

From the Argumentative to the Intolerant Indian: Rule by Online Propaganda and the Weaponization of Hate Speech in Contemporary India

*Siddharth Narrain**

This essay argues that *online propaganda* is a useful term to understand, analyse and evaluate regulatory measures related to the weaponization of hate speech online in contemporary India. The term allows for a contextual account of the persuasive nature of the affordances and technological specificities of the transmission of information online by state, sub-state and private actors. Online propaganda in contemporary India relies on infrastructures and affordances of social media platforms, including end-to-end encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp, and is marked by the transmission of content both across social media platforms and across different forms of media such as print and broadcasting. The term online propaganda allows for understanding the impact of hate speech online within a wider environment of actions by both state and non-state actors, and is able to better account for the uneven and disproportionate impact of speech that is framed within the ethnonationalist and majoritarian ideology of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. Online propaganda is made especially effective through contemporary technologies that allow for virality of content and have sophisticated and subliminal means of persuasion enabled through the affordances and infrastructures provided by social media platforms such as Facebook.

When viewed from the lens of online propaganda, the weaponization of hate speech on Facebook in contemporary India can be understood as part of a series of connected, but not necessarily coordinated, actions by state, sub-state and private actors. These involve actors taking advantage of Facebook's affordances including its algorithmic curation of speech to incentivise and promote Hindu nationalist, and anti-minority views, while at the same time disincentivizing dissenting views using the threat of criminal and social sanctions, and the threat of retaliation by Hindu nationalist crowds and their various supporters. Online propaganda involves distorting and obfuscating events, helping to entrench both existing

* Lecturer, Adelaide Law School, University of Adelaide, Australia. The author wrote this essay under the Majority World Initiative of the Yale Law School Information Society Project.

religious, racial, and ethnic stereotypes but also distracting from the policy failures of the BJP government at the Center and the states, helping to justify its policies, and to shore up support among its supporters and the public in general for anti-democratic measures that have marked the last 10 years of BJP rule in India. These measures like selective raids by Central Government agencies targeting independent media organizations, civil society and human rights organizations and opposition political leaders, and the erosion of public accountability mechanisms such as the right to official data have gradually hollowed out democracy in India. Online propaganda has been crucial to entrenching the BJP and the Modi government's electoral success and continued popularity. Narendra Modi's rule by online propaganda can only be challenged if there is a concerted effort by opposition parties and civil society organizations to build a strong counter narrative.

I. Introduction

In the winter of 2020, just before the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic devastated India, the country witnessed large-scale protests against the Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-dominated government's decision to introduce the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Combined with the government's plans to establish a National Register of Citizens (NRC) and a National Population Register (NPR), this announcement led to widespread fear among the minority Muslim community that this discriminatory measure would erode their status as equal citizens.¹ The CAA will enable the Indian government to regularise non-Muslim refugees from three Muslim majority countries in South Asia India—Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. This unprecedented distinction between Muslims and non-Muslim refugees was challenged as being discriminatory in multiple High Courts, with the matter now pending before the Supreme Court.

At the time, Muslim organizations and other secular-minded Indians took to the streets to protest the government's decision. One of the biggest sites of anti CAA-NPR-NRC protests was Shaheen Bagh, an otherwise non-descript locality in Southeast Delhi, where a large number of Muslim women, many of whom had never been politically active before, gathered peacefully in thousands, braving the extreme winter cold. Shaheen Bagh soon became the visible face of these protests and a sign of hope with those disillusioned with Prime Minister Modi and the BJP's

¹ See, generally, SHAHEEN BAGH AND THE IDEA OF INDIA: WRITINGS ON A MOVEMENT FOR JUSTICE, LIBERTY AND EQUALITY (Seema Mustaha, ed., 2020). See *Id.* at 34-35, for a timeline of events leading up to the anti-CAA-NCR-NPR protests.

ethno-nationalist policies. It was the first time that ordinary Muslims had come out to the streets, protesting the Hindu-nationalist BJP government's policies.

