

Focus
May 2022

Inside India's Digital Hate Space

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Introduction

In India, the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) religiously deploys inflammatory rhetoric against the Muslim minority. The current BJP regime with its Hindutva driven policies has subjugated minorities, predominantly Muslims, via circulation of misinformation and hate speech content which is regulated by BJP's IT cells.¹ In addition to traditional manifestations of oppression, the state misconduct towards its minorities including Muslims, Christians and Dalits has now hit new lows, encompassing digital spaces including Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Github. Sources indicate that misinformation and hate speech content regulated by these IT cells have many a times translated into real-life violence.² Although, the levels of discrimination against minorities in India is different, this study *only* explores the atrocities committed against Muslims in the wake of hate-based fake news using digital platforms. For instance, in the past six years, many Muslims in India have suffered lynching by vigilantes and these incidents were mostly triggered by fake news circulated on WhatsApp.³ Factors such as unhindered outreach, swift dissemination and sharing of

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unverified information has further added to the challenge of propaganda and misinformation. Given the thin line of differentiation, the terms propaganda, fake news, misinformation and disinformation have been used interchangeably to explain the creation and dissemination of uncorroborated content on the aforementioned digital platforms.

The recent rise in the incidence of violence, triggered by incitement through the unpronounced fake news-hate speech nexus has enhanced the relevance of digital media platforms as spaces that nurture this process, now more than ever. For instance, Geeta Pandey in her article for the BBC reports the count of hate crimes in India, stating that around 90 per cent of victims of hate speech in the past ten years in India were Muslims.⁴ The aforementioned being one of the many instances of hate-based violence only reiterate the need for a deeper insight into India's propaganda infrastructure and the threat that it poses to minorities based in the world's largest democracy.

This paper explores the digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Github, and WhatsApp turned into hates spaces as part of propaganda infrastructure of Hindutva. In doing so, the paper uses several incidents to understand how the right-wing is adopting a toxic internet culture, inherently aimed at narrowing down spatial independence for minorities (which includes but is not limited to use of memes to harass Muslim community on social media platforms).

Propaganda Infrastructure of Hindutva

The technological revolution has blessed this generation with the ease of communication through digital platforms. It allows the information to disseminate as quickly as possible.

Although people have become more informed, this has come with an unpronounced cost. A similar sort of pattern can be seen in India since 2014. The rising accessibility of the internet through a mobile connection in India has necessitated the debate on various nuances of hate speech.⁵ BJP has used social apps to exploit, spread, and manipulate public opinion through its politically motivated messages.⁶ The infrastructure of propaganda around which the ideology of Hindutva is sowed, nurtured, and executed, comes through these digital platforms.⁷ Although, this study explores the hate-based narrative that is created via the circulation of fake news but additionally, it has been noted that the general public has seemingly sacrificed their consciousness to the champions of democracy who seek to control opinions of the public and manipulate them for their personal political benefits. The BJP government through its well-established rhetoric, openly articulate this idea of political manoeuvring, as could be seen in Home Minister Amit Shah's statement,

“We are capable of delivering any message we want to the public, whether sweet or sour, true or fake because we have around 3.2 million people on our WhatsApp groups.”⁸

This leads to an apparent conclusion that BJP runs a fake news factory which is well organised, well-regulated and which erratically instigates violence via dissemination of fake news. This ecosystem is modulated by thousands of people who are allied with the government and are helping the government of India, particularly the BJP in amplifying the bigotry over social media in a very unprecedented manner.⁹ Although, it might seem a little off guard as to how fake news can be a threat to minorities but spewing hate speech that is based on fake news is the new

common hateful rhetoric that the BJP is using against its minorities. The aforementioned practice operates in four steps. At first, fake news is established, secondly, that fake news is utilised to promote hate speech through its misleading content, thirdly, it is followed by the creation of hateful narratives against minorities which ultimately result in the execution of violence both directly and indirectly. Nevertheless, this marginalisation against minorities, especially Muslims in India is not born out of a vacuum but is rather an important factor that is helping India in achieving its ideological interest in making it, a *Hindu Rashtra*.

