, suddenly bore a vacant look, with Khwaza unable to trace any of the 11 construction labourers he had employed. On further enquiry, he learnt that all the labourers, who hailed from Bihar and West Bengal, had vacated the building premises the night before. "The previous day, they told me that their families were pressuring them to return home due to WhatsApp forwards claiming migrant labourers were being attacked in the State. I gave them my full assurance and told them they had nothing to fear and that they could call me if anyone troubled them. I thought I had placated their fears and never expected them to leave this abruptly," Khwaza told this writer. Like Khwaza's property, construction at numerous buildings across the State, both private- and corporate-owned, had come to a grinding halt.

Tamil Nadu heavily depends on migrant labourers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and Assam, among other northern and northeastern States. These workers primarily provide labour to the industrial hubs of Chennai, Tiruvallur, and Chengalpattu; the textiles industry concentrated in Tiruppur, Coimbatore, and Erode; and for services in the construction, manufacturing, and hotelier sectors across the State.

While no recent census indicates how many migrant labourers work and reside in the State, a survey commissioned by the State government's Labour Department in 2016 stated that more than 10 lakh migrant labourers lived in Tamil Nadu at the time.

Being one of the most industrialised States in the country with a rapidly growing economy, the services and the manufacturing sectors majorly contribute to the State's gross domestic product, with the former contributing 54% and the latter contributing 33%. Due to this, there is a constant, high demand for semi-skilled labour, a need that cannot be met locally. Since the 1990s, there has been a slow but steady influx of migrant labourers from the north. Labourers from the northern States seek opportunities in Tamil Nadu as they get paid a significantly higher daily wage in the south. For instance, while the average per-day wage

for construction workers in Tamil Nadu varies between INR 400-600, it reportedly ranges between INR 75-100 in Bihar.

So, what unfolded between February-March 2023 that led to an unexpected departure of migrant labourers from the State?

The Anatomy of a Powerful Rumour

It all began on 2 March 2023 when Hari Manjhi, an ex-MP and current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) member with 66.2K followers on Twitter, posted a tweet with a picture of a newspaper report which claimed that “Hindi-speaking migrant labourers” were being beaten up by mobs in Tamil Nadu (see Figure 1). Manjhi’s tweet was accompanied by a picture of Bihar Deputy Chief Minister, Tejashwi Yadav, sharing a stage with Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin. The caption read: “In Tamil Nadu, Bihari labourers are being beaten up...while the Deputy Chief Minister of Bihar, Tejashwi, was seen talking to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Stalin, eating cake. Shame on @NitishKumar @yadavtejashwi.

Since the 1990s, there has been a slow but steady influx of migrant labourers from the north. Labourers from the northern States seek opportunities in Tamil Nadu as they get paid a significantly higher daily wage in the south.



Figure 1. Screenshot of BJP member Hari Manjhi’s viral tweet

Source: Twitter

Manjhi’s tweet gained significant traction in no time. It garnered 14.5K views and was retweeted by handles with a massive reach, such as BJP spokesperson Prashant Patel Umrao and a BJP-affiliated businessman, Ankit Jain, who have 363.9K and 142.2K followers, respectively.

As this news spread across other social media sites and WhatsApp,

many local and national news organisations shared similar stories without exercising the due diligence required to report such a sensitive issue. While some organisations resorted to carrying deliberately vague reports due to insufficient sources, others outrightly published false information.

Among these, the most significant report was published by *Dainik Bhaskar*, claiming that more than 15 migrants from Bihar were “killed” in Tamil Nadu and that migrant workers in the southern State are being attacked for merely speaking Hindi. Being the largest Hindi daily in the country and with a very high social media reach, this report was widely shared and believed. Other national media organisations soon followed suit. *News18 Hindi* claimed that the situation in Tamil Nadu was dire amidst repeated, pre-planned attacks on Hindi-speaking workers. The report also claimed that more than 12 people had been killed in the State. This was soon followed by highly exaggerated reports by far-right organisations such as *OpIndia* that claimed “Talibani-style attacks”, including finger-chopping and hanging, were being carried out on migrant labourers in Tamil Nadu.

An analysis of other news reports and information shared on social media between February-March 2023 reveals that two key factors were crucial in fanning the flames of this instance of misinformation, thereby triggering massive panic and paranoia.

First, videos of violence from other parts of the country, under entirely different circumstances, and at times, instances that had occurred

As this news spread across other social media sites and WhatsApp, many local and national news organisations shared similar stories without exercising the due diligence required to report such a sensitive issue. While some organisations resorted to carrying deliberately vague reports due to insufficient sources, others outrightly published false information.

many years prior, were tagged as real-time proof of violence against migrant labourers in Tamil Nadu.

For instance, on 3 March 2023, the news of a migrant labourer from Bihar being found dead at the Tiruppur railway station led to extreme unrest among the migrant community as they suspected foul play. Later, the Tamil Nadu Police released the CCTV footage of the incident, which showed that the labourer had been hit by a train while walking on the tracks. It was found that he died by suicide. Similarly, videos of three men attacking a local in an apparent case of gang rivalry in Coimbatore; and a video from Jodhpur showing a lawyer being assaulted in connection with a case he was involved in were passed off as attacks against migrant labourers in Tamil Nadu.

Second, the anti-Hindi imposition sentiment widely prevalent in Tamil Nadu was used to concoct the narrative that the supposed attacks resulted from widespread hate towards North Indians.

Bihar-based YouTuber Manish Kashyap, who runs the YouTube channel, *Sach Tak News*, posted numerous videos riddled with false information. In one video, he ‘interviews’ a migrant worker from Bihar, who reportedly works in Tamil Nadu. The alleged, unidentified worker can be heard saying, “As soon as we get off the train in Tamil Nadu, we are asked if we speak Hindi by the locals. They then attack us with knives. I know of a case in Tirupur where they attacked two people in this fashion”. This video garnered more than a million views in a matter of days.

While the initial motive of this misinformation campaign appears to be entirely political, rampant sharing of these rumours on social media was instrumental in creating an atmosphere of hostility that forced most migrants working in the State to flee. But was there any truth to this?

The Casualty of Political Hate Speech

Amidst the Centre’s push to make Hindi the national language, political leaders in south India have repeatedly delivered speeches against New Delhi’s alleged attempts at erasing regional languages. Notably, Dravidian party leaders in Tamil Nadu have often espoused anti-Hindi imposition sentiments during election campaigns. In fact, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam-led (DMK) anti-Hindi agitations in Tamil Nadu

date as far back as the 1960s. Its leaders still pander to Tamil pride by adopting a staunch anti-Hindi, anti-North stance, which also doubles down as an anti-BJP stance. However, such rhetoric is not strictly restricted to linguistic debates or scoring political brownie points. Many times, migrant labourers from the north have been at the receiving end of racist remarks.

On 14 January 2023, DMK Organisational Secretary, R.S. Bharati, mocked migrant labourers from Bihar and demeaned them by claiming that they merely sell *pani puri* in Tamil Nadu. Similarly, in 2022, the State Education Minister, K. Ponmudi, mocked Hindi and claimed that Hindi speakers are *pani puri* sellers. In 2021, the State Municipal Administration Minister, K.N. Nehru, contended that “Biharis are less brainy than Tamils” and that the former was snatching away jobs from the latter.

Apart from political discourses, this rhetoric of othering and ridiculing North Indians is also widely rampant on popular Tamil meme pages on social media and on YouTube. Nicknamed “*vadakkans*” (people from the north), the memes made targeting north Indians and migrant labourers are usually on the lines of depicting them as uneducated, unskilled, and a threat to the locals who will take over their cities.

Disturbingly, another common theme of depiction and demonisation is portraying the migrants as rapists. For instance, a remake of a viral sexist meme, this meme (see Figure 2) shows a “*vadakkan*” probably gawking at a Tamil woman with a cow beside him. The text reads, “Lest I rape you, run away.” Tamil politicians have widely used this rhetoric. A 2013 tweet by current DMK MLA, T.R.B. Rajaa, is a case in point, where he terms all Biharis as rapists.



The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam-led (DMK) anti-Hindi agitations in Tamil Nadu date as far back as the 1960s. Its leaders still pander to Tamil pride by adopting a staunch anti-Hindi, anti-North stance, which also doubles down as an anti-BJP stance.

Figure 2. A meme on Instagram depicting vadakkans as rapists

Source: Instagram/_giga_cheems_

Furthermore, such rhetoric is also widely rampant on YouTube. A video posted in January 2023 by the YouTube channel *YellowBench Tamil* shows the channel host walking around Chennai, interviewing the locals on the changes in the city since migrant labourers settled there. One person claims, “About 10,000-40,000 north Indians arrive in the city every day by trains. They don’t just come here to earn a living and keep their head down...No one knows how or by what means they buy property in the city, but now they own many of them...at this rate there will be less Tamils and more north Indians living in Chennai”. The other locals that the host talks to also echo the same sentiment, with many dehumanising the migrant labourers and claiming that they “dirty” the city. The video has more than 165K views.

Unsurprisingly, such negative discourses have not been restricted to social media platforms and political gatherings. Propagation of such othering has materialised as attacks against migrants. For instance, in February 2023, a man from Villupuram was arrested for abusing and assaulting migrant labourers on a train. The video (see Figure 3) of the assault had gone viral, after which the Government Railway Police traced and arrested the accused. Such stray incidents have been reported in the past as well.



Figure 3. The tweet posted by the Government Railway Police with the video of the attack.

Source: Twitter

How did the Tamil Nadu Government Tackle the Misinformation Campaign?

In March 2023, within hours after fake videos started going viral, the Tamil Nadu government set up a helpline for migrant labourers. The Chief Minister's Office released a statement saying that the government is "steadfast in protecting their rights" and that they are as safe in Tamil Nadu as they would be in their native States.

In the next few days, the State government also announced that it was conducting a census of the migrant labour force in every district to find out the number of migrants residing in Tamil Nadu and to provide timely assistance. The State government also acted in tandem with the Bihar government, which sent a 4-member team to Chennai to observe the ground situation and report back.

Furthermore, the administrations of various MSME, construction, and hotel companies met directly with their migrant labour forces, as they assured them of safety.

Fact-checking Exercises by Tamil Nadu Police

Immediately after the rumours of State-wide attacks started spreading on social media, the Tamil Nadu Police donned the hat of fact-checkers, as it busted false information tweet by tweet. On 2 March 2023, the State Police's official Twitter handle fact-checked two of the most viral videos in circulation then and provided clarifications stating that the violence in both videos was unrelated to the migrants' issue. On the same day, the State Director General of Police also released a video statement reassuring the migrants and explaining how the viral videos had "twisted facts" to paint a picture of unrest in the State.

The police also resorted to clarifying individual tweets that spread fake news. For instance, while replying to a tweet by Zee Bihar Jharkhand, the police tweeted, "It has been incorrectly claimed that Hindi-speaking people from Bihar are being assaulted by Tamil-speaking people of Tamil Nadu. In fact, in Tamil Nadu, migrant workers from other States of India are Safe and Secure." In response to another tweet, the police issued a clarification of the incident having occurred in Bengaluru and being unrelated to any violence in Tamil Nadu. In yet another Twitter thread, the police clarified that their investigation found that a group

from Jharkhand created a fake video to gain social media popularity. Stating “You can’t cheat everyone, every time”, in reply to a video posted by *B.N.R News*, the police unravelled how a scripted video was being circulated as being authentic and urged netizens to verify content before tweeting. Throughout this exercise, the police also constantly tweeted and issued press releases in Hindi. Various police teams across the State met with migrant workers in a direct attempt to reach out. The police also released new guidelines that it will henceforth be following to bust fake news vis-à-vis migrants.

The police were also quick to take action against rumour mongers and media organisations that published false information. After an FIR was filed against Umrao for his false and misleading tweets on the issue, one of which was deleted later, the Supreme Court on 6 April 2023 asked the BJP spokesperson to “be responsible” and exercise caution before tweeting and demanded him to tender an apology. FIRs were also filed against *OpIndia* CEO, an editor of *Dainik Bhaskar*, a Twitter handle named Tanveer Post, and YouTuber Kashyap, who was booked under the National Security Act.

Conclusion

Highlighting how misinformation spreads faster than the truth, a study by MIT Media Lab States that “false news stories are 70% more likely to be retweeted than true stories”, and the recent misinformation campaign directed at migrants in Tamil Nadu is a case in point. While the State government and the police acted swiftly, the damage was already done with thousands of migrant workers fleeing the State. And while the fact-checking exercise conducted by the police on social media was commendable, netizens should have access to fact-checking tools and software to quickly verify the different kinds of information they come across on social media. Furthermore, as has been established in this essay, many of the actions taken by the government were knee-jerk reactions. They would have been more beneficial had they been conducted earlier, including conducting the State-wide census and publishing guidelines for the police to act on misinformation. Additionally, misinformation campaigns such as this cannot be tackled successfully unless the powers to be are willing to root out the underlying hate campaigns that enable it, in this case, hate against migrant labourers in Tamil Nadu. Lastly, immense responsibility lies

on the media to only report factually correct information and exercise caution while publishing reports likely to cause mass hysteria.

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REGRESSION

Chapter 6

With the Rise of Misinformation, Danger Lurks in the Third Pillar of Democracy

Mani Chander

Abstract

The essay critically examines the pervasive influence of misinformation within the Indian judiciary, highlighting its detrimental effects on democracy, secularism, and gender equality. Specific instances are presented where judges have made controversial remarks, invoking religious and cultural biases, and reinforcing gender stereotypes. These actions are shown to have lasting impacts on public perception and societal polarization. The essay concludes by emphasizing the judiciary's responsibility to adhere to constitutional principles, warning that failure to do so undermines the institution's integrity and the democratic fabric of the nation.

Keywords

Misinformation, Indian Judiciary, Cultural Bias, Secularism, Constitution

Introduction

One of the greatest challenges to democracy and democratic institutions in India today is misinformation. Differentiating between what is authentic and false or fabricated has become increasingly difficult. Regrettably, this misinformation siege appears to have infiltrated the third pillar upon which democracy stands.