Since Modi came to power in a landslide electoral verdict in 2014, India has gradually moved from being a flawed but vibrant democracy to what political commentators have termed as an ethnic democracy.² This version of democracy has been shaped by New Hindutva³ – a muscular and deeply intolerant version of Hindutva, the political and cultural worldview that draws on a Hindu majoritarian stream of Indian nationalist thought. In this decade dominated by Modi, India's place in several prominent global rankings has fallen sharply, indicating how the world's largest democracy has undergone serious democratic backsliding.⁴ The Democracy Index prepared by the Economist Intelligence Unit labelled India a "flawed democracy."⁵ Freedom House, the U.S. non-profit, organization reclassified India from "free democracy" to "a partially free democracy."⁶ Similarly, the Sweden-based V-Dem Institute classified India as an "electoral autocracy."⁷

Viewed within this political context and given the mass participation of ordinary Muslims citizens, the anti-CAA-NPR-NRC protests were an important symbol of resistance for civil society organizations. Images of ordinary Muslims holding the Indian flag, singing the Indian national anthem, and claiming their stake as equal citizens challenged the commonly held insinuations by Hindu nationalists that the allegiance of Muslims to India was suspect. These allegations take different forms, sometimes harping on Muslims as being part of a worldwide

² CHRISTOPHER JAFFRELOT, *MODI'S INDIA: HINDU NATIONALISM AND THE RISE OF ETHNIC DEMOCRACY* (Cynthia Schoch, trans., 2021).

³ Thomas Blom Hansen & Srirupa Roy, *What Is New About "New Hindutva,"* in *SAFFRON REPUBLIC: HINDU NATIONALISM AND STATE POWER IN INDIA 1* (Thomas Blom Hansen & Srirupa Roy, eds., 2022).

⁴ Anisha Dutta, *India Secretly Works to Preserve Reputation on Global Democracy Index*, *GUARDIAN*, Jun. 22, 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/22/india-democracy-index-flawed-preserve-reputation-narendra-modi>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ The Indian government's dismissal of the country's downward spiral in international democracy as being biased is telling. While the Indian government has always been prickly when it comes to criticism from international quarters, reactions by the External Affairs Ministry have been increasingly marked by sharp and assertive reactions that question the motives of 'Western organizations' and discourse and paradigms of knowledge including that of universal human rights that are based on 'Western values' and 'colonial attitudes'. See, e.g., India's response to its downgrading on democracy indices that I have referred to earlier in this paper. Dutta, *supra* note 4. See also, Alex Gerstenhaber, *From Delhi with Love: Dr Jaishankar's Hegemonic Challenge and the Indian Vision for World Order*, *HARV. INT'L REV.* (2023), at <https://hir.harvard.edu/from-delhi-with-love-dr-jaishankars-hegemonic-challenge-and-the-indian-vision-for-world-order/>.

community of those believing in Islam, and sometimes alleging that Muslims secretly supported Pakistan over India, often during India-Pakistan cricket matches. These crude stereotypes and insinuations commonly draw upon differences in food and habits, ignoring a rich history of syncretic traditions and examples of accommodation between the two communities in the subcontinent. Anti-Muslim vilification and hate speech online often portray Muslims as unclean, dangerous and unruly, terrorists, Pakistan-sympathisers, anti-national, predatory and violent. An example of this kind of vilification was seen in the form of propaganda⁸ that included hate speech targeting Muslims during the COVID-19 pandemic where social media was rife with imaginary examples of Muslims spitting into food to intentionally spread the virus and other such vilification.⁹