It is seemingly obvious that, in today's India, there trickles a race purity narrative which aims at making it, a monolithic state (Hindu Rashtra), with one people (Jati), and a monolithic culture (Sanskrit).¹⁰ This infrastructure is sustained through the strategically designed architecture of Hindutva which propagates anti-Muslim hate speech via digital platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Reddit, and GitHub. As of 2019, there are around 2,500 social media officers and 2,600 WhatsApp groups in India and its states within.¹¹ This figure increased to 72,000 WhatsApp groups and 9,500 IT cell heads in 2020.¹² The narrative that these social media platforms produce through BJP's well-orchestrated IT cells, helps in hosting a pattern of violence against Muslims through different digital campaigns which has created public disorders.¹³

In particular, the visibility of these digital hatred campaigns began to appear during the pandemic which produced hashtags like #CoronaJihad – apparently transforming the propaganda around the pandemic into an Islamophobia-driven conspiracy.¹⁴ Whilst, the digital platforms have ushered a new age of networked and virtual communication, the flow of

dark humour, hate speech, and fake news through these platforms has altered the landscape of communication and has pushed the political environment towards populism and polarisation. For instance, on December 6, 2017, a Bengali Muslim migrant worker named Mohammad Afrazul was beaten to death in Rajasthan followed by burning his body. The man who killed him dared to videotape the whole incident and upload it on YouTube.¹⁵ Simultaneously, the accused deeds earned him supporters, particularly from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), who saw him as a champion of eliminating 'love jihad' — a controversial term connoting the marriage of a Muslim man with a Hindu woman that was popularised on social media with a common hashtag #LoveJihad introduced by the right-wing and adopted by many in the mainstream.¹⁶ Interestingly, most of the inflammatory #LoveJihad tweets circulating on the internet were not geo-tagged at least within 80-100 kilometres of Rasjsamand, which clearly indicated that the hashtag was created elsewhere and was propagated far afield via social media later on.¹⁷ Thus, the use of hashtags like #LoveJihad, #CoronaJihad, and many others like #LandJihad and #GharWapsi contributed a significant portion of hatred and propaganda against Indian Muslims.

India, away from its digitally regulated chaos, once in all its splendour, was a state with communal harmony but currently, under the BJP's political umbrella – a socio-cultural metamorphosis is underway. Although the digital hatred machine of the BJP is well oiled, there will be a larger price to pay when this hateful rhetoric is optimally normalised. Unfortunately, in recent years, Indian Muslim women who found themselves auctioned online have been paying this price. These Indian Muslim women found themselves on an online app which

auctioned them as 'Deals of the Day'. The app is known as 'Bulli Bai' which is a successor to the 'Sulli Deals' app (an online term used for Muslim women by right wing as a means of troll)¹⁸. The app was incubated by the GitHub platform and auctioned more than 100 Muslim women as "Bulli Bai" of the day.¹⁹ The app displayed pictures of multiple journalists, activists, including the Pakistani Nobel Laureate Malala Yousafzai. Vocal personalities like Ranna Ayyub and Ismat Ara were also made victims along with Shabana Azmi, among others.²⁰ Albeit, the Human Auction was fake but the app and the humans that were auctioned were real. Additionally, the humans were Muslims, in specific the vocal and crushed strong Muslim women who were objectified/sexualised based on their religion and cast. Following the backlash, the apps were ultimately taken down but the damage that they caused was traumatising and the image that they created of how they are so powerful and unstoppable was horrifying.