Analysis shows that controversial, politically coloured and unwarranted comments, including systematically unreliable sources having no backing in law, have been quoted by some judges on several instances. This is exceptionally dangerous as it threatens the administration of justice and erodes and endangers democracy.

From requesting Prime Minister Modi to prevent India from becoming an Islamic country to directing parliament to pass a law conferring national honour to Lord Ram and ordering the Union government to file an affidavit disclosing what action they proposed to take against the “*love jihad movement*”, some judges have furthered fake narratives in the name of protecting Hinduism and Hindu culture.

The damaging impact of misinformation becomes magnified when those in positions of power make misleading remarks. When a judge says something, it is believed to be true. Unwarranted and false information leads to change in public perception, exerting a lingering influence on people’s reasoning and, in some cases, driving further polarisation.

Amidst purveyors of fake narratives, inappropriate judicial remarks and observations, whether in court orders or otherwise, form part of the lesser-known, underplayed and not oft-explored machinery of misinformation.

Needless, Brazen Invocation of Hinduism and Hindu Culture

In December 2018, Justice Sudip Ranjan Sen, a judge of the Meghalaya High Court at the time, disposing of a petition filed by a person who was denied a domicile certificate by the State government, made several controversial and irrelevant remarks. He claimed India should have been declared a Hindu country during partition as it was divided based on religion.

In his 37-page judgment, he wrote, *“Even today, in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, the Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Christians, Parsis, Khasis, Jaintias and Garos are tortured, and they have no place to go, and those Hindus who entered India during partition are still considered as foreigners, which in my understanding is highly illogical, illegal and against the principle of natural justice.”*

“Many foreigners become Indians, and original Indians are left out, which is very sad”, he remarked with a clarification: *“However, I am not against my Muslim brothers and sisters, who are residing in India for generations and abiding Indian laws, they should also be allowed to live peacefully.”*

The order further noted, *“I make it clear that nobody should try to make India as another Islamic country; otherwise, it will be a doomsday for India and the world. I am confident that only this government under Shri Narendra Modiji will understand the gravity and will do the needful as requested above, and our Chief Minister Mamataji will support the national interest in all respect (sic).”*

The judgment became highly publicised and evoked severe criticism from various quarters. On the other hand, once the verdict was delivered, those who shared the judges’ view were left with a stronger sense of belief, and their misinformed ideas stood reinforced.

Justice Sen issued a clarificatory order two days after the judgment was passed, stating that he was not a *“religious fanatic”* and that his order was *“misinterpreted”*. He did not face any disciplinary action or consequences and continued to serve as a judge until retirement.

In fact, in February 2019, when a petitioner moved the Supreme Court against the controversial remarks made by him, a bench of then Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi and Justice Sanjiv Khanna refused to withdraw judicial work from him and asked the petitioner to amend the prayer and instead seek an expunction of the remarks in the judgment.

Much later, in May 2019, a division bench found the December 2018 judgment to be *“totally superfluous”, “legally flawed”,* and *“inconsistent with constitutional principles,”* and set aside the judgment in its entirety as *non est* (will not exist).

Legally, as of today, the provocative judgment has no force or value, but its impact on public perception lingers, for what has been said cannot be unsaid. At a time when the country is becoming increasingly

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polarised, the repercussions of such communal remarks are devastating and further threaten our secular fabric.

The judgment passed by Justice Sen is not a one-off case; there are others which exemplify the diffusion of misinformation through judicial orders.

For example, Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav of the Allahabad High Court, in October 2021, stated in an official order that “*Parliament must bring law to pay ‘Rashtriya Samman’ (national honour) to Lord Ram, Lord Krishna, Ramayan and its author Valmiki, besides Gita and its author Maharishi Ved Vyas as they are the culture and heritage of the country*”.

In stating that “*there is a need to educate children about Indian culture by making it compulsory in schools across the country*”, the judge insinuated that Indian culture is Hindu culture, all while blatantly othering minority communities. Not only are such remarks beyond the judiciary's powers, as courts have no authority to direct the legislature to frame a law, but their ramifications are also lasting and potentially explosive.

Similarly, in 2009 while dealing with a plea for anticipatory bail by two Muslim men, Shahan Sha and Sirajuddin, accused of converting and then marrying a Christian and a Hindu girl, Justice K. T. Sankaran of the Kerala High Court rejected bail because it was, “*well known that there was a movement known as Love Jihad or Romeo Jihad.*”

In his order, Justice Sankaran directed the Director General of Police (DGP), Kerala, to file an affidavit answering questions such as how the ‘love jihad movement’ is funded, how many students had been converted to Islam in the last three years, and whether there was any connection between ‘*love jihad*’ and counterfeiting, smuggling, drug trafficking and terrorist activities.

Even though the DGP, in his report, found no evidence of any organised attempt or “*movement*” to entice girls or women into marrying Muslims to convert them to Islam, Justice Sankaran continued to cite the conspiracy theory in his orders without any basis.

In the Name of the ‘Holy Cow’

Several Indian courts have, off-late, been obsessed with the protection of cows—in some cases, elevating the cow’s status to “*mother*” and “*God*”, going as far as seeking a formal declaration to make cows the country’s national animal. From invoking Hindu culture to mythology and baseless claims under the garb of “*modern science*”, judges are increasingly seen propagating their misguided opinions through official court orders.

For example, a Hyderabad High Court judge, Justice B Siva Sankara Rao, claimed that cows are “*sacred national wealth*”. In 2017, while adjudicating a petition for custody of cows and bulls seized from the petitioner on account of allegedly transporting them to a slaughterhouse, the judge remarked, “*This question needs to be posed and answered in view of the national importance of cows which are substitutes to Mother and God.*”

In the same year, another judge, Justice Mahesh Sharma of the Rajasthan High Court, made a 20-point recommendation in court for the protection of cows claiming that it was “*the voice*” of his “*soul*” while describing himself as “*a devotee of Lord Shiv who reveres the cow*”. In an attempt to seek the declaration of the cow as the national animal, the same judge said that cows should replace the tiger as the national animal because “*it’s also holy*”. On another occasion, the judge claimed that the peacock was chosen as India’s national bird because “*it’s considered pious*” and follows “*life-long celibacy*”.

On September 1, 2021, the Allahabad High Court also observed that the cow should be declared the country’s national animal and held that *gau raksha* (“*protection of cows*”) should be a fundamental right of Hindus.

In a 12-page order, Justice Shekar Kumar Yadav invoked mythology several times, stressing the importance of the cow as described in the age-old scriptures such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Shastras* and *Puranas*.

Justice Yadav, while dismissing the plea of a man accused of cow slaughter, went on to back his archaic stance by invoking what he believed was scientific reasoning: “*Vaigyanik yeh maante hain ki ek hi pashu gaay hi hai jo oxygen grahan karti hai, oxygen chhorti hai* (Scientists believe that the cow is the only animal that both inhales oxygen and exhales oxygen).”

Alluding to the ‘holy cow’, he also noted in his order that cow’s ghee is used for oblations in *yajnas* (a ritual sacrifice) since it “*gives special energy to sun rays, and ultimately causes rain.*”

The Rajasthan High Court made a similar ruling to declare the cow the national animal. Also, it allowed future litigation by granting people the “*right*” to file public interest litigation for the declaration of the cow as a national animal. In 2019, the Punjab and Haryana High Court justified the ban on cow slaughter by citing the animal’s importance in Hindu culture. It was held that the cow embodied the cosmic law of ‘*dharma*’.

In recent years, false complaints of cow slaughter targeting those from minority communities have increased. Courts’ consistent, often irrelevant and brazen remarks in the name of the ‘holy cow,’ have emboldened mobs and self-proclaimed *gau rakshaks* to crack down on innocent Muslims, often leading to death by lynching.

Evidence shows that when courts make observations on certain issues, people take them seriously, often acting in pursuance of, or at the behest of courts’ rulings. The ramifications are serious and not to be taken lightly.

For instance, recently, potentially taking inspiration from what had been said by judges of various high courts, a plea was filed before the Supreme Court seeking directions to the Government of India to declare the cow as the national animal. Even though the apex court eventually dismissed the plea while holding that “*it is not the job of the court to decide on such matters*”, the petitioners who moved the court clearly believed that their petition was maintainable.

Reinforcing Gender Stereotypes through Judicial Orders

Time and again, Indian courts have reinforced stereotypes against women in cases of rape, sexual abuse and divorce—all in the name of the country's “*social fabric*”, “*morality*”, and “*Hindu culture*”.

The idea that all harm will be undone and all sins will be washed away if a man accused of rape marries the victim has been reiterated by courts on several occasions. In 2022, a single bench of the Allahabad High Court quashed an FIR pertaining to the rape of a minor girl on account of an “*amicable settlement*” to marry. In 2020, the Delhi High Court granted anticipatory bail to a rape accused after the survivor's mother expressed that she had “no objection” to the accused marrying her daughter.

In March 2021, then Chief Justice of India, S A Bobde, while hearing a bail plea of a government servant accused of raping a minor, remarked in open court: “*Will you marry her?*”

There is no requirement of law which suggests that if a victim of sexual abuse agrees to marry the accused, the accused could seek the remedy of bail or be exonerated altogether. Such a presumption by the courts is possibly based on the erroneous belief that society will be more

There is no requirement of law which suggests that if a victim of sexual abuse agrees to marry the accused, the accused could seek the remedy of bail or be exonerated altogether. Such a presumption by the courts is possibly based on the erroneous belief that society will be more accepting of such women if they married their perpetrators, for who else would marry them?

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In shifting the onus (of accepting the prospect of marrying one's perpetrator) to an already aggrieved victim, courts not only place these women at a greater risk of abuse in the future but also impose their misguided views on a deeply misogynistic society.

In 2020, a Karnataka High Court judge held that *"it is unbecoming of Indian women to go to sleep after being raped"*. The order read, *"the victim's behaviour was not at all consistent with those of an unwilling, terrified and anguished victim of forcible intercourse if judged by the normal human conduct"*.

Courts have ventured into not only how a victim of sexual abuse should behave and what she should do but also how she should be dressed. In one case, S Krishna Kumar, a sessions judge in Kerala, found that the "sexually provocative" dress worn by the complainant provided sufficient legal ground to make comments offensive and disrespectful to women. Granting bail to the accused, he added it is *"highly unbelievable that he (the accused) will touch the body of the victim fully knowing that she is a member of Scheduled Caste"*.

In another case in 2017, the Punjab and Haryana High Court even commented on the victim's *"misadventures and experiments"*, her *"promiscuity"*, and *"voyeuristic mind"*.

While deciding petitions of divorce and citing "Hindu culture", several judges have made bizarre commentary on what constitutes cruelty by a wife. A cruel wife chooses her career over taking care of her family and raising children, neglects her *"kitchen duties"*, including refusal to *"prepare tea"*, insists on living separately from the husband's parents, and does not wear *sindoor* and *mangalsutra*. Even as there is no specific definition under the law, judges have embarked upon the task of delineating what might constitute cruelty by a wife.

These unwarranted remarks, often based on what some judges, in their own opinion, believe are characteristics of a *"good wife"* as opposed to a *"cruel wife"*, strengthen regressive views held by society at large. The propagation of sexism through judicial commentary is a form of misinformation that continues unabated.

Your Honour, Your Honour

“I will bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India as by law established, that I will uphold the sovereignty and integrity of India, that I will duly and faithfully and to the best of my ability, knowledge and judgment perform the duties of my office without fear or favour, affection or ill-will and that I will uphold the Constitution and the laws.” This is the promise that judges make upon entering office.

When a high court judge attributes credibility to scripture such as the Manusmriti or claims that “*Bhartiya traditions*” and “*dharmas*” ought to be followed to uphold the Indian Constitution, they defy the very oath that is taken at the time of assuming office.

When a sitting judge of the Supreme Court openly heaps praises and makes obsequious remarks about the country’s Prime Minister, the executive head, the very independence of the institution is called into question.

Indeed, being human, judges derive from their knowledge of the world, which in turn plays a significant role in decision-making, but to go beyond the purview of the mandate of the Constitution—which enshrines the basic structure and separation of powers—does not behove the position they hold.

In a world increasingly plagued by misinformation, it is the ultimate responsibility of those who preside over our courts to be free from

The judiciary is considered the third pillar of democracy for a reason. For society, it is one of the three places where people repose their trust and derive their sense of social and moral compass. To misinform and misguide the public is to defy that trust and, in turn, defy democracy.

prejudice and act within the confines of the very document which grants them great power.

The judiciary is considered the third pillar of democracy for a reason. For society, it is one of the three places where people repose their trust and derive their sense of social and moral compass. To misinform and misguide the public is to defy that trust and, in turn, defy democracy.

A chain is as strong as its weakest link. Ignorant remarks made by even few members of the judiciary can wreak havoc on the reputation, and faith reposed in the institution by the people of India.

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Chapter 7

How Hindu Nationalist Propaganda is Derailing India's Global Influence

Mohamed Zeeshan

Abstract

This essay critically explores the influence of Hindu nationalist propaganda on India's global standing and foreign relations. It discusses how disinformation and propaganda, particularly under the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) rule, have been used to refashion India's identity abroad along Hindu nationalist lines. The essay highlights instances where this propaganda has led to international controversy and strained diplomatic relations, such as the case of the film "The Kashmir Files". It also examines how Hindu nationalist rhetoric has polarized domestic discourse and affected India's relationships with foreign diplomats and partners. The essay further discusses the impact of this propaganda on India's foreign relations and its quest for global leadership, with a focus on two broad fronts: propaganda advancing Hindu nationalist causes and propaganda obfuscating situations politically unfavorable to the government. The essay concludes by emphasizing the potential long-term detrimental effects of these strategies on India's credibility as an emerging global power and economy.