Anti-Muslim propaganda by Hindu nationalists draws on commonly held tropes and the traumatic history of Partition in the subcontinent, portraying Hindus as being subject to domination by Muslim rulers such as the Mughals who were foreigners and invaders. In its crudest form, anti-Muslim online hate speech has been weaponised by Hindu nationalists to call for the subjugation of Muslims – “to show them their place.”¹⁰ Hindu nationalist propaganda claims that India, or Bharat which is their preferred term, in this period of new Hindutva, is not only being decolonized from British colonial influence but from the influence of hundreds of years of rule by Muslim rulers. A popular Hindu nationalist legal commentator, claiming to draw on postcolonial scholarship, has gone so far as to make the questionable claim that Islamic rule in India was a form of settler colonialism.¹¹

Even though opposition political parties were wary of openly supporting or joining the anti-CAA-NRC-NPR protests, for fear of being targeted by the BJP as being “anti-Hindu”, many prominent artists, human rights activists and civil society organizations rallied behind these protests. Farmers groups, many of whom were part of the minority Sikh community, who were disillusioned with the government’s farming laws supported these protests. As these protests gained traction across the country they began to be covered extensively by the international media. Rattled by the popularity of these protests, and the negative publicity that

⁸ See, generally, EDWARD BERNAYS, PROPAGANDA (2005). For an account of the shifting use of the term propaganda from a more neutral term to one with negative connotations especially in the United States and during the Cold War period, see Melba Cuddy-Keane, Adam Hammond, & Alexandra Peat, *Propaganda*, IN MODERNISM: KEYWORDS 17-76 (1st ed., 2014).

⁹ CAMPAIGN AGAINST HATE SPEECH, WAGES OF HATE: JOURNALISM IN DARK TIMES (2020).

¹⁰ See, generally, RITUMBRA MANUVIE ET AL., LONDON STORY, PREACHERS OF HATE (2022); Fathima Nizaruddin, *Role of Public WhatsApp Groups Within the Hindutva Ecosystem of Hate and Narratives of “CoronaJihad,”* 15 INT’L J. COMM. 1102 (2021).

¹¹ See J SAI DEEPAK, INDIA THAT IS BHARAT: COLONIALITY, CIVILISATION, CONSTITUTION (2021).

followed, top BJP politicians, from Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah onwards, began vilifying the protestors, insinuating that they were part of a conspiracy to defame the government at a time when the then U.S. President Donald Trump was scheduled to visit the country.¹²

BJP party members and ministers had begun counter mobilizing, portraying the protestors as anti-national elements, troublemakers, and as inciting conflict between Hindus and Muslims. These statements reached an especially virulent pitch during the lead up to the Delhi Assembly elections, a state ruled by the opposition Aam Admi Party (AAP) led by the charismatic Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. Desperate to regain power in Delhi, BJP leaders resorted to vilifying the peaceful anti-CAA-NPR-NRC protestors. Public statements attacking these protestors included Prime Minister Modi, the Home Minister Amit Shah, Chief Minister of India's most populous state Uttar Pradesh, and the then Union Minister for Central Minister for Finance and Corporate Affairs Anurag Thakur.¹³ Thakur went as far as to provoke his audiences at speeches leading up to the Delhi Assembly elections with the slogan, "*desh ke gaddaron ko – goli maaron saalon ko*" (shoot the traitors of the country).¹⁴

Emboldened by these statements by BJP leaders, prominent social media influencers who were aligned with the ethno-nationalist worldview of the BJP began to vilify the anti-CAA-NRC-NPR protestors. Painting these peaceful protestors as anti-national and troublemakers, these influencers urged their followers to take to the streets and counter mobilize Hindu nationalist influencers on social media platforms. While politicians are also influencers in their own right, these influencers may not be formally part of the BJP but are committed to its Hindu nationalist worldview.¹⁵ According to a recent study, there are approximately nineteen to twenty thousand Indian influencers active on social media.¹⁶ Their reach varies from the tens of thousands to the hundreds, and they form an important bridge between the formal machinery of the BJP and their audience.¹⁷ They allow the BJP to reach audiences that are very specific and not

¹² JUSTICE MADAN B. LOKUR ET AL., CONSTITUTIONAL CONDUCT GROUP (CCG), UNCERTAIN JUSTICE: A CITIZENS COMMITTEE REPORT ON THE NORTH EAST DELHI VIOLENCE (2020).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ Archis Chowdhury, *Fact Check: Did Union Minister Anurag Thakur Raise Goli Maaron Slogan?*, BOOMLIVE.IN, Mar. 2, 2020, at <https://www.boomlive.in/fake-news/fact-check-did-union-minister-anurag-thakur-raise-goli-marro-slogan-7087>.

