

## Facebook's Compliance in India's Digital Offensive

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### Introduction

Facebook (FB) is a subsidiary of Meta and needs no introduction because it has outreach to almost every nook and corner of the globe. Introduced in 2004, it has the largest number of users leading the social media market in terms of revenue and profit generation globally. It has gained massive success but is often in hot waters and faces scrutiny due to its contentious content moderation policies. The policies that are devised to handle hate speech, sensitive political content, and misinformation vary in different countries and are somehow under the influence of local laws, cultural values, and business prospects. This article delves into the content moderation policies of Facebook in Pakistan and India, two contiguous archenemies with a legacy of skirmishes and tussles since partition in 1947, having varying political and social landscapes. It elucidates the discrepancies in Facebook standards in both countries that are certainly fueled by political lobbying and profit generation.

### Background

Facebook was introduced in India and Pakistan in 2006. At present, India ranks first having the largest user base and Pakistan is in the tenth rank in terms of Facebook users according to Statista, a German data collection company.<sup>1</sup> Silicon Valley's mammoths have invested heavily in India to boost their profit. Facebook established its first-ever office in Asia in the Indian city of Hyderabad in 2010. This led to creation of offices in Mumbai, Bangalore and Gurgaon with Hyderabad as the head office of Facebook in India. In 2020, an investment of around

\$5.7 billion was fed into the Indian economy by FB. Facebook bought stakes for Rs. 43,574 crores in Reliance owned by Indian billionaire Mukesh Ambani in 2020.<sup>2</sup> It is a digital connectivity platform that helped Facebook and its WhatsApp unit strengthen their presence in the largest market, India. The companies were there to chase profits and they acquiesced to the demands of the government which led to gradual relaxation in the Facebook policies in India. Pakistan did not offer a larger audience also it was accused of providing sanctuaries to terrorists and extremists resulting in stricter controls on Pakistan.<sup>3</sup>

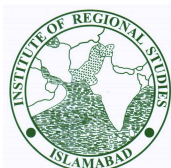
### Facebook's Global Legal and Regulatory Framework

FB under Meta introduced certain community standards and guidelines, with additional terms and policies that "apply the same to everyone, everywhere." The Community Standards provide a platform that applies to everyone. Its proclaimed values are "Authenticity, Safety, Privacy, and Dignity." The foundation of community standards is the "Policy Rationale" that directs the policy lines by moderating and identifying the content that is not allowed and content that needs to be augmented with additional information that limits the audience of specific age groups. The community standards are devised to limit violence and criminal behaviour, objectionable content, and to ensure the safety of users, protection of the integrity, authenticity and intellectual property.<sup>4</sup>

Above mentioned legalities are just on paper for showcasing to the world but in reality, the facts are contrary to this rules-based order. These

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standards are not applied consistently in every country which hints at biases and favouritism. These accusations of inconsistent policies are driven by the reliance of Facebook on localised offices and employees for content moderation, political pressure, differences in local laws, and business dynamics. Facebook was also engaged with Cambridge Analytica; a company that provides services to political parties and businesses to change audience behaviour. It was unable to ensure the safety of its users and got their data stolen and harvested for some political means.<sup>5</sup> However, it later issued statements that it did not allow the company to use the data but it used it anyway.<sup>6</sup>

### **Content Moderation Standards in India**

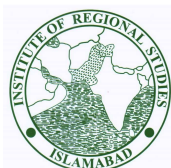
The number of Facebook users in India are 378.05 million as of April 2024.<sup>7</sup> Facebook is not only used for infotainment but also for furthering political objectives by the Indian government, military, and extremist groups. The Modi government used this platform to fulfill its ulterior motives and requested FB to monitor the content citing fears related to misinformation, national security, protection of minorities and public order. The FB administration has faced scrutiny over its policies because it allowed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to spread disinformation and hate speech.<sup>8</sup> It is also accused of supporting the BJP in the proliferation of its fascist narratives propelled by the Hindutva ideology.

This was confirmed when two former Facebook employees turned whistleblowers, Sophie Zang and Frances Haugen exposed Facebook's affiliation with political parties and its unwillingness to curb hate speech and misinformation by broadcasting internal documents. Zhang worked as a data scientist for FB, in 2019 she tried to delete a fake network that was associated with a BJP parliamentarian. She said that she was bogged down and informed of the company's "Cross-Check" or Xcheck (exclusive treatment given to high-profile

customers; politicians, musicians, star athletes). Later, FB said that it had removed the network but did not find the page of the BJP politician in the network.<sup>9</sup>

This hints at the reluctance of FB to remove the pages and fake networks of Hindu nationalists. Facebook employees also proclaimed that "the company routinely makes exceptions for powerful actors when enforcing content policy," referring to India. Facebook also got involved in inciting violence by letting the Indian mobs use FB for their propaganda against Muslims.<sup>10</sup> The perpetrators of Delhi riots in 2022 used FB as a platform to call people for violence using hate speech against Muslims, this content was also not regulated by the community standard 'Violence and Criminal Behaviour' that pledges to curtail 'violence and incitement by dangerous organizations and individuals.'