Keywords

Hindu Nationalism, Foreign Policy, Propaganda & Misinformation

Introduction

Using disinformation and propaganda for foreign policy purposes is probably as old as Statecraft itself. In his epic account of the Peloponnesian War, which gripped ancient Greece in the fifth century B.C., the contemporary Greek historian Thucydides narrated how politicians and leaders on both warring sides used propaganda — and at times, blatant lies about the superiority of one's own people — either to justify policy decisions or to win over allies during the war.

Given the nature of that era, ancient Greeks had to rely more on the spoken word than the written word to reach mass audiences. Thucydides writes in particular of a moving speech delivered by the Athenian politician Pericles at the funeral of fallen Athenian soldiers a year into the war. Several centuries later, Abraham Lincoln would deliver a famous speech of his own under similar circumstances at Gettysburg during the American Civil War.

This reliance on the spoken word changed drastically over time with the advent of the printing press and the Internet. In the run-up to its invasion of Ukraine last year and afterwards, Russia used the immense reach of the Internet and social media to spread its highly contestable view of Ukraine to people everywhere. That included easily debunked tropes such as that Ukraine is not really a nation or that the Ukrainian government is made of Nazis. Elsewhere, reports have shown that Chinese authorities are trying to infiltrate international social media with a barrage of fake accounts, pushing the view of the Chinese communist party overseas.

India and its foreign policy have not been immune to these impulses, particularly under the rule of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has sought to refashion India's identity abroad along Hindu nationalist lines.

At the International Film Festival of India in November 2022, the renowned Israeli filmmaker Nadav Lapid courted controversy when he pulled up the movie *The Kashmir Files* for a scathing assessment. Promoted by leaders of the ruling BJP, *The Kashmir Files* purports to depict communal violence against Kashmiri Hindus and their subsequent exodus three decades ago. But Lapid was unimpressed by its artistic quality.

“It felt to us like a propaganda and vulgar movie that was inappropriate for an artistic and competitive section of such a prestigious film festival,” Lapid said, arguing that it whimsically portrayed good and evil like a *“cartoon for kids”*. *“Doesn’t an event like this, a tragic event, deserve a serious movie?”* he asked pointedly.

In the immediate aftermath of Lapid’s remarks, Israeli diplomats came out in unified condemnation of that assessment and distanced themselves from it. Israel’s ambassador to India, Naor Gilon, tweeted to Lapid that he *“should be ashamed.”* By all accounts, the Israeli government seemed anxious not to displease the ruling political establishment in India, which had fervently promoted the controversial film. Yet, the crisis only worsened. Shortly afterwards, Gilon said that he had received anti-Semitic messages on Twitter, including one that said, *“Hitler was a great person.”*

Then, in a column for the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, reporter Swati Chaturvedi claimed that *“huge diplomatic pressure”* had been applied by India to elicit that response. *“It was conveyed to Israel that India considered the criticism of the film an ‘unfriendly act,’”* Chaturvedi wrote.

This bizarre fiasco involving *The Kashmir Files* was not the first time that one of New Delhi’s diplomatic partners had been caught in a maelstrom over domestic Indian politics. In recent years, as strident Hindu nationalism has polarised Indian discourse — including through propaganda and disinformation — foreign diplomats and partners have found themselves in its crosshairs for various reasons.

To be sure, employing propaganda and disinformation to serve national

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interests predates the more recent rise of the BJP. In 2020, the Brussels-based watchdog NGO, EU DisinfoLab, uncovered a 15-year-long global disinformation campaign by hundreds of fake media outlets serving Indian interests, particularly to malign Pakistan. But since the advent of the BJP's predominance in national politics, India's domestic discourse and rhetoric have clashed with its foreign relations and interests primarily owing to two broad fronts: (1) propaganda that advances Hindu nationalist causes; and (2) propaganda that obfuscates situations that are considered politically unfavourable by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government.

Both phenomena have profoundly affected India's foreign relations and, as significantly, its longer-term quest for global leadership.

Public Diplomacy for Hindu Nationalist Purposes

One of the key objectives of Hindu nationalist political strategy is to rise above the caste divisions that have traditionally fragmented the Hindu electorate by advocating a more unified Hindu identity at the expense of religious minorities. As a result, politicians, party functionaries, and commentators sympathetic to the BJP have, on several occasions, sought to appeal to Hindu civilisational pride, often at the cost of deriding Islamic beliefs and customs. This has often damaged India's credibility on the world stage and drawn sharp rebukes from important strategic partners.

In May 2022, the then BJP spokesperson Nupur Sharma made derogatory comments about Prophet Muhammad, triggering an outpour of condemnation from across the Muslim world and from the United States and a spokesperson of the United Nations Secretary-General. The fracas even saw calls on social media from Arab activists for the expulsion of millions of Hindu expatriates from the Arab world.

Sharma was not the only BJP functionary in recent years to ruffle feathers abroad in pursuit of muscular Islamophobic rhetoric. In 2020, BJP MP Tejasvi Surya was called out online for derogatory tweets about Arab Muslim women by a member of the UAE royal family, Princess Hend Al Qassimi. "*You make your bread and butter from this land which you scorn, and your ridicule will not go unnoticed,*" Al Qassimi tweeted, referring to the large Indian diaspora in the UAE. Previously that same

year, the BJP's national general secretary, B.L. Santhosh, drew flak after warning U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders that India would feel "*compelled*" to influence the 2020 U.S. presidential elections. He was responding to Sanders' criticism of "*anti-Muslim mob violence*" in India following communal riots in Delhi early that year.

Even at the U.N., Hindu nationalist disinformation from the Indian government has rubbed many the wrong way. In 2020, for instance, India accused the U.N. General Assembly of deliberately ignoring attacks on Hindu and Buddhist communities — a complaint that New Delhi has oft repeated even though several commentators have pointed out that the Assembly has passed several resolutions condemning attacks on Buddhist and Hindu temples in countries like Afghanistan.

Hindu nationalist fearmongering and propaganda have been especially consequential in India's fractious neighbourhood. Bangladesh has been derided and ridiculed for years as a source of illegal immigrants. In 2018, the then BJP president and now Union Home Minister, Amit Shah, referred to Bangladeshi migrants as "*termites*". A senior Bangladeshi minister responded by calling his comment "*unwarranted*". That same year, a regional leader of the BJP, T. Raja Singh, went much further, declaring that "*the government should shoot*" Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants.

These comments and other policies have provoked angry backlashes across the border. In October 2021, Hindu worshippers were attacked during Durga Puja celebrations in Bangladesh, and temples were vandalised. In response, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina later warned India that "*incidents should not take place there which would have an impact on Bangladesh, and the Hindus in our country face attacks.*"

Ineffective Image Management

The concomitant emergence of a personality cult around Prime Minister Modi has also evoked various disinformation campaigns in service of more combative foreign policy rhetoric. Protecting the government from criticism has accordingly become a core objective of Indian foreign policy under Modi. Social media and the diplomatic corps have been employed towards that cause, often at the cost of India's credibility on the world stage.

This effort was tested during the devastating second wave of Covid-19

that struck India in 2021. In April and May of that year, amidst crippling shortages of oxygen and a rising death toll, diplomatic missions in New Delhi sought support and assistance, including from grassroots workers belonging to the opposition Congress party. Following one such incident in early May — of Congress party volunteers supplying oxygen to the Philippines embassy — External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar took to Twitter to claim that there was no demand for oxygen at the embassy. The dispute was never settled by the Philippines embassy. Still, given the nature of security protocols, it seemed highly unlikely that a foreign diplomatic mission would willingly welcome volunteers into their compound in the middle of the night without a potential need.

Almost immediately after Jaishankar's Statement, the New Zealand High Commission publicly appealed to Congress party volunteers for oxygen following several cases of Covid-19 on their premises. The High Commission was immediately attacked on social media and subsequently issued an apology for its appeal. But the New Zealand foreign minister later confirmed that the staff member for whom help had been sought had eventually passed away.

Perhaps the most striking and consequential diplomatic fallout of disinformation came amidst border clashes with China in 2020. In May and June of that year, Chinese and Indian troops were engaged in skirmishes, resulting in deaths and gunfire for the first time in decades. Reports suggested that Chinese soldiers had ventured into territory claimed and previously patrolled by Indian troops. New Delhi's official line in the following talks was that the two countries ought to reestablish the status quo as it had existed before the clashes. In a conversation with the Chinese government, Jaishankar said that China had attempted to erect structures on India's side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) — the de facto border between the two countries. Beijing countered that its troops had not transgressed into Indian territory and blamed the Indian side for sparking the violence.

Then, amidst outcry and criticism of his government, Prime Minister Modi appeared to contradict the Indian stand by declaring in Parliament: *"No one has intruded, nor is anyone intruding."* Chinese State media later reproduced Modi's Statement, seemingly to vindicate Beijing's stand that the clashes had not occurred on Indian territory.

Modi was ostensibly trying to project an image of strength by declaring that the Indian army had repelled all intrusion. But to the contrary, under the circumstances, his Statement appeared to signal to Beijing that India was seeking to avoid a confrontation with Chinese troops at all costs and that New Delhi was perhaps even willing to write off lost territory if further clashes could be avoided. In the following months, possibly bolstered by this perceived upper hand, the Chinese side adopted increasingly maximalist positions on the dispute. Satellite images revealed rapid infrastructure development by Chinese troops in the disputed region, and skirmishes spread two years later to Arunachal Pradesh in the east.

Image management has proved similarly counterproductive in the Modi government's effort to respond to various global governance indices, which have consistently downgraded India across several parameters. In his book, *Price of the Modi Years*, journalist and writer Aakar Patel pointed out that India had registered a fall on a whopping 54 out of 58 global indices in recent years, measuring press freedom, democracy, corruption and several other characteristics. On the Global Hunger Index, for instance, India has fallen from 94th among 107 countries in 2020 to 101st out of 116 in 2021 and 107th out of 121 in 2022.

In 2021, the government attempted to discredit that index — amongst several other indices — by claiming that its methodology was flawed. One of New Delhi's allegations was that the Global Hunger Index was based on a “four-question opinion poll” conducted by Gallup. Yet, researchers later disproved that claim, showing that the index did not consider that poll at all. Instead, it was based on data from the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organisation which measured the percentage of undernourished in the population.

Prioritising the National Interest

Hindu nationalist messaging and aggressive foreign policy rhetoric appeal undeniably to the BJP's political audiences at home. They are designed to prove to Indians that the Indian government no longer cares for foreign opinions — that it can exercise true independence in foreign policy and restore the pride of the Hindu civilization. Yet, these strategies are altogether catastrophic for India's broader national interests. By their very nature, disinformation and obfuscation are easily disproved, especially by foreign media commentators that do

Protecting the government from criticism has accordingly become a core objective of Indian foreign policy under Modi. Social media and the diplomatic corps have been employed towards that cause, often at the cost of India's credibility on the world stage.

not have to operate under the influence of the Indian government. Consequently, such incidents hurt India's credibility, both as an emerging global power and as an emerging economy.

In recent years, India's alacrity in rubbishing foreign indices and questions over India's own economic data have raised doubts over the integrity of its financial institutions. Concerns over Indian institutions also proliferated after an explosive report early this year by the New York-based short-seller Hindenburg Research, which alleged that the Adani Group is using its ties to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to escape scrutiny and pull off "*the largest con in corporate history.*"

Given India's favourable demographics and the West's strategic interest in reducing its economic exposure to China, many global investors remain keen on pivoting to India. Yet, suppose political interests, propaganda, and disinformation interfere with the fair and transparent functioning of India's economic institutions or State authorities. In that case, India may see its attractiveness as an investment destination deteriorate in the longer run.

Abroad, the Indian diaspora has long been an unparalleled tool for foreign influence, driving favourable policy outcomes in foreign capitals on New Delhi's behalf for several years. But more recently, they have become significantly polarised in the face of widespread disinformation over social media. Last year, communal riots broke out between Hindus

and Muslims in the U.K. following an India-Pakistan cricket match. Those clashes had come in the aftermath of rumours that a Muslim girl had been kidnapped and that Hindus and Hindu temples were under attack. British police later told the BBC that misleading social media posts had played a “*huge role*” in provoking the riots. Independent analysis found that many posts alleging attacks on Hindus in the U.K. originated from India.

Similarly, riled up by social media and by far-right Hindu groups on the ground, sections of the Indian diaspora have taken to extremist outlooks elsewhere around the world. In the U.S., Hindu nationalist sympathisers have organised anti-Muslim rallies. In the Gulf, multiple Indian expats have been detained or deported following Islamophobic posts on social media.

The polarisation of the Indian diaspora by Hindu nationalist disinformation does not just diminish their political influence overseas; it also risks driving anti-immigration sentiment in the West in the years ahead in the wake of incidents of communal violence.

Perhaps most importantly, in the long run, disinformation tactics risk derailing India's rise as a global power by squandering away its global goodwill and soft power advantage, especially relative to China. For decades, India's rise has been welcomed both by the West as well as the Global South, owing to India's reputation as a stable democracy with credible State institutions — a rarity in the post-colonial developing world. For instance, India's Election Commission has served as an

The polarisation of the Indian diaspora by Hindu nationalist disinformation does not just diminish their political influence overseas; it also risks driving anti-immigration sentiment in the West in the years ahead in the wake of incidents of communal violence.

independent observer in several countries, from Egypt to Cambodia. But discreditable disinformation and hate messaging against the world's Muslims — all unchecked by independent State institutions — will make India seem a progressively less appealing partner.

Much of India's appeal comes from its traditional role in bolstering multilateralism and global stability. Suppose India is seen as a threat to the existing multilateral world order — as China and Russia are — it would make India's rise significantly less palatable to both the West and the developing world. In that case, the latter of which, in particular, see multilateralism as a necessary tool to maintain geo-political stability and prevent the exploitation of smaller States. In that context, aggressive responses to global indices and unsubstantiated criticism of multilateral bodies for a bias against Hindus will not play well with India's global constituency.