¹⁵ Joyojeet Pal, *Why 'influencers' now play a crucial role in setting political agendas*, MEDIA RUMBLE (Dec. 19, 2023) at <https://shows.acast.com/the-media-rumble-podcast/episodes/tmr-2023-why-influencers-now-play-a-crucial-role-in-setting->.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

necessarily politics-driven (techies, hearing impaired persons, professional groups, etc.) have begun to have a disproportionate impact on public opinion.¹⁸

At the time of the anti-CAA-NCR-NPR protests, prominent Hindu nationalist influencers urged their followers to counter-mobilize to use Facebook Live feeds and other platforms including WhatsApp and Telegram to call for a united Hindu response to these protests.¹⁹ Taking their cue from statements by the leadership of the BJP and its party members, these influencers highlighted the inconvenience to the public caused by these protestors who had blocked or occupied parts of the road.²⁰ Online propaganda by Hindu nationalist influencers formed an important part of the wider set of factors that eventually led to communal riots between Hindus and Muslims in February 2020. One of crucial events leading up to these riots was an incendiary speech on February 23 by the former BJP member of the Delhi Legislative Assembly Kapil Mishra at Maujpur. Mishra addressed a crowd of Hindu nationalist supporters who had been mobilized through Facebook live videos and other social media platforms who had gathered near Jaffrabad in Northeast Delhi, where anti-CAA-NRC-NPR protestors had occupied and blocked part of the road.²¹ Within hours of Mishra's provocative speech and subsequent tweets threatening to clear the roads in Jaffrabad and Chandbag of the anti-CAA-NRC-NPR protestors, riots broke out between Hindus and Muslims in Northeast Delhi. The riots continued until February 29, resulting in the death of 53 persons, the majority of whom were Muslims.²²

Despite questions by the Delhi High Court, the Union Home Ministry-controlled Delhi police did not take any action to prosecute Mishra and other BJP members for their provocative statements leading up to the Delhi riots. Instead, drawing upon a larger narrative by Hindu nationalists, the Delhi police prosecuted several Muslim students, activists and others who participated in the anti-CAA-NCR-NPR protests. According to their version of events, mirrored by Hindu nationalist online propaganda, the Delhi riots were a result of a "conspiracy" by anti-CAA-NCR-NPR protestors to embarrass the Modi government at a time when

¹⁸ See, generally, KUNAL PUROHIT, H-POP: THE SECRETIVE WORLD OF HINDUTVA POP STARS (2023); Pal, *supra* note 15.

¹⁹ Sagar, *Delhi Violence Unmasked*, CARAVAN, Mar. 1, 2021, at <https://caravanmagazine.in/tag/delhi-violence-unmasked> [hereinafter "*Violence Unmasked*"]; Fathima Nizaruddin, *Institutionalized Riot Networks in India and Mobile Instant Messaging Platforms*, 9(1-2) ASIASCAP: DIGITAL ASIA 71 (2022).

²⁰ Sagar, *supra* note 19.

²¹ *Id.*

²² Lokur et al., *supra* note 12, at 65.

