

Citizens for Justice and Peace

Hate propaganda in news and social media

Muslims are the largest minority in India and arguably the most persecuted one. The 2011 Census data puts the Indian Muslim population at 172.2 million which is 14.2% of the total population. Under colonial occupation, a 'divide and rule' policy was adopted especially with a view to quell the burgeoning revolts against economic, social and political suppression. This led to the Partition of the sub-continent by which Pakistan opted for religion-based nationhood, while India remained committed to a secular, democratic republic.

While a vast majority of Muslims opted to stay behind, putting their faith in the Indian Constitutional values of equality and non-discrimination, the reality of Pakistan has been continually used to intimidate and threaten them. Organisations who themselves had little or nothing to do with the Indian freedom struggle and who have, instead openly propagated religion-based nationhood for India, have held second-class citizenship as a constant threat to the religious minorities and the political dissenter. ¹Today, the government in power at the Centre and in several Indian states, is committed to a supremacist ideology and a theocratic authoritarian State, while presently being elected under the egalitarian mandate of the Constitution.

While institutional discrimination against India's Muslims has been evidenced over decades since Partition, the specific hate-letting over the past six years has not just been legitimised, but has been accompanied by violence and political marginalisation. Ever since a hardline BJP came to power in the Centre in 2014, Muslims in India have increasingly become targets of mob lynching in the name of cow protection², criminalisation of triple talaq³, and targeted and inflammatory hate speech.

The othering and hatred against the Muslim community has been manifest through two powerful tools of communication: social media and news (especially electronic) media. In recent years, there have been legislative measures too that are distinctly discriminatory. Over recent decades, tests of patriotism and untested allegations of 'illegal infiltration' have also led to further harassment and persecution for example in

¹<https://sabrangindia.in/indepth/ideology-rashtriya-swayamsevak-sangh-rss-both-hate-ridden-and-supremacist-part-1>

²<https://thewire.in/rights/two-years-since-sc-judgment-the-spectre-of-mob-violence-continues-to-loom-large;>
<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/to-end-mob-lynching-supreme-court-gives-an-11-point-prescription/story-pdknxkMYd3Caz3R27nSniP.html>

³<https://www.theleaflet.in/stop-the-criminalisation-of-triple-talaq-bebaak-collective-public-statement/#;>
<https://scroll.in/article/895032/triple-talaq-ordinance-amendments-are-welcome-but-many-muslim-organisations-remain-disappointed>

the north eastern state of Assam where a vast majority of those targeted under the ‘D Voter’, ‘Declared Foreigner’ and NRC-excluded persons, are Muslims. The spectre of statelessness has caused trauma and cost 107 lives in the state of Assam.⁴

Hate Speech

The persistence, spread and legitimisation of Hate Speech (and Expression) has been visible on the Indian political landscape with Muslims being a major target. Hate Speech is not Free Speech in that it almost always targets already vulnerable populations situated in structural, social or political inequality. Hate speech everywhere, including in India, is often the precursor to the physical targeting of vulnerable populations and minorities.⁵

In India, hate speech (and writing) plays a key role in instigating hate crimes. These are crimes committed against members of specific communities who are singled out and targeted with the intention of intimidating them. Usually hate speech is replete with slurs that profile the community in stereotypical ways, for example being ‘violent’, ‘unpatriotic’, ‘dirty’, ‘serial polygamists’.

Though hate speech has been around for a long time⁶, it has become more frequent since May 2014, and is used as a tool to incite hatred, violence, animosity, particularly towards minority communities with the aim to establish a dominance of the majority⁷. This is visible most specifically in electronic and digital media telecasts of programmes aimed at furthering this hatred that often spills into violence. Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP) has been consistent in its Hate Hatao programme⁸, analysing and calling out instances of Hate Speech and Writing.

Legal provisions

Hate speech has not been defined in any law in India. However, legal provisions in criminal law and election law prohibit the stigmatisation of communities, castes, classes and genders. However, these sections of the law are rarely applied with rigour against hate offenders.

⁴<https://cjp.org.in/tag/d-voters/>; <https://cjp.org.in/disasters-displacement-and-political-dis-enfranchisement-in-a-warming-world/>

⁵Teesta Setalvad's acceptance speech on receiving the Hon Doctorate of the Laws from the Univ of British Columbia on November 26, 2020.