In a dynamic geopolitical environment in which India becomes increasingly more important by size and location, the world will inevitably pay more attention to Indian politics and policy. If India wants to become a global superpower, it must be more mindful of — and open to — that foreign scrutiny.

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Chapter 8

India's Internet Blackouts: An Ineffective Strategy Against Misinformation

Rumi

Abstract

This essay critically examines the phenomenon of internet shutdowns in India, a country that leads the world in this practice. It explores the legal framework under which these shutdowns are imposed, their socio-economic impacts, and their effectiveness in curbing misinformation. The essay argues that while shutdowns are often justified to prevent the spread of misinformation, they are largely ineffective in achieving this goal. Instead, they significantly affect various aspects of society, including the economy, education, healthcare, and the exercise of fundamental rights. The essay concludes by calling for a more holistic approach to address misinformation and avoid the harmful effects of internet shutdowns.

Keywords

Internet Shutdowns, Digital Access, Policy Implications, Fundamental Rights

Introduction

India has been an undisputed leader in shutting down the internet worldwide. India has imposed 734 shutdowns since 2012, per data maintained by SFLC.in¹. The trend portrays that most of these shutdowns are more preventive than reactive. Shutdowns in India are imposed mainly to solve the evil of misinformation spread during protests, communal violence, and examinations. Shutdowns are usually targeted at shutting down social media platforms to restrict the flow of misinformation. This essay will attempt to answer whether internet shutdowns serve their purpose and if they are ever proportionate. It will do this while taking the reader through the broad landscape of the shutdown-ridden society.

Internet shutdowns refer to deliberate disruptions or blockages of Internet services specifically imposed by governments. These shutdowns can be either partial or complete. In partial shutdowns, only specific services are restricted, while in complete shutdowns, there is no internet access. Various reasons contribute to internet disruptions worldwide, including crackdowns on dissent, preventing cheating in examinations, national security and public safety concerns, and combating the spread of misinformation. The impact of these shutdowns varies significantly across different regions, genders, and economies. Shutdowns affect different individuals and communities in diverse ways, and their consequences are deeply rooted in political contexts, democratic institutions, and political discourse.

Internet shutdowns in India can be imposed under two statutes, one is Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, and the other is through the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules, 2017. Post the notification of these rules in 2017; all Internet shutdowns are supposed to be imposed using these 'Suspension Rules' itself. Although Section 144 of CrPC, a blanket provision, has reportedly been used to impose shutdowns, it is in bad practice.

These suspension rules derive their validity from Section 7 of the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885. These rules also have a few but nearly not enough

¹ <https://internetshutdowns.in/>

built-in mechanisms to prevent misuse of shutdowns by the State and Central Government. According to these Rules, the power to impose an internet shutdown is with the executive branch of the Union and state. As per sub-Rule 2(6), an internet shutdown shall be imposed in accordance with Section 5(2) of the Indian Telegraph Act. Section 5(2) states that an internet shutdown, along with the grounds mentioned in Article 19(2) of the Constitution, can be imposed only in case of a “public emergency” or in the interest of “public safety”. However, these terms (public emergency and public safety) have not been defined anywhere in the parent act. As a result, internet shutdowns are often imposed in situations that do not satisfy the threshold of a public emergency or public safety as laid down by judicial precedents.

There have been multiple violations of these rules. In the case of *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India*², it was held by the Supreme Court of India that an internet shutdown order passed under the Rules must be published and made publicly available. An internet shutdown is a restriction on fundamental rights guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(g) (freedom of speech and expression and freedom to trade and profession). Therefore, it will violate principles of natural justice if an internet shutdown order is not publicly available for citizens to challenge the suspension. This principle was then added to the Rules through an amendment. There are still multiple States that do not end up publishing the orders.

² *Anuradha Bhasin v Union of India*, para 96.

Accessing the impact of internet shutdowns is challenging, as there is limited quantifiable evidence available, except for a few studies demonstrating the substantial costs of shutdowns on the economy, political discourse, democracy, healthcare, and education.

In addition, the rules provide for forming a review committee at the central and state level. The task of this committee is *only* to determine whether an internet shutdown was imposed according to the law. Further, the Review Committee is composed of members from the executive branch. This means that the committee is not independent and lacks diversity in its composition. In addition, it is a violation of the principles of natural justice. Such a weak review mechanism has resulted in no accountability and transparency concerning the imposition of internet shutdowns.

In a recent report by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Communications and Information Technology, it was submitted by the government of India that no official centralised record of the states which have constituted functioning review committees or not³.

Orders accessed which have been passed by State Governments in India appear to be copy-paste versions of similar orders with no application of mind needed for the gravity of the situation. An analysis of the orders lays down a pattern of ‘preventive’ shutdowns imposed to stop rumour-mongering through social media applications. However, isn’t the internet more than just social media?

The internet is crucial in enabling various fundamental rights, such as freedom of speech and expression. It has also contributed significantly to the economy’s expansion, education, emergency services, and e-governance. The availability of digital communications has become essential for family life and other aspects of human connections within corporate processes. This need has become amplified, especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, by pushing India to digital life.

Assessing the impact of internet shutdowns is challenging, as there is limited quantifiable evidence available, except for a few studies demonstrating the substantial costs of shutdowns on the economy, political discourse, democracy, healthcare, and education. Most evidence relies on anecdotal experiences of individuals and communities. This becomes particularly evident in South Asia, where the community and society structures are more complex.

³ 1Suspension of Telecom Services/ Internet and Its Impact, 26th Report, Standing Committee on Communications and Information Technology, December 2021. Also see: IT Standing Committee’s Report on Internet Shutdowns, SFLC, 8 December 2021 at page 14. Accessed at: <https://sflc.in/it-standing-committees-report-internet-shutdowns>

It is well-established and documented in India in line with the 'Digital India' initiative that the internet is essential for exercising constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights of Freedom of Speech and Expression, Freedom of Press, Freedom of Peaceful Assembly, Freedom of Trade and Profession. Meaningful access to the internet also affects the right to access healthcare and the right to access information. Arbitrary and disproportionate internet shutdowns cause a severe violation of these rights. Many state governments in India impose internet shutdowns to clamp down on dissent and free speech. Often cited communal and religious tensions as reasons for internet shutdowns are also a result of the political activities of ruling parties.

Internet shutdowns have severe economic costs. It is also important to note that most of India's economy is informal, making it hard to conclude the exact cost of shutdowns.

According to the Top10VP⁴ report for 2022, India lost \$184.3 million due to internet shutdowns. In the year 2020, this number was \$2779 million. Long-term shutdowns shut down businesses, cause loss of jobs and drastically reduce the masses' economic participation.

The shutdown of the internet in erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir, which lost the internet for over 18 months, is the worst-hit state in India in terms of economic impact and overall. According to a Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industries report, businesses have suffered losses worth Rupees 40,000 crore from 05 August 2019 to July 2020. Till November 2020, at least 5000 salesmen in tourism and mobile services were not paid salaries for August, September and October. Further, 4.96 lakh people lost their jobs⁵. It was also observed that start-ups, mobile phone sector and courier services are among the worst-hit businesses in Kashmir.

Internet shutdowns have severely impacted education, especially since the start of the pandemic. As schools and higher education institutions were shut down and the mode of delivery was made online, the internet

4 1Samuel Woodhams and Simon Migliano, Cost of Internet Shutdowns, Top10VPN, updated on 13 January 2022. Accessed at: <https://www.top10vpn.com/research/cost-of-internet-shutdowns/>

5 Aid, Bashir Wani, 18,000 crore rupees, nearly 5 lakh jobs lost as Kashmir Reels under internet suspension, Citizen Matters, 3 January 2020. Accessed at: <https://citizenmatters.in/kashmir-business-impact-internet-suspended-post-article-370-150>

is the only source to access education. It must be noted that over 96 percent of internet users in India are mobile internet users, and over 75 percent of internet shutdowns affect mobile internet services. This worsens the digital divide and prevents meaningful connectivity.

With respect to long-term internet shutdowns, it was observed that some students dropped out of school or missed an entire year of schooling. In Kashmir, it was reported that due to low internet speed and connectivity issues, the syllabus for the academic year had to be reduced by 40 percent. Parents of children reported that students had been discouraged from attending the classes due to low speed. It also caused emotional and mental health issues for many students who could not access education. In some cases, students failed to appear in necessary government-held examinations for entrance into colleges for higher education and for government jobs. Typically these examinations are conducted after a gap of one year. This shows that these internet shutdowns directly contributed to unemployment in Kashmir. Alternatively, in some cases, people travelled to different cities in order to appear in exams or even to obtain study material.

One of the most commonly cited reasons for imposing internet shutdowns is to prevent the spread of misinformation. However, there is insufficient evidence to establish a direct relationship between internet shutdowns and a reduction in the spread of misinformation. Internet shutdowns often restrict access to all online content, not just false information, making them ineffective in combating misinformation. Moreover, these shutdowns can hinder access to reliable sources of information, impede people's ability to fact-check and verify information and create an environment of uncertainty that fosters rumours and incorrect information.

In a report by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations⁶, it was observed that with increased digitisation of health records and facilities, an internet shutdown also impacts healthcare services. Many doctors rely on the internet for consultation with their peers, and patients also use it to consult doctors. These activities are

6 Rajat Kathuria, Mansi Kedia, Gangesh Varma, Kaushambi Bhagchi, Richa Sekhani, *The Anatomy of an Internet Blackout: Measuring the Economic Impact of Internet Shutdowns in India*, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, April 2018, page 38. Accessed at: https://icrier.org/pdf/Anatomy_of_an_Internet_Blackout.pdf

usually hit due to internet shutdowns. It was observed that a doctor in Manipur could not access their database, which is hosted on a server. They could also not make payments, track shipments and do other online activities related to life-saving drugs and other surgical instruments.

Many government-provided health schemes for the poor and vulnerable are affected by internet shutdowns, thereby affecting access to healthcare. In early 2020, it was reported that many individuals who are beneficiaries of a government health scheme (Ayushman Bharat, a health insurance scheme for economically backward individuals) were not able to access healthcare as the hospitals were unable to deal with these cases due to internet blockade in Kashmir. Doctors stated that they could not process Ayushman Bharat cases for 25 days straight, after which they resorted to an offline process, which was not as efficient and many people were left out. People who were hit due to this blockade said they have been pleading before health officials to accept free medical scheme cards in private and government hospitals. However, they were denied free healthcare due to the prolonged internet shutdown. In addition, frequent internet shutdowns and communications blockades during the pandemic led to the cutting off of people from their family members who were being treated for COVID-19.⁷

In another instance, an internet shutdown was imposed by the West Bengal government, specifically near hospitals during COVID-19, to prevent any person from disclosing the deplorable state of affairs prevailing in hospitals treating COVID-19.

Insufficient documentation exists to conclude the full impact of internet shutdowns. The gap in understanding if shutdowns counter misinformation is even more significant. A paper titled “Internet Shutdowns, Digital Authoritarianism, and Disinformation: A Governance Framework” by Jan Rydak discusses the relationship between internet shutdowns, digital authoritarianism, and disinformation. It argues that while governments sometimes use internet shutdowns to control the spread of disinformation, this is an ineffective approach that harms democracy and human rights. The paper suggests that governments should focus on improving their governance frameworks

⁷ Nazir Masoodi, Internet Back at Kashmir Children's Hospital, But No Access to Doctors, NDTV, 5 January 2020. Accessed at: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/internet-back-in-80-government-hospitals-in-jammu-and-kashmir-but-there-is-a-catch-2159058>

to address disinformation instead of relying on internet shutdowns to control disinformation. It proposes a governance framework that includes legal, institutional, and technological measures to address disinformation while protecting freedom of expression and democratic values. The paper also examines case studies of internet shutdowns in India and argues that these shutdowns were ineffective in controlling disinformation. The paper concludes by calling for governments to adopt a more holistic approach to address disinformation and avoid the harmful effects of internet shutdowns⁸.

According to Kris Ruijgrok's paper, "Understanding India's Troubling Rise in Internet Shutdowns⁹," internet outages hurt civic space freedoms, democracy, and digital rights in India. The research emphasises how internet blackouts have been used in India to quell dissent, put down demonstrations, and control the flow of information. The shutdowns affect the economy, disrupt healthcare and educational services, and make it difficult for the media to cover significant events. They also make it difficult for citizens to communicate and receive information. This can stifle civic discourse and cause people to self-censor because they are afraid of being punished for speaking out. The research also makes the case that internet outages can damage democracy by making it harder for people to engage in politics and hold their government responsible. Internet censorship effectively mutes their voice by making it impossible for opposition parties to organise, coordinate, and connect with their supporters during political unrest. Additionally, internet outages violate people's digital rights, such as their freedom of speech, information access, and privacy. International human rights principles are broken when the internet is shut off without a fair trial or sufficient justification.

Freedom of speech, which includes the right to look for, receive, and transmit information and ideas through any media, including digital technology, is one of the most fundamental digital rights. By limiting access to information and communication channels, internet shutdowns can directly infringe on this right by limiting people's freedom of expression and access to information. Other digital rights, including the right to privacy, which might be jeopardised when communication

⁸ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3330413

⁹ https://public.opentech.fund/documents/Understanding_Indias_Troubling_Rise_in_Internet_Shutdowns_-_Kris_Ruijgrok_-_Ju_cscx7Y.pdf

routes are interrupted or watched, can also be affected by shutdowns. Shutdowns can impact the economy, especially for freelancers or small business owners who depend on the internet for their jobs. Internet outages can have more significant effects on the creation and uptake of digital technologies in addition to these immediate effects. Shutdowns might deter investment in digital infrastructure and innovation, especially in areas where they happen frequently or for an extended period. They can erode user confidence depending on online platforms and communication channels prone to closure, which can erode confidence in digital technology.

Women's participation in public life and mass movements gets severely restricted during a shutdown. Women often rely on internet-enabled tools such as Live Locations, using app-based cab services to keep them safe. Without these tools, they might be unable to venture out independently to participate in the public sphere of life¹⁰.