Trump was visiting the country.²³ This version of events was reflected in fact-finding reports (a form of documentation that has its roots in the human rights and civil liberties movement in India) by pro-government and Hindu nationalist organizations claiming to represent civil society.²⁴

The BJP and its Hindu nationalist supporters are not the only ones accused of being responsible for the Delhi riots. Even though law and order in Delhi is a domain of the Union government, the AAP government in Delhi has been criticised by civil society organizations for not doing enough to effectively control the violence at the time.²⁵ In a belated attempt to address the issue, the Delhi Legislative Assembly constituted a committee to investigate the causes of violence and recommend measures to prevent such an event from taking place in the future. As part of its mandate, the committee summoned Facebook's India representatives to testify before it. After a legal battle before the Supreme Court, in November 2020, the then-Head of Facebook's Public Policy Team in India, Shivnath Thukral, testified before the committee. His testimony was livestreamed and is available on YouTube. However, Thukral refused to answer any questions specific to the Delhi riots, instead answering in vague generalities about how Facebook's measures in India are tailored to the local context.²⁶

While Facebook is not the only platform on which anti-Muslim hate speech and Hindu nationalist propaganda have been rife, it is the only platform that set up an independent audit to evaluate its content regulation policies in India. In 2020, Meta commissioned Human Rights Impact Assessment (HRIA) by the United States based law firm Foley Hoag LLP in the wake of criticism from human rights and digital activists.²⁷ However, Meta has refused to release the full contents of the report, only releasing selective parts that focus on the efforts that Facebook has

²³ Tarique Anwar, *Why Police Report Doesn't Mention Kapil Mishra's Speech in Delhi Riots Chargesheet*, NEWSCLICK, Mar. 27, 2021, at <https://www.newsclick.in/Why-Police-Report-Doesn%E2%80%99t-Mention-Kapil-Mishra%E2%80%99s-Speech-in-Delhi-Riots-Chargesheet>; Seemi Pasha, *Delhi Police Chargesheet Misses Key Fact: Riots Killed the Anti-CAA Protest*, WIRE, June 18, 2020, at <https://thewire.in/rights/delhi-police-chargesheet-riot-media-coverage>.

²⁴ N D Jayaprakash, *Delhi Riots 2020: A Critique of Two Purported Fact-Finding Reports*, WIRE, July 6, 2020, at <https://thewire.in/communalism/delhi-riots-2020-a-critique-of-two-purported-fact-finding-reports>.

²⁵ *Delhi riots: AAP criticised for focusing on optics; women's delegation meets Kejriwal*, WIRE, Feb. 26, 2020, <https://thewire.in/communalism/delhi-riots-aap-arvind-kejriwal>.

²⁶ Delhi Assembly Television, *Live Proceedings of Delhi Assembly Peace and Harmony Committee*, YouTube, Nov. 18, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xODKyEjzIVI>.

²⁷ META, HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT (July 2022), at https://about.fb.com/wpcontent/uploads/2022/07/Meta_Human-Rights-Report-July-2022.pdf.

taken to regulate content on the platform.²⁸ According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Meta fears that any overt account of the weaponization of hate speech on Facebook and Hindu nationalist propaganda online will lead to a backlash from Hindu nationalist crowds against its employees and external researchers in India involved in the reporting process, endangering their safety.²⁹

This account of Facebook's motives is consistent with earlier reports that Meta has been reluctant to openly call out Hindu nationalist propaganda on its platform given the importance of the Indian market.³⁰ Facebook's own stake in the Indian market and its commitment to tackling Hindu nationalist hate speech online was the subject of much controversy since Modi came to power in 2014. Mark Zuckerberg, in a visit to India soon after Modi's election victory, was all praise for the Indian government's Digital India initiative while expressing Meta's interests in partnering with the government.³¹ In 2020, then--CEO Ankhil Das refused to allow its internal teams to apply Facebook's community standards to regulate anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya hate speech on its platform by the BJP member of the Telangana Legislative Assembly, T. Raja Singh, and other Hindu nationalist influencers.³² The ensuing controversy led to Das' resignation and change in Facebook's leadership. These reports on Facebook's response (or lack of) to Hindu