Indian Military also used FB for its heinous acts against the Muslims in Kashmir. The Chinar Corps deployed in Srinagar used a network of fake accounts pretending to be Kashmiri citizens where they praised the Indian army and criticised its archrival Pakistan and its ally, China.<sup>11</sup> Facebook monitored the content and identified it as "a covert campaign" led by the Indian military after FB has traced using geolocation technology. These incidents called for action according to the FB policy 'Co-ordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB),'<sup>12</sup> but when the American CIB supervisor informed the executives in India that they needed to remove these networks as they violated the standards, they got furious and presented suspicions of exasperating the government, linking the network deletion with sovereignty of India. And if they are found complicit in any such actions they might face charges and imprisonment by government forces. The symbolic violence had left its imprints on the employees because previously the government officials sent police to the home of Twitter's head in India.



Thus, the political clout is also due to the presence of Facebook offices in India, executives are threatened to act on the government's whims if they want to protect themselves and their families. The company often gives in to the demands of government over fears of losing finances. It prioritises its revenues over the implementation of consistent policies and standards.

### **Content Moderation Standards in Pakistan**

Pakistan is not as big a market as India and hosts 47.35 million users. Pakistan has to face stricter controls and content moderation policies. The Pakistani government has also maintained that FB should monitor the content quoting threats to national security, political stability, religious sentiments (blasphemy), moral and cultural values. The government has no significant influence on FB executives and policies because of the absence of FB offices in Pakistan. The Pakistan government has criticised FB for having different standards for both states. The bias was explicit when FB removed the content related to Kashmir, criticism of Indian policies against minorities, Indian military and political disparities.

This discrimination became more evident after Burhan Wani's martyrdom in 2016 and the abrogation of Article 370 and 35A in 2019. All posts on Kashmir, freedom fighters and criticisms on India were removed immediately by sending a notification attached to the post saying "We removed the post below because it does not follow the Facebook Community Standards." This reflects how FB favors the Indian government and holds a bias against Pakistan. This also happened due to Indian drum-beating when it declared Pakistan as a state sponsoring terrorism that has jeopardized the security of South Asia. This has led to mounting international pressures on Pakistan and FB also succumbs to the pressure and limits the content that has nothing to do with terrorism. Thus, in Pakistan,

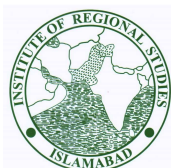
the policies are shaped by external political actors rather than the local political elite. These policies of FB received criticism from the Pakistani government for not being impartial and demanded clarification on the "difference in policies for users in India and Pakistan."<sup>13</sup>

The FB market in Pakistan is small, having little to no significance for a tech giant, unlike India. It finds no incentive in accommodating the demands of the Pakistani government or users because they are usually focused on the areas of their business interests. However, now after facing criticism, FB has relaxed its policies in Pakistan when many users have begun using Twitter as a more convenient platform to highlight these issues.

### **Way Forward**

In this era, social media and Artificial Intelligence (AI) pose a greater threat to the state rather than conventional militaries and wars. A single wrong cue given using social media can create a frenzy among citizens and can be a threat to national security. The "Arab Spring" erupted from Tunisia and proliferated to the whole of the Middle East is also titled "Facebook Revolution" because it used FB to call citizens to join protests and rallies. The lethal use of FB by India to propagate hate speech, violence, and disinformation has damaged Pakistan's stature internationally and turned the population against the Armed Forces and government.

Keeping in view the dynamics of this region FB must alleviate the concerns regarding discriminatory policies and hinder Indian disinformation and propaganda for the sake of South Asian stability. The policies must be the same for both states according to global standards and distinctions based on user base and business prospects should be avoided. There is a dire need to curtail the toxic use of technology in the rapidly growing state of India. The strategic stability and peace in South Asia are dependent on the ties



between these two states, and it is essential to impede any technological misadventure that can have deleterious consequences.

## Conclusion

In a nutshell, FB had devised many discriminatory policies that were brought to light when the users in Pakistan were restricted from posting and sharing anything linked with IIOJK and Indian atrocities against minorities. The opposite was happening in India where incendiary rhetoric was allowed to stir up calls for violence, hate against

Muslims in India and Kashmir, and promote anti-Pakistan and anti-China narratives. This cast FB in a bad light, the testimonies of 'giving voice to everyone ensuring their safety and dignity' turned out to be a sham, and proved FB policies 'do not apply the same to everyone, everywhere.' Moreover, FB swept Indian activities under the rug and banned all of the FB activities carried out in Pakistan that went against India. This led to a critique on FB but that did not make a visible difference in policies immediately and took a few years to ease policies in Pakistan.

## Notes and References

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- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Stacy Jo Dixon, "Facebook users by Country 2024," *Statista*.
- <sup>8</sup> Joseph Menn and Gerry Shih, "Under India's pressure, Facebook let propaganda and hate speech thrive," *The Washington Post*, last modified 26 September 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/26/india-facebook-propaganda-hate-speech/>.
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- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>13</sup> Javed Hussain, "Facebook should clarify 'difference in policies for users in India and in Pakistan'," *Dawn*, 20 August 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1575468>.