In the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)¹¹ report, The United Nations emphasises the grave harm that internet outages do to exercising one's human rights, including the right to information, freedom of speech, access to education, and health care. The research details the detrimental effects of shutdowns on democratic processes, such as the repression of dissent and protest and the infringement of citizens' rights to participate in public life. The survey also points out that marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as women, children, people with disabilities, and rural residents, are disproportionately affected by internet outages. Children and youth cannot use online learning materials when there are shutdowns, which severely impacts education.

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Chapter 9

Online Hate Campaigns Against Women: Exploring the Instrumentalization of Women and Denial of the Right to Speak in Online Space

Sakshi Wadhwa

Abstract

Scholars have pointed out the double persecution women face, first due to their identity as women and second by belonging to persecuted communities (Caste, Religion, Sexuality). With the emergence of online spaces, offering ease of access, and features of immediate reactions to comments, hate campaigns have taken up a scarier shape. A hate campaign, defined by Collins dictionary, is “*a series of actions which are intended to harm or upset someone or to make other people have a low opinion of them*” (Collins, n.d.).

Hate speeches are often used against a vulnerable group; however, the invocation and targeting of women only on the pretext of belonging to a persecuted community or voicing out their views in online spaces point to the obstinate stain of patriarchy, which refuses to go away even after being washed by the seemingly best detergent of modernity. Targeting of women, though worse for the ones belonging to vulnerable groups, involves professionally high-ranking, upper-caste women as well. Although such instances are not entirely new, their frequency and intensity have increased, with online modes of violence like harassment and cyberbullying being critical reasons. The paper will explore these concerns related to online hate campaigns, networked harassment, and cyberbullying, pushing women to silence themselves and withdraw their presence from online forums.

Keywords

Online Gendered Abuse, Hate Speech Normalisation, Communalisation of COVID-19, Women’s Digital Visibility, Cyber Misogyny, Patriarchal Discourse

Concept of Power in the Subjugation of Women

For Sharmila Rege, a renowned Indian sociologist, feminist scholar and author, the reproduction of caste inequalities requires the category of gender, which plays a crucial role in maintaining caste hierarchies. According to her, violence against women should not be categorised as a “*caste*” or a “*gender*” issue; instead, the linkages between the two need to be acknowledged (Rege, 1996). Building on her argument, it can be affirmed that in contemporary India, the dimension of “*religion*” holds significant importance concerning the violence against women, and the linkage between “*caste*,” “*gender*,” and “*religion*” needs to be addressed in order. This points to the continuity with the regressive elements of the past despite the freedoms and rights-based vision enshrined in the Constitution. To understand the subjugation of women, it is vital to understand the concept of power. According to Steven Lukes, power is exercised through compliance, where the thoughts and desires of those on whom the power is exercised are controlled. In her book on misogyny, Kate Manne argues that misogyny is an expression of power rather than hatred. For her, misogyny is the “*law enforcement branch of patriarchy*,” which focuses on women’s “*surveillance, scrutiny, and suspicion*” (Manne, 2018). Therefore, it can be argued that misogyny and violence directed against women involve power exercised over them rooted in the patriarchal mindset that leads to the surveillance of women’s activities and curtailment of their agency, freedoms, and even mobility. Matters become more complicated when women, who already face the blizzards of violence, are dragged and used as instruments to “humiliate” a particular community. Such attacks that weaponise women are not new and have a history that is worth mentioning here. A different and new manifestation of power can be seen in the online domain, where “cyberstalking, bullying, harassment, hate speech, disinformation, and propaganda” are increasingly becoming a norm (Roundtable on Feminist Perspectives on Social Media Governance | IT for Change, n.d.).

Tracing the History of Infantilizing Women

Right from colonial times, on how modern or rooted in Hindu culture a woman should be, the decision laid with the male social reformers; therefore, following Lukes's argument, power was exercised over women as they were made to comply with the perception and demands of those holding power over them while their agency and beliefs remained unrecognised. By the late 19th century, the 'women's *question*' no more "enjoyed" centre stage and the debates tilted towards "*politics of nationalism*" (Chatterjee, 1990). Even in discussions regarding widow burning where British colonists and Western-educated, modern social reformers favoured the abolition of the practice and the conservatives opposed it, women's opinions or voices were not featured. As eloquently put by Mani, women were the grounds of the debate without being the subject or the object (Mani, 1990). Similar relegation of women to the margins continued for the initial thirty years post-independence. They were categorised as 'mothers' in the 'Mother and Child welfare programs' under planned development. This, despite them contributing their labour in the agricultural sector (women provided more than 50 per cent of agricultural labour), rural areas, and informal sector, urban areas, show the trivialising of women where they are bereft of individual identity (Towards Equality, 1975). The present status of women, similar to earlier times, is seen as relative; for example, just by their belongingness to a targeted community, their dignity is susceptible to harm.

Furthermore, even in contemporary times, women's identity as equal citizens, having equal rights to voice their opinion, is denied on the

Even online disinformation campaigns involving faulty and demeaning perceptions of women, especially those belonging to marginalised communities, being Dalit or Christian are more harshly attacked.

Internet, where they are silenced through hate speech and other forms of online violence. More on this will follow in the next section.

Public Life and Women

Transgression of the norms leads to withdrawal from public life in the case of women (especially unmarried) in all regions, therefore encouraging the public/private, inside/outside divide that can be traced from the times of independence where the ‘*women’s question*’ was ultimately settled by creating division between the material or the outside world. Western imitation was accepted and even aspired for in the material or outside world, while Hindu codes were followed in the spiritual or inner, private world. Since lower-caste women are not restricted to working outside due to the economic needs that require them to work outside their homes and therefore have a public life, they are regarded as “*impure*.” The perception that they are “*impure*” make them easy targets for rape by men from the higher caste since rape is viewed as snatching away of one’s *honour*, and the lower caste women are seen as already bereft of “*honour*” (Rege, 1996). Defiance on caste codes and hierarchies by the lower caste also results in the rape of lower-caste women in the rural areas as an expression of the revenge of the upper caste by raping “*their*” women. It is worth highlighting here that the online circulation of speeches expressing such conceptions of impurity and power has repercussions in instigating violence. Although it can also lead to legal action against the speaker, the damage might have already been done. Even online disinformation campaigns involving faulty and demeaning perceptions of women, especially those belonging to marginalised communities, being Dalit or Christian are more harshly attacked. “*Gendered disinformation*” is yet to be adequately defined as a term, but Lucina Di Meco, the co-founder of the online campaign “*#ShePersisted*,” who also conducted a study on it, finds it as circulation of false, deceptive information or images against women (Rajvanshi, 2023). Another study adds to this concept by pointing out that “*gendered disinformation*” is not limited to false information but also uses “*highly emotive and value-laden content to try to undermine its targets*” and “*seeks impact primarily at the political level, though can also cause serious harm at the personal level*” (Rajvanshi, 2023). Though the study focused primarily on the terrifying impacts of such disinformation on women politicians, it can also have horrible

consequences for women away from political positions (*Rajvanshi, 2023*).

In an interview with Lucina Di Meco, Angellica Aribam, a woman from the northeastern State of Manipur who also founded an organisation for strengthening women's political participation, shared how she was harshly trolled online since women from the northeastern States of India are perceived as “easy” and “characterless.” She also said that her “*intersectional marginal identity*” led to an intense online trolling attack on her (*Rajvanshi, 2023*). Furthermore, the rape threats women receive for expressing their opinions, even if they belong to the most high-profile professions like journalism, political activism, and even politicians, is concerning. In January 2022, a female author journalist filed an FIR in Mumbai against the trolls allegedly opposing her opinions (*Express News Service, 2022*). With more than 20,000 abusive tweets that included rape and death threats posted on her social media profiles, the journalist sought help from the Mumbai police (*Express News Service, 2022*). A report by Amnesty International has revealed disturbing trends of online abuse faced by women politicians in India (*TROLL PATROL INDIA Exposing Online Abuse Faced by Women Politicians in India, 2020a*). The report shows that Indian women leaders face double the harassment faced by women leaders in the UK or the US. Furthermore, Muslim women leaders face more scathing trolling and abuse that involves religious slurs (*TROLL PATROL INDIA Exposing Online Abuse Faced by Women Politicians in India, 2020a*). Such news reports and data are worrying as they show even influential women facing a tornado of abuse. It is worth pondering how much more this must be for not-so-influential women who might also want to put forth their views.

While it was never easy for women to “reclaim” the public space right from independence, it is equally difficult for them to reclaim the “online space” in “modern” India or, if the question can be turned on its head, is online space a “public space” since the kind of networking and algorithms that are at play leads to enough distortion to make it just an online space and not “a democratic public space”. The intersection of restrictions in public life, emphasis on “*honour*,” and treating women as instruments who can be targeted to signal anger against the community to which they belong is visible in the online harassment meted out to women. The ‘*Bulli bai*’ and ‘*Sulli deals*’ cases are the most recent example

While violence against women has continued in the physical spaces, the online space, meant to be accessible and inclusive, is also used for abuse against women. However, as put forth by Arti Raghavan, online gendered abuse is a “distinct beast”.

of this (elaborated in the following section), while trolling women journalists, political activists, and political leaders along with rape and death threats are no newer. It is crucial to note that online hatred against women also spills into the offline world (*Conversation, 2020*). The case of Gauri Lankesh, who was murdered for her journalistic work, is a prominent example of online hate speech percolating as physical harm (even loss of life in this case) in the offline world (*Conversation, 2020*). The following sections will focus on these instances of online abuse.

Online Spaces and Hate Campaigns against Women: Instrumentalisation of Women and Exercising of Power over Them

While violence against women has continued in the physical spaces, the online space, meant to be accessible and inclusive, is also used for abuse against women. However, as put forth by Arti Raghavan, online gendered abuse is a “distinct beast” as it is easily accessible, speakers can be anonymous, the audience can be invisible, and it provides a platform for easy community building. People can easily and instantly create and join online communities to vent problematic opinions (*Raghavan, 2021*). Such online groups spewing venom against a particular section of society (usually a vulnerable section) normalise unacceptable and derogatory remarks in the groups to the extent that the members in the group who do not usually comment or propagate such views also

turn into passive audiences or tacit supporters. Therefore, although the target of criticism is a section of society, such groups influence other members to agree with those who indulge in online bashing (Taub, 2018). It is interesting to note here that the target of such groups is not the vulnerable section of society. Still, like-minded people who join such groups are encouraged to vent out even unacceptable and derogatory views, and hatred is normalised, making even the ones who would not have subscribed to such speech as passive audience or tacit supporters (Taub, 2018). It is such groups that initiate and encourage hate campaigns. The frequency of hateful online comments normalises hatred and encourages people to join in the hate campaign; further, since the audience is invisible and the harm that the hate speech is causing is not immediately visible, it becomes easier to engage in hate campaigns without much thought. To be categorised as “*hate speech*,” it should vilify or target a socially or politically marginalised person or a group. The authority or stature of the person using hate speech and the one on whom it is meted out plays a vital part in identifying it as hate speech (Raghavan, 2021).

Speech involving words, texts, or images does not reflect the existing atmosphere and hierarchies; instead, they construct and normalise them. Texts, symbols, and visuals in social media communicate a particular message. Meanings are provided centrally by representation through language, and if no meaning is generated out of communication, then that implies failed consumption of the message (Hall, 1980). Language, including signs, symbols, and visual and written content,

Women’s presence online challenges the patriarchal logic that has confined them in private spaces, stopping them from voicing their opinions. Hate speech and campaigns are used to silence women and take away their democratic rights of public participation.

represent feelings and ideas that create and reflect the culture and a shared worldview (Hall, 1997). In this meaning-making, culture marks identities within a group and “codify boundaries” (Rajan & Venkatraman, 2021). Hall’s argument is about language representing culture through signs, symbols, and visual and textual means and, therefore, involved in meaning-making. The semiotics approach underscores the importance of how representation is made; in other words, it deals with the “how” of representation.

During the initial spread of COVID, the Indian media brutally and incorrectly blamed ‘Tablighi Jamaat’ for spreading the virus. The criticism percolated on social media like Instagram, with several cartoons, memes, and posts where the “religious encoding” of the virus as a Muslim came to the fore through symbols like skull caps, hijab, and caricatures depicting the virus as a Muslim. The green colour was used to depict the virus, referring to Muslims who revere the colour as sacred; even the Muslims’ places of worship were branded as “causes of the crisis” in one of the cartoons (Rajan & Venkatraman, 2021). The fear and anxiety against the virus are personified by the fight against COVID, portrayed as the fight against Muslims. Hate campaigns through social media posts strengthened the communalisation of disease, affecting harmonious coexistence. Such hate campaigns involving communal conflicts are also directed toward women.

Women’s presence online challenges the patriarchal logic that has confined them in private spaces, stopping them from voicing their opinions. The proliferation of online platforms has opened avenues for women’s public participation. Hate speech and campaigns are used to silence women and take away their democratic rights of public participation. Therefore, the paternalistic discourse, which views women as nescient, aims at “invisibilities” in public regarding the majoritarian discourse (Tyagi & Sen, 2020). At the same time, it attempts to invisibilise their religious identity in terms of minority communities. One such deplorable instance is the Bulli bai and Sulli deals app case, where profiles of Muslim women were created with their photos attached on content sharing platforms for their fake auction, as farcical “deals of the day” shows their commodification that has a parallel with the colonial instance when lower caste women faced the threat of being sold, as mentioned in sections above.

The incidents have led to an open letter sent to the then Chief Justice, N.V. Ramana, by 4,500 signatories asking for his suo moto action on the case (*Mehrotra, 2022*). Using derogatory slang terms for Muslim women, the app creators attacked not only the privacy of women but their fundamental right to life and their status as humans as they were put for sale. As there was no actual sale, the app intended to humiliate and dehumanise Muslim women whose publicly available pictures were misused for making their profiles. Evidence points to the fact that the chances of women being targeted increase if they are more vocal; this is especially true for women from religious or caste minorities (*BBC News, 2022b*).