²⁸ Newley Purnell, *Meta Officials Cite Security Concerns for Failing to Release Full India Hate-Speech Study; Executives at the Facebook Parent Privately Shared with Rights Groups Their Disappointment about the Sparse Report, According to Audio Recordings*, WALL ST. J., Sept. 28, 2022, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/meta-officials-cite-security-concerns-for-failing-to-release-details-of-india-hate-speech-study-11664370857>.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ India now has the largest number of users for three of Meta's platforms – Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, far more than users in the United States. *Leading countries based on Facebook audience size as of January 2023*, at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/268136/top-15-countries-based-on-number-of-facebook-users/>. Last visited Jan. 22, 2024; Harry Rollason, *What Countries are the Biggest WhatsApp Users?*, VERINT.COM, Dec. 22, 2021, at <https://www.verint.com/blog/what-countries-are-the-biggest-whatsapp-users/>; *Leading countries based on Instagram audience as of January 2023*, at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/578364/countries-with-most-instagram-users/> (last visited Jan. 22, 2024).

³¹ Anandita Singh Mankotia, *Facebook Chief Mark Zuckerberg Meets PM Narendra Modi & IT Minister, Agrees to Partner Govt in NOFN Project*, ECON. TIMES, Oct. 11, 2014, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/facebook-chief-mark-zuckerberg-meets-pm-narendra-modi-it-minister-agrees-to-partner-govt-in-nofn-project/articleshow/44776692.cms?from=mdr>.

³² Newley Purnell & Jeff Horwitz, *Facebook's Hate-Speech Rules Collide With Indian Politics*, WALL ST. J., Aug. 14, 2020, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-hate-speech-india-politics-muslim-hindu-modi-zuckerberg-11597423346>.

nationalist propaganda and hate speech online has been corroborated by subsequent accounts by whistleblower Sophie Zhang.³³

However, despite these changes and the increasing internal disquiet among many Facebook employees,³⁴ Meta is unlikely to take overt action to curb Hindu nationalist propaganda online, given the fear of a backlash from Hindu nationalist crowds and the massive stakes that Meta has in the Indian market. Moreover, the Indian government has sent global social media platforms a strong message through constant threats of greater regulation. These threats have now been concretized through a slew of laws that have been proposed or enacted to enable greater government control over the media including social media platforms.³⁵ Another example of the Indian government's attempts at bullying social media platforms in the country was its threat to jail employees of Facebook, WhatsApp and X (formerly Twitter) for allowing criticism of its policies on their platforms during the farmers' protests in 2021.³⁶ The Indian government's actions targeting social media platforms are attempts at discouraging counter-propaganda online and ensuring that these platforms think twice before taking strong measures such as deplatforming individual users or organizations to curb Hindu nationalist propaganda online.

³³ *Whistleblower Says BJP MP Involved in Fake Engagement Network on Facebook, Accuses Company of Not Acting*, DECCAN HERALD, June 6, 2022, <https://www.deccanherald.com/business/business-news/whistleblower-says-bjp-mp-involved-in-fake-engagement-network-on-facebook-accuses-company-of-not-acting-1115791.html>.

³⁴ *Facebook Failed to Curb Misinformation, Hate Speech in India, Leaked Documents Show*, ABC.NEWS, Oct. 25, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-25/facebook-selective-curb-hate-speech-misinformation-india/100564484>.

³⁵ These include *The Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code Amendment Rules, 2023* and the proposed *Digital India Act* drafted by the Union Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology in 2023 and the proposed *Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill* drafted by the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in 2023.

³⁶ Jeff Horwitz & Newley Purnell, *India Threatens Jail for Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter Employees; Country Flexes New Powers over Big Platforms While Companies Are Counting on World's Second-Largest Population for Growth*, WALL ST. J., Mar. 5, 2021, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/india-threatens-jail-for-facebook-whatsapp-and-twitter-employees-11614964542>.