Neo Alt-Right Radicalisation; Trads vs. Raitas

After the perpetrators of the Sulli and Bulli Bai apps were arrested, a rift grew between the right-wingers and the social media saw a Neo-Alt Right group²¹ in India with Extremist views. Trads and Raitas, (usually up against each other as Trads vs. Raitas) are the by-product of a radical ecosystem hosted by social apps like Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram. They are a sub-cultural movement hosting an online army of people who are inspired by the propaganda of the Hindu Rashtra.²² They believe in making India a Hindu State by marginalising Muslims, however their marginalisation is not carried in a traditional way but rather via the social apps and derogatory meme culture. Subsequently, this online army in recent years has seen a dangerous tilt of young

men and women towards the Alt-Right digital ecosystem commonly called the 'Trad-wing'. To begin with, the term Trad is short for 'Traditional' and these young men who call themselves trads, align with the right-wing and serve as self-styled civilisational warriors. Raitas, on the other hand, are mocked by Trads as being too liberal and their name stems from a popular Hindi phrase '*Rayta Failana*' which literally means 'making a mess of things'.²³

The whole debate that revolves between Trads and the Raitas exist because of a distinction between the ideologies of these two schools of thought. The people who align themselves with the group of Raitas are the ones that want Hindus to dominate whereas the Trads who take their inspiration from white supremacists,²⁴ believe that they (Raitas) are "just messing things up" (Connotation: Raita Filana) by not advocating for a return of the implementation of Manusmriti.²⁵ Trads consider themselves the protectors of Sanatan Dharma and believe that Modi is too soft on Muslims and Dalits.²⁶ The Trad accounts also use memes and hashtags to target Prime Minister Narendra Modi which was observed highly when the hashtag #MaulanaModi appeared in bulk after Modi extended Eid felicitations to Muslims, ultimately displeasing the right-wingers.²⁷ Similarly, the digital ecosystem of Trads and Raitas is filled with derogatory memes and toxic humour which is specifically targeted at Islamists and Dalits – labelling them as termites, frogs, and cockroaches. However, both the groups place their belief in Hindu supremacy which unites them up to some extent.

Nevertheless, spreading violence against Muslims via the social media and defending it in the name of recovering from identity crises in order to return to Hindu Rashtra is by no means

justifiable. Thus, the growing ecosystem of trads whose content is based on provocative hate against caste, religion, race, and gender, shall not be ignored. They are both a result of and a contributor to the normalisation of severe hate speech, genocidal jokes, and a social camaraderie formed around hatred for no other purpose than hate itself.

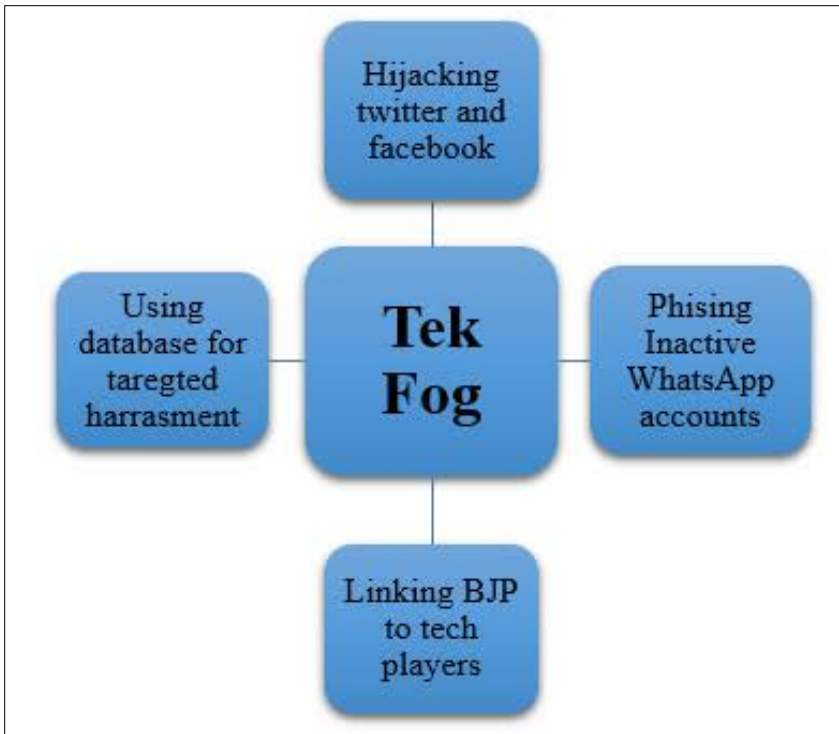
Tek Fog; Marriage of Big Tech and Dirty Politics