In contemporary India, mere suspicion of a Muslim or Christian violating Hindu norms offers sufficient grounds for violence against them. The targeting of offline and online attacks and hate campaigns being dissenters rather than only religious or caste minorities indicate the gravity of prevailing intolerance (*Basu, 2020*). The normalisation of violence can occur in three ways: through online hate campaigns, as mentioned above, through conservative organisations that engage in violence with the State's complicity or tacit approval, reflected in its silence against such attacks, and through legislation that constructs or reinforces polarisation. A shift can be seen in contemporary violence since pre-planned 'riots' "from above" of the earlier times are replaced by hate crimes which are more problematic due to the unpredictability of their timing and location since even a non-riot-prone area can be used for the same. The targeted individuals serve as 'demonstration' for others (*Basu, 2022*). Therefore, it is crucial to look for counter-strategies against the existing atmosphere of hatred, and the following concluding section will suggest some ways to do so.

Counter Strategies against Hate Campaigns

In cases of violation of these rights (which abound in number), laws in India are expansive but ill-equipped as they reflect a patriarchal stance. Examples of this include the "protection" by the law putting limitations on the feminist movement in the name of modesty, honour, and the subjectively loaded word decency that can be used to shift the blame on the women facing hate campaigns rather than the perpetrators (*Raghavan, 2021*). Indian laws lack a vocabulary to define hate speech that reinforces oppression and violence against women (*Raghavan,*

“Public order,” which implies maintaining peace and tranquility, remains the main restriction in cases of hate speech leaving vitriol against women unacknowledged. There is a need to go beyond the binary of victim and perpetrator to address the structure of patriarchy that normalises violence against women.

2021). This loophole, in turn, facilitates scapegoating of women in a communal setup where perpetrators bypass punishment. Even when charged, it is not for targeting women per se but for the community to which they belong. “Public order,” which implies maintaining peace and tranquillity, remains the main restriction in cases of hate speech, leaving vitriol against women unacknowledged. There is a need to go beyond the binary of victim and perpetrator to address the structure of patriarchy that normalises violence against women. “A higher legal obligation” of the online platform is required to act on unlawful and dehumanising content. Finally, there is a need to move away from the narrative of “honour” residing in women, accepting the patriarchal, polarising dynamics and countering it through solidarity, especially among women, to fight against hatred.

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Chapter 10

Online Abuse of Sportswomen and Sportspersons from Minority Communities: A Crushing Blow to the Spirit of Sports

Shruti Jahagirdar

Abstract

This essay delves into the disturbing trend of online abuse targeted at sportswomen and sportspersons from minority communities in India. It explores how this form of digital harassment not only tarnishes the spirit of sports but also poses a significant threat to the mental well-being of athletes. The essay discusses several high-profile incidents of online abuse, including those involving cricketer Mohammed Shami, athlete Dutee Chand, and badminton player Jwala Gutta. It also examines the broader societal and political contexts that amplify such abuse. The essay concludes by emphasizing the need for legal and technological reforms to address this issue and create a more conducive environment for athletes from all backgrounds.

Keywords

Indian Athletes, Online Abuse, Digital Harassment, Mental Well-Being, Legal Reforms

Introduction

Chak de! India, the 2007 Bollywood film starring Shah Rukh Khan as a coach of a fledgling Indian women's hockey team, is one of the best sports movies Bollywood has ever produced. The film revolves around a Muslim hockey player, Kabir Khan, who misses an important goal in a final World Cup match that leads India to lose against Pakistan. This missed goal becomes a reason for the trolls to label Khan as a traitor and drive him and his family out of their home. Years later, Khan is appointed as a coach of the Indian women's hockey team and is thus afforded a chance to redeem himself by coaching a team of misfits to achieve the extraordinary i.e to win the Hockey World Cup. While the movie is mainly about the game, an unmissable theme is the trolling of a sportsperson owing to his minority community status in India and the highlighting of the apparent prejudices that people harbour against such sportspersons.

Chak De! India shows trolls scribbling hateful messages on Khan's door and the walls of his house. The digital age equivalent of this is the bulk posts, tweets and retweets on social media against athletes who come from minority communities. Online abuse of such athletes and of sportswomen has become an uncontrollable menace and is amplified by the political environment in the country as well as personal prejudices of the abusers.

Abuse of Sportspersons

In the past few years, a series of incidents of horrific abuse of sportspersons has rocked the Indian sports scenario. These incidents include abuse of sportspersons from the Muslim community, Dalit community, the LGBTQIA+ community, abuse of sportspersons from the North Eastern States of India, abuse of sportswomen etc. While many such incidents have taken place, the following are but a few examples of such abuse.

On 26th October 2021, after a devastating loss to Pakistan in the ICC T20 World Cup, cricketer Mohammed Shami was brutally trolled on social media. A cricket team has eleven players and yet, to the eye of the hyper nationalistic Indian viewer, only Shami stood out as a

cause for the Indian team's failure. The BCCI later issued a Statement condemning the incidents of trolling; however, the stance was feeble and did not prove as a sufficient deterrent against the sportsman's trolling. Virat Kohli, the captain of the Indian team also eventually stood up in support of Shami, but what followed shocked the conscience of the entire nation; the trolls turned to abusing not only Kohli himself but also his newborn daughter, which explained why Kohli may have been hesitant earlier to show his support for Shami publicly and why most other players also refrained from doing so for the longest time.

In September 2021, outlookindia.com reported that Dutee Chand, an athlete who has won a number of medals for India in 100m and 200m sprints and is one of India's first openly gay sports stars, had filed a case against the editor of an online news channel who had published defamatory and obscene content against her. The editor was subsequently taken in for questioning by the police. Dutee Chand said in her Statement, "The false and obscene portrayal of me on social media and web portals has tarnished my image which ultimately impacted my performance in the Olympics. I do not know what harm I have done to these people." It is distressing to imagine that such a courageous woman and pro athlete, who decided to come out with her

This recurring othering of sportspersons hailing from minority communities as soon as a game is lost is a disturbing trend because it signals to aspiring athletes that the country is not a conducive environment for pursuing a career in sports and even worse, it reinforces age old caste barriers that are not only unconstitutional but ones that take the country back by several decades and quickly destroy all attempts to create equality in society.

sexual identity and become a voice for the LGBTQI+allies community, has to face vicious attacks and vitriol because of her choice to speak the truth.

Jwala Gutta, the former world ranking no. 6 in Badminton is surely a fierce and outspoken athlete who is quite active on social media. She has spoken openly about the abuse she faces and has said that athletes often keep quiet to continue focussing on their game, however this strategy may be backfiring. She shared images of comments received on her social media handles, one of which called her 'You Chinese Virus'. What Gutta faces is of course a form of discrimination against the North East Indian community despite some of our most successful sportspersons coming from the North East.

Yet another instance of horrific abuse faced by an athlete is one involving hockey player Vandana Katariya. While this was not online abuse, it was no less depressing. Hours after the Indian hockey team lost to the Argentinian team in the Tokyo Olympics, two upper caste men in Haridwar reportedly abused Katariya's family with casteist slurs while going on to say that the Indian team had lost because "too many Dalits had made it to the team".

More recently, in September 2022, India witnessed another example of abuse against a cricketer from a minority community. Arshdeep Singh, a young cricketer was called a Khalistani after he dropped a catch in a match against Pakistan. In such instances, it is noticeable that until the team is winning, all is well but the moment a minority community player makes a mistake, all hell breaks loose. A common theme is that this is more likely to happen in sporting events against Pakistan and the history between the countries is often used as an excuse to abuse the sportspersons who may have made a mistake on the field. One wonders what it must feel like to dedicate one's entire life to a sport only to make a single mistake and be instantly branded as a traitor.

This recurring *othering* of sportspersons hailing from minority communities as soon as a game is lost is a disturbing trend because it signals to aspiring athletes that the country is not a conducive environment for pursuing a career in sports and even worse, it reinforces age old caste barriers that are not only unconstitutional but ones that take the country back by several decades and quickly destroy all attempts to create equality in society.

Elite sport is both mentally and physically demanding. An athlete is under constant pressure to perform at almost superhuman levels of consistency. Nowadays, a lot of them are able to do so thanks to a battery of trainers, physios, sports nutritionists, psychologists and coaches all using the latest science and data analytics to improve a player's health and performance. However, despite all of this, one must realise that most athletes are very young people shouldering the weight of fame, responsibility and expectations all at once. There is a part of them that is naturally growing and maturing just like regular folks at that age and trolling can have devastating effects on their physical and mental health. If the trolling affects their focus and drive to play, all is lost.

A study conducted by the World Athletics Organization in November 2021 reported that during the Tokyo Olympics, athletes faced severe trolling and 87% of it was directed towards female athletes. The study tracked 161 Twitter handles of athletes involved in the Tokyo Olympics. It went through 2,40,707 tweets and a number of videos, photos and GIFs. Of all the categories of abuse identified by the study, the topmost were sexism, racism and false doping accusations.

“This research is disturbing in so many ways but what strikes me the most is that the abuse is targeted at individuals who are celebrating and sharing their performances and talent as a way to inspire and motivate people. To face the kinds of abuse they have is unfathomable and we all need to do more to stop this. Shining a light on the issue is just the first step.” said Sebastian Coe, the president of World Athletics.

Voices of players from the minorities and especially of women are crucial in furthering their community's representation in every sport field and even otherwise. There is no better empowerment than watching someone, who is just like you, do what you thought was impossible. It breaks the shackles of the mind and shows you that if only you believe in yourself, the sky's the limit for what you can achieve. To this end, sports governing bodies in India such as The Athletics Federation of India and The Indian Olympic Association should actively support players like Dutee Chand and Vandana Katariya to combat abuse, both online or otherwise, and create programs that make these players' voices heard across India. It must be acknowledged that the challenges these players face are much more complex than the challenges faced by players who come from more privileged backgrounds.

Voices of players from the minorities and especially of women are crucial in furthering their community's representation in every sport field and even otherwise. There is no better empowerment than watching someone, who is just like you, do what you thought was impossible.

While the struggles of Indian sportspersons are evident from the above instances, it is important to know that the evil of online hate and abuse transcends boundaries and even the international stage is rife with such instances of abuse. As an example, consider the kind of abuse black athletes routinely face and one of the most noticeable amongst such athletes is tennis star Serena Williams. Williams has reportedly faced racism in various forms since her childhood, but the most vicious of it comes from social media not only against her race but equally targeting her muscular and non-conformist body type. Trolls often aim to take the attention away from her performance and question her femininity. In an interview, a rather tone-deaf reporter asked Serena Williams if she felt intimidated by her opponent Maria Sharapova's "supermodel good looks". Williams has spoken openly about how constant body shaming has impacted her, but she has over time come to accept her body and thinks of it as a weapon. In an interview with Bazaar UK, she said that when her daughter 'Olympia' was born, she noticed that Olympia had muscular arms like her and instead of being fearful about what people would say about her daughter, Williams was happy that her daughter was like her.

BBC's study, published in August 2020, recounts negative experiences of British female athletes dealing with social media trolling. The findings said that "Abuse directed at sports women on social media was frequently about body image, performance or telling athletes to "get back in the kitchen". An athlete, who is a size six, had been called 'too fat' while someone else recounted being featured on a profile that had

been created purely to pick out women's flaws; her photo was posted with the muscle in her legs shown as the flaw. Another athlete said she received a comment on her Instagram handle which said "Women shouldn't look like this."

Such trolling and comments on women's bodies merely add to the unrealistic stereotyping of beauty standards being set by social media and it is worrying to know that women athletes have also become a target of such a campaign because it may shift such an athlete's focus from strength, speed, agility etc. to looks and while the former help her performance, the latter is just a cosmetic and superficial part of personality that are irrelevant from an athletic performance point of view.

In India, from a legal standpoint, there are mainly two ways to deal with online hate -

- 1) Under the IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, social media companies are required to put in place grievance redressal mechanisms to address cyberbullying, harassment etc. An aggrieved person can report abusive posts/comments etc and the social media company must address such complaints within the prescribed time limit.
- 2) In addition to the above, Indian civil and criminal laws can also be used to initiate legal proceedings before the police/courts of law.

However, the above may not always be sufficient to address all forms of online hate where public personalities are victims since in many cases, the perpetrators of such online trolling and abuse target the victims incessantly and through multiple sources/accounts and in such cases, the available remedies often fall short of providing relief to the victims. Not to mention, it can be exhausting to deal with continuous hatred and therefore reforms both legal and technological are required to address this issue.

In India today, societal behaviour is largely dominated by political influencers and sports and art are their favourite punching bags. Online abuse does not come about in isolation but is connected to politics, media and commerce. This 'ecosystem' of hate targets sportspersons from minority communities and thus reduces India's image of a country passionate about sports to a petty divisive political identity. It is a lost opportunity for the nation when upcoming athletes from minority

communities stop voicing their opinions or sharing their thoughts by relegating themselves to the background just to avoid this ecosystem of hatred and this leaves their communities underrepresented in public discourse.

Conclusion

Sportspersons represent the best in a nation. It is why the rest of us love them and follow them because it is exciting and inspiring to see someone push their mind and body to achieve amazing physical and mental feats. For this to happen, talent needs a nurturing environment, free from the poison of hate and abuse. India, a young country, is known to struggle to create conducive environments to support sportspersons and yet in its short post-independence history, India has produced the world's finest sportspersons in almost all sports fields. This means that while we have the requisite potential to scale great heights, something is pulling us down; and while this demon has many heads, one of them most definitely is trolling and abuse of sportspersons both online and offline.