II. Online Propaganda and the Weaponization of Hate Speech Online in Modi's India

A recent commentary on the BJP's propaganda machinery, written in the lead up to the inauguration of the Ram temple at Ayodhya, is telling:

[Y]et it is plain that election mode is not reserved by the BJP for election time only. It appears to be an always-on mode, an ever-present bias towards celebration, overstatement and reiteration of claims that are sought to be turned into perceived reality by a party that is as flush with funds and media support as the others are devoid of it. The danger is that the party begins to believe its own hype and the government's energies are more towards storytelling and to that extent less towards problem-solving. Indeed, the only problem that the party probably sees is that the story has to be fixed...³⁷

For the BJP and its Hindu nationalist supporters, storytelling is more important than the record of the government. Much of the party's efforts have gone into 'fixing' or shaping the story. BJP rule under the leadership of Modi has perfected the art of rule by propaganda. The BJP has successfully harnessed contemporary technological affordances of social media platforms to mobilize public opinion, build a strong narrative touting its successes, and promote its political project steeped in Hindu nationalist ideology. This form of propaganda or "online propaganda" is distinct from earlier forms of state propaganda in India that were dependent on state machinery and institutions.³⁸ Online propaganda in the Indian context straddles online and offline media,³⁹ moves across social media platforms, moves through end-to-end encrypted platforms, and shared by state, sub-state and private actors. Online propaganda is made especially effective through contemporary technologies that allow for virality of content and have sophisticated and subliminal means of persuasion enabled through the affordances and infrastructures provided by social media platforms such as Facebook. These include

³⁷ Jagadeesh Rattanani, *New Year, New Temple, Old Problems*, DECCAN HERALD (Jan. 3, 2024).

³⁸ For an account of propaganda and the role of the Films Division of India during the Emergency declared by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, see Avijit Mukul Kishore, *You've Told Me That Three Times Now': Propaganda/anti-propaganda in the Films Division India Documentary, 1965-75*, 7(2) MOVING IMAGE REV. & ART J. 223-35 (2018).

³⁹ For accounts of the relationship between online media platforms and older forms of media, see ASWIN PUNATHAMBEKAR & SRIRAM MOHAN, *GLOBAL DIGITAL CULTURES: PERSPECTIVES FROM SOUTH ASIA* 12 (2019) 12. See also SHAKUNTALA BANAJI & RAMNATH BHAT, *SOCIAL MEDIA AND HATE* 81 (2022) 81; *ACTS OF MEDIA: LAW AND MEDIA IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA* (Siddharth Narain ed., 2022).

the ability for these actors to manipulate virality through coordinated actions on platforms such as Facebook that take advantage of economies of scale provided through, for example, the use of bots and other computational technologies.⁴⁰

When viewed through the lens of online propaganda, the weaponization of hate speech on online platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram in contemporary India can be understood as part of a series of connected, but not necessarily coordinated, actions by state, sub-state and private actors. These actions involve these actors taking advantage of affordances of contemporary social media platforms including their algorithmic curation of speech to incentivise and promote Hindu nationalist views. Online propaganda by the BJP and its Hindu nationalist supporters also disincentivize dissenting views using the threat of criminal and social sanctions and retaliation by Hindu nationalist crowds. As I have already pointed out, these supporters include online influencers who have large audiences ranging from the thousands to millions, and are not as bound to the minimal norms of online civility as ministers and other formal members of the BJP.⁴¹

Online propaganda by Hindu nationalists in contemporary India involves distorting and obfuscating events, helping to both entrench existing religious, racial, and ethnic stereotypes but also distract from the policy failures of the BJP government at the central and state levels. Online propaganda is not limited to social media and includes private news broadcasters (many of whom are pro-government), pro-government news anchors with a considerable presence on social media,⁴² state owned radio, and Hindu nationalist propaganda films masquerading as art.⁴³ Online propaganda has played a major role in justifying the BJP government's policies and shoring up support among its supporters and the public in general for anti-democratic measures that have marked the last ten years of its rule in India. These measures include selective raids by Central Government agencies such as the Enforcement Directorate, which has targeted independent media organizations, civil society and human rights organizations,⁴⁴ and leaders of

⁴⁰ COMPUTATIONAL PROPAGANDA: POLITICAL PARTIES, POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL MANIPULATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA (Samuel C. Woolley & Philipp N. Howard eds., 2018).