In a similar context, another really astonishing factor was unveiled, which played a great part in contributing to India's dirty politics of disseminating fake news and igniting anti-minority violence. In 2020, a whistle-blower from India revealed a secret app called '*Tek Fog*' which was created by BJP IT cells. Tek Fog is a conglomeration of four unique features (see Figure 1). The functioning of the app was built around hijacking major social media accounts and amplifying right-wing propaganda (as augmented by Trads and Raitas) to a domestic audience. The main feature of the app allowed it to hijack the 'trending' section of Twitter and Facebook and auto-retweet or auto-share the posts in a spam manner. This technique helped engineer public discourse(s) by creating absurd trends/hashtags and hijacking conversations across major digital platforms. Tek Fog played a great part in helping the right-wing propagandists to deliver their extremist narrative and political campaigns to a more diverse audience and that narrative was then utilised by social media warriors to propagate hate speeches and instigate violence. For example, as part of an investigation carried out by *The Wire*²⁸, the whistle-blower was asked to perform a live experiment to see whether the specific feature of the app was functioning or not. The source provided them with the hashtag

#CongressAgainstLabourers whose aim was to appear in at least 55,000 tweets. Half an hour later, the trend went to accumulate 57,000 mentions - surpassing 2000 tweets beyond the target. This apparently proved that the procedure for propagating a narrative across social media is well-orchestrated by the BJP government and that they are seemingly working hard to alter public discourse(s) based on fake news and disinformation.

Figure 1

Understanding features of Tek Fog



Source: The Wire²⁹

Subsequently, another interesting yet scary feature of Tek Fog includes 'modifying existing news stories to create fake news.' This feature operates to create fake news by changing

keywords and generating political narratives via modifying the link of a published article. For example, an article published in *The Print* had the following headline, '**Telegram – a free speech Russian platform is a haven for Far-Right terror groups.**' Now, after link modification, the source had edited the headline and some parts of the texts which were not the words of the author, rather the opposite. The altered headline read; '**Telegram – a free speech Russian platform is a haven for Pakistani and Left-wing terror groups.**' It is noteworthy that the political affiliation of the Telegram was shifted from right-wing to a left-wing group and an element of Pakistan was added in as well.³⁰ Through the above-documented facts, it is very clear that Tek Fog is a part of the BJP propaganda infrastructure which spreads automated hate, ignites hate speech and engineers public discourse in favour of India's ruling party, BJP.

Conclusion

The spread of hate speech via fake news is apparently a new non-traditional way of achieving foreign policy goals and India's current government has proven itself right so in this regard. It is because, the news that is circulated via the BJP's vast network of WhatsApp takes no time to reach the domestic audience, creates a negative public discourse against Muslims and then incites violence. Interestingly, the BJP is using unique tools and techniques to not just circulate fake news, and engineer public discourse but to also gain vote bank via its social media warriors.³¹ Thus, there is an urgent need to educate the general public to utilise these platforms to the maximums of benefit and not just to be exploited. However, the complex web of connectivity that India has constructed over the years is indeed a

dangerous world where the most targeted ones are the ones belonging to minorities. Nevertheless, as of today, modern nation-states are experimenting with digital diplomacy via platforms like Twitter. At the same time, the world's largest democracy is finding ways and funding tech gurus to spread hate. It is debatable, because other states are using social media in their best interests but, so is India. The only difference is the stark distinction between the interests of other world democracies in comparison to India's inclination toward creating a Hindu Rahstra. In the realist clock, both of them are pursuing their countries' core interests but at the expense and sacrifice of something bigger.

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