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Chapter 11

Media and the Marginalized: A Critical Examination of Class, Caste, and Religious Bias in Indian Media

Tanya Maheshwari & Sureet Singh

Abstract

This essay critically examines the representation of the working class, people experiencing poverty, and marginalised communities in Indian media, arguing that these groups are often misrepresented or underrepresented. The analysis spans across various media formats, including popular films, news reports, and opinion pieces. The essay argues that the media often frames poverty as a personal failing rather than a systemic issue and frequently caricatures or dismisses the working class and the poor. The essay also critiques the media's portrayal of government schemes aimed at poverty reduction, arguing that these portrayals often misrepresent the reality of these initiatives. Furthermore, the essay discusses the role of media in perpetuating class, caste, and religious biases and how these biases intersect. Drawing on Marxist theory, the essay suggests that these media practices uphold the economic status quo and the hegemony of the ruling class. The essay concludes by emphasising the need for a more grounded and materialist engagement with class in media analysis.

Keywords

Indian Media, Working Class, Misrepresentation, Neoliberal Lens

Introduction

“Ab yehi traino se phelega COVID pure desh mein” (now these are the trains that will spread COVID all over), lamented my aunt as we watched news coverage regarding the special trains for migrant workers during the pandemic. Her comment made me livid. It was not so much an inability to be empathetic to the pain of others but a genuine hatred of people experiencing poverty and the working class laid bare. But my aunt and I are not individual units. Like everyone else, we are social actors: the figurations of a certain time and place and consumers of a particular media culture. A media culture which spreads disinformation regarding poverty fails to represent the voices of the working class and, ultimately, promotes hatred for the toilers and people experiencing poverty. These representations (or lack thereof) are pervasive to the extent that they are naturalised – to be taken as given. They are framed through a neoliberal lens, weakening systemic analysis and suggesting that poorness is a personal failing – *“the poor are simply not working hard enough!”* For this reason, the following essay could not have been a chronological retelling of the recent past or a narrative account of cause and effect. Instead, we have selected pieces across various mediatic formats: scenes from a popular film, a self-righteous opinion piece, spurious reportage, image politics, and even mundane local news.

In addition, we feel that a lack of discussion on anti-worker and anti-poor sentiments point towards a failure to link hate and discrimination along caste and religious lines to economic bases. Through this essay, we hope to re-configure the media surrounding us into objects of such analyses.

Impressions of the Ruling Ideology



Jab We Met (dir. Imtiaz Ali, 2007) instantly became famous for its depiction of an individualist ‘freedom of choice’ on the part of the woman – at the cost of much other analysis. To arrive at this conclusion, one must consider freedom as something which still operates within the bounds of class and caste, such as seen in the coupling of Geet and Aditya: a woman from a landowning caste falling in love with a man from a business family. One can only hold this as freedom when one views ‘woman’ as a category vacuous of any other intersections. What of the representations of the working class folk at the train station as extremely sleazy, of the station master as more parochial than a feudal grandfather, and of Geet’s instant disavowal of sex workers?

These are the sort of representations that embed themselves, inform and shape our cultural contexts. Poor and working-class characters are either caricatured, rendered morally inept or, even easier, cast aside. In her work titled *Cinematic Clearances: Spaces of Poverty in Hindi Cinema’s Big Budget Productions*, Megha Anwer speaks about the treatment of poverty in two big-budget Bollywood films (*K3G*, *3 Idiots*). They posit that poverty in these films “is rendered ridiculous, it survives only as a comic object, a space and predicament unworthy of our sympathy, and good enough only for our deprecatory laughing dismissal.”

Similarly, in other formats across our media landscape...



Breaking News: Gorakhpur में सामने आया हैरान करने वाला मामला | Beggar | Gorakhpur News | UP News

Spurious reportage often does the rounds on social media. Aside from a lack of veracity, note also the sensationalist flashes, rapid editing, scarce imagery, and bare minimum details – alongside the voice of the telecaster, shocking the viewer as he announces how shocked people were to find a beggar with 3 Lakh Rupees. The lack of clarity of pieces such as these - and the sort of hysteria underpinning them - help create an aura of fear and mistrust. More to the point, does this deserve to be news at all?



Beggar का Bank Account में मिले करोड़ों रुपये, Wealth देखकर Police भी हैरान

Similarly, why broadcast a mishmash of images (clearly from India) before moving on to a story about a woman posing as a beggar in Egypt? Instead of news driven by guidelines and facts, the news is dramatised with foreboding music and unspecific images. The video plays out as an anti-beggar PowerPoint presentation. Let us then take the first four slides: discontinuous imagery is shown alongside the text, “People often help beggars seeing their helplessness” and “however some beggars are such that their possessions leave people astounded”. Here the syntax postulates people as a category exclusive of beggars. The effect of this

is twofold: firstly, the portrayal of beggars as a homogenous community (as opposed to an economic relation), and secondly, enticing the viewer to relate to the ‘people’ and in doing that, consign beggars to a category unwaveringly below their own. This is popular media-driven not by reason and factual accuracy but by blatant appeals to emotion.

Bias in the news takes less overt forms as well. In one piece, a conflict between the residents of a suburb in Noida and those of a nearby village is written subtly in favour of the upper-middle-class residents. They are portrayed as hapless victims, terrorised by “agitators... armed with iron rods” who “were pelting stones indiscriminately”. Utilised here is that favourite word journalists use to describe protests by an oppressed community – rioting. Amidst all this, glimpses of the working class’s perspective are seen: beatings by private security guards with batons, the hospitalisation of a domestic worker, and the issue at the heart of it all – the alleged theft of two months’ salary amounting to only Rs 12,000. These details - even one as critical as the source of the dispute - do not warrant further investigation in the eyes of the reporter because they are not central to the perspective of the upper-middle-class residents (and readers).





In the worst cases, a working-class perspective is absent, even if the story is about them in particular. For instance, a stub about a fire that broke out in Gejha village in Noida is entirely lacking in even the bare minimum details, such as the source of the fire, possible property damage and eyewitness accounts. In sharp contrast stands a concerted story regarding a roof collapsing in an upper-middle-class society in Gurgaon, which received the attention of the chief minister of Haryana. A follow-up story regarding this incident also detailed the appointment of a team of experts from IIT Delhi to evaluate the structural integrity of the society. Not only is it highly unlikely for the Gejha fire to spawn this sort of expert review, but it is also uncertain if a follow-up story would be written at all.

The lack of representation of the working class in Indian media is a structural omission. Senior journalist and editor of People's Archive of Rural India (PARI), P Sainath, describes one part of this problem – the vanishing labour beat in newsrooms. This is why a historic general strike in 2022 which brings crores of workers onto the streets (as per AICCTU brief, as per CITU), receives no coverage in popular media.

Instead, we are constantly consuming media that privileges either the upper class or the upper middle class, with their ways of life, and their interests and issues hegemonizing our papers, screens and soundscapes. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci develops the idea of hegemony: a means for one class to build consensus for its rule. Although developed initially to explain dynamics in a Marxist State, the idea can be applied to our setting. It is through hegemony that the ruling class naturalises the status quo in society. Hegemony is why it seems natural that resources are directed towards understanding

the structural faults in a posh society. At the same time, there is no investigation into the sheer hazard of living (let alone pulling through a fire) in a cramped space such as a slum.

Upholding the economic structure of our society is of utmost importance for maintaining the status quo in society. In popular media, this can take the form of articles which pose as intellectual think pieces but, in truth, use jargon to spread disinformation. On November 5, 2022, an article regarding the progress of poverty eradication in India was published by the Indian Express. The piece is titled, *‘There is no debate: There has been a persistent decline in poverty in India’* and builds on a research paper written by the authors and published by the IMF. The (supposedly uncontested) claims are that (a) poverty has decreased despite the pandemic because (b) transfers of food and schemes such as *Saubhagya Yojana* (electrification) and *Ujjwala Yojana* (LPG access) have largely reduced the deprivation faced by millions of citizens. First, let’s look at the research this article builds on.

The research paper uses a commonly accepted multidimensional understanding of poverty which accounts for nutritional status, access to housing, sanitation etc. The paper then argues that if we impute the value of food transfers to people experiencing poverty (via the Public Distribution System), it becomes clear that the deprivation of people has reduced. The problem with this highly unorthodox method of calculating poverty reduction is that the PDS fails to provide nutritious food – something well-recognised in economic research. In other words, even with the PDS operating efficiently, as the authors suggest, it would not improve nutrition (or alleviate poverty). At best, the authors have confused the role of food consumption in multidimensional poverty calculations (nutrition vs hunger). At worst, they are misrepresenting it on purpose.

One way to check if poverty, as measured via nutrition (and not hunger), has decreased would be to check the nutritional status of people. The Global Hunger Index, which measures this, recently found that India slipped to 107th out of 121 countries. This contradicts the foundations of the authors’ argument, so it is swiftly dismissed in their article. The authors seemingly take the stance that the Global Hunger Index measures nutrition. Let us consider this argument for a moment. Is it wrong that the hunger index measures ‘nutrition’? The

multidimensional poverty index used by the UNDP and OPHI includes nutrition (and not hunger) in its calculation of poverty. Even if one does make the argument that hunger should also be included, this by no means makes the findings of the GHI false. The truth is that the nutritional status of Indians has been worsening, and no amount of shifting goalposts can change that.

Aside from food transfers (discussed in the paper), other schemes are discussed by the authors in the article. The accounts of their success are no less misleading: see Mint's articles regarding *Saubhagya Yojana*, and the CEEW report regarding *Ujjwala Yojana*. Ultimately, all this will be of no concern to the authors. The reason why such pieces are written is not to comply with the truth or even editorial standards. Such intellectual acrobatics are only undertaken to facilitate the reproduction of the economic status quo and continue the exploitation of the working class and the deprivation of people experiencing poverty. Putting it in terms of the article's title – there certainly is debate.

The Ruling Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses

In some spaces, it will always remain contentious to argue that hate campaigns are a reality in our country. Elsewhere hate along the lines of religion and caste is beginning to be acknowledged. However, there remains room to provide analyses of hate campaigns that foreground class alongside the above mentioned intersections.

For instance, the demolition of part of a mosque, shops and homes in Jahangirpuri in 2022, received wide coverage in popular media. While few denied the communal angle of this incident, there appears to be no consideration of the demolitions as an attack on a working-class neighbourhood. This is even though 'anti-encroachment drives' have

A media culture which spreads disinformation regarding poverty fails to represent the voices of the working class and, ultimately, promotes hatred for the toilers and people experiencing poverty.

long been one way for the State to destroy the homes and livelihoods of people experiencing poverty and the working class in Delhi and across India. This is precisely why popular media failed to tie demolitions in Jahangirpuri to those in Banjara Market in Gurgaon (which took place only two weeks and 40 kilometres apart!). What is missing is a critical eye which understands that religious and caste-based hate cannot be untangled from hate against the working class. To find an analysis which acknowledges the role of class alongside caste and religion, we need to turn to the Left who correctly identify the demolition in Jahangirpuri not only as an attack against the Muslim minority in India but also as an attack on the working class: “When the bulldozers started their action in Jahangirpuri, only the working-class people of all the communities had to bear the loss”.

Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser’s work, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* comes to mind here. Althusser’s essay seeks to unify seemingly disparate pieces of hate against the working class and poor into a broad ongoing ‘campaign’. Building on his work, we suggest understanding seemingly disparate hate/disinformation/lack-of-information campaigns as one unified campaign against a heterogeneous working class composed largely of people of lower castes and different faiths. To understand this, let us look at his work.

As we all know, no production in society would be possible without first reproducing the status-quo conditions. To Althusser, this does not only mean the reproduction of skills, labour and machinery but also a reproduction of “submission to the rules of the established order”. Such reproduction is carried out by Ideological State Apparatuses, including the family, education systems, newspapers, communications, cultural ventures, etc. Even though these are disparate private ventures and may be viewed as diverse and ‘autonomously functioning’, Althusser suggested that they are, in fact, unified by their guiding ideology. The ideology here is the ruling class’s ideology (which may involve an alliance between, for example, the upper class and upper middle class) with all of its contradictions. Althusser notes, “Of course, it is quite different to act by laws and decrees... and to ‘act’ through the intermediary of the ruling ideology in the Ideological State Apparatuses... but it cannot mask the reality of a profound identity. To my knowledge, no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses.”

Most instances of popular media are potent sites which lend themselves to being opened up and viewed critically for people experiencing poverty and the working class to express themselves and a space where contradictions can be exposed. When we began writing this, there was a certain helplessness at being unable to compose something entirely novel. Doesn't everything we read seem a bit obvious? To us, the solution is to present not a novel idea but the idea which bears repeating. To us, the approach that bears repeating engages with class and does so in a grounded and materialist way.

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Chapter 12

Fighting Fake News on the Ground: Empowering Indian Villages through a Grassroots Approach

Vamsi Krishna Pothuru

Abstract

This study explores the propagation of fake news in rural India, emphasizing its societal repercussions, and proposes grassroots strategies to mitigate the issue. Recognizing the instrumental role of community radio stations in disseminating accurate information and combating misinformation, the study analyzes their impact and their resource and coverage limitations. The investigation also reviews successful public awareness campaigns and digital literacy programs, highlighting their ability to empower rural communities with critical information skills. A three-tiered approach—awareness creation, capacity building, and knowledge creation about misinformation reporting channels—is suggested as a strategy to combat fake news at the grassroots level. The paper concludes by presenting a five-point plan involving community stakeholders, localized information, use of popular communication channels like WhatsApp, information accessibility in audio format, and cultural mediums for awareness generation. The study underscores the need for context-sensitive, scalable models and digital literacy interventions in managing misinformation in rural India.

Keywords

Fake News, Rural India, Media Literacy, Community Radio Stations

Introduction

Fake news is a global concern and is widely discussed for its role in damaging democracies worldwide. Its ramifications are visible among small communities, severely impacting their socio-cultural fabric. In recent years, villages in India have been gripped by fear and anxiety caused by fake news spreading on social media. It was further worsened during the Covid-19 crisis. It is necessary to contextualise the fake news problem in India, especially in Indian villages, which are the most vulnerable to this technology-induced violence.