⁶<https://europepmc.org/article/pmc/pmc7371832>

⁷<https://sabrangindia.in/article/look-whos-talking-hate-speech-cant-be-free-speech-says-jaitley>

⁸<https://cjp.org.in/hate-watch>

Recent Instances:

This overall public culture of hate letting against India's Muslims was exacerbated furthermore with the outbreak of the pandemic. Sections of the electronic news media, that have a viewership of millions, drove a sharp anti-Muslim rhetoric by 'communalising'⁹ the pandemic. In mid-March 2020, an international religious congregation of Muslims in the capital city of Delhi was used by television channels to dub Muslims as 'Corona Super-Spreaders' leading to ostracisation on the ground. A mainstream electronic news channel¹⁰, on the guise of conducting an investigative series on the COVID-19 singled out madrasas (Islamic schools) for a sting operation. The report was twisted to depict how children are 'crammed in rooms and are at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19' in madrasas. Comparisons were drawn with the Tablighi Jamaat event to wrongfully suggest that Muslims were not following social distancing norms. However, they appeared to wilfully and completely ignore the fact that these madrasas act as shelters for deprived and destitute children.¹¹ While many Madrasa heads were seen justifying their move to keep the children within the Madrasa premises to protect them from the disease and to keep them safe, the narrative that was brought forth by the channel was that children were being exposed to the disease in unsanitary conditions and in violation of government set COVID norms. The fact that several migrant workers were left stranded on roadsides with no help from government, is testimony to the fears expressed by the Madrasa heads that the children will be left in the lurch if they were let out from their safe space, which was the Madrasa.

All such media stories were systematically aimed at alienating and demonising Muslims and holding them responsible, one way or another, for the nationwide spread of the pandemic. One tragic fallout of this stigmatisation was when a young man took his own life after he was ostracised in his village.¹²

CJP took immediate steps. We first sent a written complaint to the channel to take down *both* videos and issue a public apology. However, failing to get an appropriate reply, we moved the News Broadcasting Standards Authority (NBSA) which is an independent body set up by the News Broadcasters Association (NBA), and a self-regulating body. We made a strong case against the selective reportage and how it violated the NBSA's own guidelines. Several such cases are being heard.

We have had successes in the past with electronic channels being asked to remove such targeted content after we filed and argued our case. Our complaints are detailed and thorough, showcasing national¹³ and

⁹Communalism is a peculiarly South Asian term, defined by historians as the 'misuse and manipulation of religion and religious symbols for political ends.'

¹⁰<https://cjp.org.in/cjp-moves-nbsa-against-india-todays-sting-operation-on-madrasas/>

¹¹<https://cjp.org.in/cjp-moves-nbsa-against-india-todays-sting-operation-on-madrasas/>

¹²<https://www.news18.com/news/india/facing-social-boycott-himachal-man-hangs-self-to-death-day-after-testing-negative-for-coronavirus-2565349.html>

international laws. The outcome generally expected is that the news channel is reprimanded for broadcasting such content, given a warning against repeating similar practice and asked to take down the content. In some rare cases, the channel is even asked to issue an apology. While this may not deter a news channel from their vicious and unregulated propaganda, it is supposed to encourage channels to tone down their narrative.

The attack on the dignity of the Indian Muslim community has not been limited to just the TablighiJamaat incident but the media has also resorted to coming up with radical terms aimed at demonising the Muslim community, such as “Zameen Jihad” (Land Jihad) or “UPSC Jihad” (Jihad in civil services).¹⁴The term Zameen Jihad was coined by a news channel to allege that there was a systematic attempt of land grabbing by the Muslim population in the predominantly Hindu Jammu region of Jammu and Kashmir, with the help of a law passed by the local government which was aimed at increasing Muslim population in the region. Some fake census figures were also thrown around to show the increase in Muslim population, thus further cementing and justifying the “land jihad” myth.

This show was telecasted at the start of the pandemic and was instrumental in the stigmatisation of Muslims, using the TablighiJamaat incident as a trigger. One news channel even claimed that the nationwide lockdown could have ended in April had the TablighiJamaat incident not occurred. It also went on to claim that the congregation was a conspiracy to spread COVID-19 in India.

Interestingly, several Indian high courts have come down sharply against such coverage but this has inevitably been some months after the relentless coverage. So, though needed and salutary, much of the damage was done.¹⁵In many of these high court judgments, it was in fact observed that many of those arrested as a result of this Jamaat incident contracted coronavirus only after entering the country, which completely nullifies the claims of conspiracy of spreading the virus.

It is narratives such as these that gave further impetus to other news channels to invent and come up with newer ways to victimize the Muslim community. Another such brazen instance is that of a digital news channel/provider where the Supreme Court of India (SCI) was approached, compelling the Modi Gov’t to take notice and adjudicate against content. The programme indulged in hate speech by accusing the

¹³Our complaint also highlighted the judgement of the Bombay High Court which states that the government made TablighiJamaat members scapegoats.

¹⁴<https://cjp.org.in/cjp-complains-to-nbsa-against-zee-news-report-on-zameen-jihad/>

¹⁵<https://sabrangindia.in/article/bombay-hc-quashes-tablighi-jamaat-fir-says-trial-would-be-abuse-process-law>

Muslim community of “infiltrating” the civil services of the country by calling it “UPSC Jihad”. After the SCI’s initial injunction against the show, the Modi government was compelled to step in.¹⁶

In such instances, CJP also writes to other nodal authorities of the Central government on content that comes up on social media, that qualifies as hate speech. For instance, in the case of a YouTube which enjoys 6,23,000 subscribers, we acted. The description of the channel itself is both derogatory and discriminatory.¹⁷

Thus, CJP has been actively involved in pointing out such anti-minority hate speech in the news/electronic media/digital media and social media platforms wherever such toxic hatred is allowed to flourish deleteriously influencing people’s behaviour and attitudes.