Internet and Indian Village

According to McKinsey Global Institute's 2019 report, Internet adaptation and smartphone penetration in India suddenly surged after 2013, thanks mainly to affordable Internet and smartphones. With the Internet and smartphone penetration comes the challenges of Information disorder, popularly known as fake news. According to the "Internet in India 2022" report by the "Internet and Mobile Association of India" (IAMAI), there are 759 million active Internet users in India, and it is expected to reach 900 million by 2025. The report also highlights that much of this growth is driven by rural India, with 399 million users currently. What makes Indian villages vulnerable to fake news is that most of the rural populace are first-time Internet users with a low literacy level, especially digital literacy.

Indian villages are close-knit communities representing different castes, religions and other socio-cultural identities. Almost 65% of India's population resides in rural areas, which are coming online at an increasing pace in recent years. The latest National Statistical Office (NSO) report highlights the disparity between rural and urban literacy rates at 72.8 % and 87.7 %, respectively. At the same time, the "Internet in India 2022" report indicates that rural India will lead the growth rate of India's Internet users in the coming years.

Enigma of WhatsApp in India

Accessibility to the Internet is synonymous with access to personal messaging apps like WhatsApp. It is the most popular social media platform in rural areas due to its affordability and easy-to-use features. According to Statista, India has the largest user base of WhatsApp

in the world, with 487 million users. Trust tends to be high in village WhatsApp groups due to the proximity among its members, and information spreads rapidly in these groups. The most chilling effects of WhatsApp rumours are palpable in the form of mob violence. In recent years, Indian villages witnessed a spree of mob lynching fuelled by child kidnapping and cow smuggling rumours on WhatsApp. A study by the London School of Economics (LSE) explains how WhatsApp in India used as a tool in mob violence at three stages: circulation of rumours, mobilisation of lynch mobs and post-circulation of recordings of violence. In response to violence caused by rumours on its platform, WhatsApp introduced measures such as limiting the number of forwards, labelling frequently forwarded messages and awareness advertisements. These measures might reduce the effects of misinformation among urban users. However, they may not yield any results among those residing in rural areas because the fake news awareness advertisements on newspapers and television were just short-term responsive measures and not directed at rural audiences. Any efforts to address fake news must be long-term and focus more on society's vulnerable sections.

Also, due to its encrypted nature, addressing misinformation spread on WhatsApp is challenging for fact-checking initiatives and researchers. Any efforts in this regard are more effective only when users themselves are able and willing to verify or report the incorrect information they come across. To do that, users must possess the attitude of healthy scepticism and basic digital literacy skills.

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Response from Stakeholders

Arguably, the most significant stakeholders in India's fake news ecology are social media platforms, fact-checking initiatives, and governments. They have been trying to address the misinformation problem in India through mutual collaboration among themselves and civil society organisations across India. However, stakeholders from rural areas are not included in these efforts.

Fact-checking Initiatives

Fact-checking initiatives in India are indispensable in combating misinformation. While their work is commendable, ensuring a greater representation of regional languages in their work is vital. Also, fake news generated in a national context differs significantly from that generated in a regional context. Ideological/political and communal narratives are a significant genre of fake news nationally, whereas State-specific issues or local news dominates information consumption in small towns and villages. Language and context are the two most important parameters to be considered in the working of fact-checking initiatives. It is crucial to realise their increased regional coverage and percolation of fact-checked information in rural communities, which do not have capacities to access these websites in their local languages. Also, fact-checking initiatives must emanate/be encouraged in regional languages from semi-urban and rural parts of the country. These hyper-local initiatives can achieve timely percolation of accurate information in regional languages covering rural pockets of the country.

The Role of Government Authorities

Various government authorities in India have been acknowledging the fake news problem. The central government and various State governments are launching their official fact-checking initiatives. State governments in India, including Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and others., have official fact-checking websites. PIB fact check is one such initiative by the central government of India. However, these initiatives act as mouthpieces for the government and are prone to misinterpretation and propaganda. Under the latest amendment to the New Information Technology Rules 2021, the Indian government proposed the formation of a dedicated fact-checking unit that can

cancel any information on social media related to the government and its policies. These developments are raising concern among civil society about the impact of such measures on freedom of speech in the country. In conversation with Poynter, Jency Jacob, Managing editor of the Boom fact check, said, “*Giving any government body the power to force social media platforms to take down stories that they deem false is fraught with danger and can lead to indirect censorship.*” Similarly, Kunal Kamra, an Indian standup comedian, has challenged the constitutional validity of these new amendments in the Bombay High Court. He argued that the proposed government’s fact-checking body with such unprecedented powers is against the fundamental principles of natural justice.

The anti-fake news efforts by the Indian government so far are narrow and focus only on regulating social media platforms. India needs robust policies to address the fake news problem by including ordinary citizens in the process.

On the other hand, local authorities like police departments also have fact-checking accounts on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. These localised efforts are instrumental in addressing rumours/fake news problems in rural parts of the country. The State government in Kerala has a program called ‘Satyameva Jayate’ in schools to teach digital media literacy among students. Such efforts deserve replication across States with a focus on rural areas.

Social Media Platforms

The primary response from social media platforms to the fake news problem in India is by introducing changes in the user interface, such as WhatsApp’s forward label feature and ‘related articles feature’ on Facebook. WhatsApp forward label feature lets users know whether messages have been written by the sender or simply forwarded. Whereas related articles feature on Facebook tag potential Facebook posts with fact-checked articles. These changes alone may not effectively combat misinformation in rural areas. Because under the related articles feature, it is difficult to imagine the first time social media users with low digital literacy read such lengthy, fact-checked articles. Likewise, A report by BBC called “Duty, Identity and Credibility” States how a few users interpreted the forward label feature introduced by WhatsApp. One of the users in the survey assumed that the forward label implies that it should be forwarded further. In this context, it is crucial to

The anti-fake news efforts by the Indian government so far are narrow and focus only on regulating social media platforms. India needs robust policies to address the fake news problem by including ordinary citizens in the process.

consider these ground realities in the process of formulating anti-fake news measures. Also, following the spree of killings fuelled by rumours on its platform, WhatsApp has acknowledged in a statement that it needs support from local law enforcement authorities and civil society organisations to fight misinformation, especially at grassroots levels.

Grassroots Awareness as a Way Forward

Community radio:

Existing measures to tackle fake news by various stakeholders rarely put ordinary citizens at the centre of the solution. There are exceptions. *Alfaz-e-Mewat*, a community radio (CR) station based in Haryana, covers 225 villages and acts as an effective communication channel among villagers, medical officers and other local authorities. This station has used local folk songs to create awareness about safety during the pandemic. It had special programs to debunk fake news which targeted minorities as carriers of the coronavirus. The most evil forms of fake news in Indian villages are often communally charged, leading to offline violence. Also, the generation of fake news significantly rises during major news events such as elections or protests. Local communication systems like CRs are more effective in addressing fake news because of their socio-cultural positioning in rural communities.

As of 2021, there are 339 CR stations in India, covering approx. 90 million people. CR stations are rooted in the local socio-cultural conditions and

serve the information needs of communities. This grassroots approach must be considered in fighting fake news in Indian villages. CR stations broadcast information in local languages and enjoy more trust among communities. However, they need more resources and cover only small portions of the country. How CR stations responded to the covid-19 crisis and their modus operandi could provide valuable insights into addressing the fake news problem in rural India. Such campaigns proved more effective because they considered the community's social, political and cultural aspects. This approach is fundamental to addressing the problem of fake news in diverse communities such as Indian villages.

Local stakeholders:

Various innovative public awareness campaigns emanated from local authorities, including police departments and civil society organisations, in response to child kidnapping rumours and Covid-19 misinformation in villages. In 2018, several villages in Jogulamba Gadwal district in Telangana were gripped by child kidnapping rumours spreading on WhatsApp. In response, the district's superintendent of police, Reema Rajeswari, rolled out a model to combat fake news in around 400 villages. As a part of this program, she trained around 500 officers before they reach out to communities starting with the village leaders. In this model, every awareness event starts with a folk performance embedded with a message about fake news. This program also tried to address communal sensitivity in the region. This model was widely covered in mainstream media and replicated across several parts of the country. Such campaigns are more effective because they consider the community's social, political and cultural aspects. This type of understanding is fundamental in addressing the problem of fake news in diverse communities such as Indian villages.

Similarly, *FactShala*, a media literacy initiative by *InterNews* in collaboration with Google, trains communities in rural India. This program employs a multi-stakeholder approach by collaborating with fact-checkers, journalists, and community radio stations to empower rural communities with media literacy and critical information skills. Likewise, a few fact-checking initiatives are also experimenting with digital media literacy interventions to empower communities in villages. *Vishwas News*, a fact-checking organisation, launched a

program called *Sach Ke Saathi* (Companions of Truth) to empower the digitally vulnerable by training them to identify and verify information online. Similarly, *Digital Empowerment Foundation* (DEF) has recently developed a program to create a rural ecosystem with hyper-local fact-checking initiatives based on community radio stations to fight fake news in villages. This program developed tools such as a WhatsApp tip line for community radio stations to receive potential misinformation reported by users. Equipping such local communication channels with the necessary resources is essential in creating resilient models against fake news in Indian villages.

Three-tier approach:

Any effort to combat the fake news problem at the village level must consider these three stages. The first stage is to create awareness among village communities about the evils of fake news. This will help create attitudes of healthy scepticism among communities about the daily information they consume. The second stage is capacity building by imparting digital literacy skills like basic fact-checking and source identification. The training material must be tailored to the literacy levels of the communities. The third stage is knowledge creation among rural communities about various existing channels to report potential misinformation and access fact-checked information. Knowledge of local WhatsApp tip lines and other channels must spread among villagers.

Five-point approach:

Percolation of fact-checked information and media literacy interventions are the two most essential elements in the fight against fake news in villages. While providing the correct information promptly is a valuable immediate response, empowering vulnerable communities through media literacy is a sustainable solution in the long run. In conclusion, five important aspects must be considered in formulating effective interventions at the community level. First, community stakeholders, such as local authorities, village leaders, civil society organisations and community radio stations, must be included in the process of addressing fake news among rural communities. They are essential in the process of understanding the socio-cultural conditions of the region. Their knowledge is critical in building trust and reaching out

to these communities. Also, local CR stations effectively disseminate fact-checked information through special programs and bulletins. Second, fact-checked information and media literacy resources must be available in local languages and dialects. Language is the primary factor in reaching out to communities. So it is crucial to ensure the timely percolation of fact-checked information into rural communities in their languages. Third, WhatsApp should be considered a primary communication channel in anti-fake news interventions because of its popularity among rural communities.

WhatsApp as a medium could facilitate the dissemination of corrective information and digital literacy modules in multimedia format. Multimedia content in simplified infographics and animations could be more effective for the rural populace. Also, WhatsApp tip lines could be an effective way to identify and debunk fake news. Fourth, fact-checked information and media literacy interventions should also be available in audio format to cater to the illiterate population. Daily fake news bulletins in audio format would be a better way to reach the maximum number of people. Social media companies must develop fact-checking and digital literacy tools tailored for users with low to no literacy in rural areas. Finally, local cultural art forms and folklore should be considered as a medium to create awareness about the evils of fake news. This approach proved successful and visible across awareness campaigns in different parts of the country.

Conclusion

The generation of fake news and its consequences are contextual. We see a significant rise in fake news cases during elections, violent protests and other newsworthy incidents. To make it worse, various social and

It is crucial to consider these ground realities in the process of formulating anti-fake news measures.

political actors use fake news to create hate among communities. So it is crucial to have replicable models for timely deployment to mitigate the impact of fake news. Also, digital literacy interventions are indispensable in the fight against fake news in the long run. Some such measures are imparting basic fact-checking skills and knowledge about avenues for authenticity verification of potentially false information. These interventions not only empower rural communities against the immediate effects of fake news but could transform how they interact with the Internet for their overall development.

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Internet, Cognitive Bias and Dangers of Perception Control

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The Dangerous Side of Influence: The Misrepresentation of Mental Health in Indian Digital Space

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Transgender Rights in India and its Long History of Misinformation

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Welcome to a World without Rules

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Rumours in the Age of Social Media: A Study of Targeted Attacks on Migrants in Tamil Nadu

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With the Rise of Misinformation, Danger Lurks the Third Pillar of Democracy

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How Hindu Nationalist Propaganda is Derailing India's Global Influence

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India's Internet Blackouts: An Ineffective Strategy Against Misinformation

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Online Hate Campaigns Against Women: Exploring the Instrumentalization of Women and Denial of the Right to Speak in Online Space

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Online Abuse of Sportswomen and Sportspersons from Minority Communities: A Crushing Blow to the Spirit of Sports

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Media and the Marginalized: A Critical Examination of Class, Caste, and Religious Bias in Indian Media

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Fighting Fake News on the Ground: Empowering Indian Villages through a Grassroots Approach

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In a world increasingly mired in the quagmire of misinformation and disinformation, the quest for truth becomes both a challenge and a moral imperative. This anthology, curated by the Digital Empowerment Foundation, brings together ten cogent essays that illuminate the multifaceted dynamics of misinformation in India's digital landscape.

From the insidious surveillance systems and their impact on democracy, to the troubling trend of mental health misinformation on social media, from the misinformation surrounding transgender rights, to the online hate campaigns against women—each essay unravels a strand of the complex web of misinformation.

This collection is not merely an exploration of these themes; it is a clarion call for digital literacy, a plea for responsible content consumption, and a manifesto for a more informed, inclusive future. Each narrative echoes with the resilience of truth-seekers, the commitment to dispel falsehoods, and the courage to reclaim our shared narratives.

As you navigate through these pages, you will find yourself confronted with uncomfortable realities, enlightened by insights, and ultimately, inspired to be a part of the change we so dearly need. Join us on this journey as we navigate the labyrinth of misinformation, striving towards a future where truth triumphs and understanding flourishes.

Let this anthology be your compass in the digital age—an era marked by information overload and the urgent need for critical thinking.



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