Stigmatising love, attacking personal freedoms

Apart from newly enacted amendments to citizenship law, recent legislative moves that hit at Indian Muslims and other minorities, are laws that target inter-religious marriages, labelling these acts of ‘forceful conversion’ or ‘love jihad’¹⁸. This has been part of systemic ultra-right propaganda that has slowly crept in as legislation. These moves disregard Indian Constitutional provisions, ignoring the fact that two mature adults can fall in love defying religious backgrounds. Although, there has not been even one proven case of any such forceful conversions, many BJP-ruled states Uttar Pradesh (UP) is the first state ruled by the BJP that has implemented a law against it proposing imprisonment of 5 to 10 years! Formulating a law for an ‘offence’ that exists in propaganda and imagination is clearly a step towards legitimising selective religious targeting.

Mob attacks

The cow is a holy animal in Hindu religion but never has the “protection of cows” been taken to such an extreme so as to ‘justify targeted lynching of Muslim cattle traders’ under the garb of hitting at those who generally consume beef. Such attacks have grown since 2014. Instances of public lynching of Muslim men and boys has continued, while lynching has not been recognised as a separate offence under the penal code in India. Some of the widely covered cases of mob lynching Muslim men include the Tabrez Ansari case whereby a 22-year-old was killed by a mob as he was forced to chant Hindu slogans of ‘Jai Shree Ram’ (Hail Lord Ram). According to some reports, 113 people have been killed in incidents of mob

¹⁶ <https://cjp.org.in/sc-cuts-short-sudarshan-newss-diatribes-on-upsc-jihad/>

¹⁷ <https://cjp.org.in/cjp-moves-mib-against-hate-monger-pushendra-kulshreshtha/>

¹⁸ <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/love-jihad-women-freedom-the-love-jihad-spectre-7049722/>; <https://sabrangindia.in/article/governor-gives-assent-anti-love-jihad-ordinance>

lynching since 2015.¹⁹ Not all incidents of mob lynching are attributed to suspicion of carrying meat but some are also attributed to spreading of fake news over social media and lynching people over suspicion that they are kidnappers, or for refusing to chant Hindu religious slogans.

The brewing citizenship crisis: Religion, citizenship and law

The ruling government's anti-Muslim policy agenda was also evidenced when it passed the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019²⁰ which selectively enables non-Muslim communities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan to get easy access to citizenship by registration in India. CAA 2019 is violative of both Article 14 and 21 of the Indian Constitution. This is to be followed by preparing a National Register of Citizens (NRC) to identify citizens in accordance with the citizenship law, which process was to be preceded by the National Population register (NPR), both legislative and policy moves that will single out and target Indian Muslims.

Powers of determination (after a perusal of 'documents') lie with junior level bureaucrats. The documented test of citizenship is not just unparalleled and bizarre, but given that large sections of the Indian population are unlettered with no access to 'official documentation', the process will also hit other sections of the marginalised. With religion as a marker being brought in *for the first time in Indian Citizenship law*, by the 2019 amendment, and given propensity of influence and corruption in India's bureaucracy, it was clear who the easy targets of this process would be. The Assam experience has already taught us so much.

Hundreds of thousands protested these moves in the months of December 2019 and January 2020. The government has used the COVID 19 pandemic lockdown to crack down on protesters, many of whom young Muslims.²¹ The north-eastern state of Assam already has a population of a staggering 2.2 million and their families facing the spectre of statelessness²²; of this, a significant section are Indian Muslims. In fact Assam's NRC enumeration process that took place under the monitoring by the SCI saw mass impoverishment and a total of 1.9 million people excluded. Assam's dreaded detention camps²³ await anyone who under bureaucratic or judicial stigmatisation is declared 'foreigner.' The process is ridden with malafides and prejudice.

¹⁹<https://www.thequint.com/quintlab/lynching-in-india/>

²⁰The amendment facilitates easier routes to all (except Muslims) refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh for citizenship registration in India. The justification is that they face religious discrimination from 'Islamic countries.'

²¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0hU5MB1IOkM&t=1408s>

²²<https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/nrc-how-a-government-and-bureaucracy-betrayed-its-people/cid/1694949>

²³<https://cjp.org.in/assam-crisis-mha-reveals-shocking-figures/>



Background

The poor share that Muslims have got in the socio-economic share of India's development since Independence has been documented by the government.²⁴ This discrimination has worsened with the ascendance to power of hardline parties to power. A culture of impunity pervades with powerful perpetrators escaping the long arm of the law, especially when it comes to attacks against the minorities and India's marginalised sections. Today, this unfortunate trajectory has been brazenly legitimised in political thought and action.

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²⁴The findings of the Justice Rajinder Sachar Committee report *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India*, submitted in November 2006 to the prime minister, had some significant findings.