⁴¹ Pal, *supra* note 15; PUROHIT, *supra* note 18.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ The most prominent of these were Vivek Agnihotri's *The Kashmir Files* (2022), a one sided jingoistic portrayal of politics and history of political developments in Kashmir and Sudipto Sen's *The Kerala Story* (2023) about 'love jihad' or allegations of a concerted effort by Muslim men to 'abduct', manipulate and marry Hindu women.

⁴⁴ Rahul Mukherji & Aditya Shrivastava, *Civil Society under Siege, in India*, THE HINDU, Jan. 5, 2024, at <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/civil-society-under-siege-in-india/article67706998.ece>.

opposition political parties.⁴⁵ Civil society organizations and individuals who have questioned the government's policies have been ruthlessly silenced using seemingly unrelated strong-arm tactics like charging them with non-payment of taxes or violations of the foreign contributions law (FCRA).⁴⁶ These are enabled by the gradual erosion of public accountability mechanisms and institutional checks on executive power.⁴⁷

These measures have been accompanied by the BJP government's obfuscation, embargo,⁴⁸ and manipulation of routine government statistics⁴⁹ and diluting citizens' right to information as guaranteed by the Right to Information Act and rules.⁵⁰ Other measures include states rewriting history textbooks through a Hindu nationalist lens, squashing any form of dissent within the BJP, and the erosion of long-standing Parliamentary norms and conventions. Taken as a whole, these measures have helped entrench rule by propaganda in Modi's India and build a grand narrative of Hindu unity, Bharat awakening, the emergence of an assertive and self-reliant nation and *vishwa guru* (guru of the world) taking its rightful place in the world.⁵¹ This narrative has no space for dissent, and naysayers are quickly termed "sickular" (a play on secular), "anti-national," "urban Naxals,"⁵² "tukde tukde gang" (intent on breaking the country into pieces), elite or Westernised, anti-Hindu and Muslim or minority appeasers.

⁴⁵ P Raman, *The Pre-election Sweep is the Central Agencies' Latest Trick against Opposition Leaders*, WIRE, Nov. 9, 2023, at <https://thewire.in/politics/pre-election-swoop-central-agencies-latest-trick-opposition-leaders>.

⁴⁶ ARVIND NARRAIN, *INDIA'S UNDECLARED EMERGENCY: CONSTITUTIONALISM AND THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE* (2022).

⁴⁷ Tarunabh Khaitan, *Killing a Constitution with a Thousand Cuts: Executive Aggrandizement and Party-State Fusion in India*, 14 L. & ETH. HUM. RTS. 49 (2020).

⁴⁸ See e.g., Madhur Singh, *Incalculable Tragedy: We May Never Know the Truth about India's Covid Numbers*, ASIAGLOBAL ONLINE, May 19, 2021, at <https://www.asiaglobalonline.hku.hk/incalculable-tragedy-we-may-never-know-truth-about-indias-covid-19-numbers>.

⁴⁹ *108 Economists, Social Scientists Slam Modi Govt for Tweaking Data*, NEWSCLICK, Mar. 15, 2019, at <https://www.newsclick.in/108-economists-social-scientists-slam-modi-govt-tweaking-data>.

⁵⁰ DHNS, *Restore RTI Act to its Former Glory*, Editorial, DECCAN HERALD, Oct. 23, 2023 at <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/editorial/restore-rti-act-to-its-former-glory-2737577> (last visited Jan. 22, 2024).

⁵¹ Express News Service, *India as "Vishwa Guru": As G20 Summit Ends, PM Modi's Vision of India's Place in the World in Sharper Focus*, INDIAN EXPRESS, Sept. 17, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/india-vishwa-guru-g20-summit-pm-modi-vision-world-8933278/>.

⁵² Naxals are members of the militantly left and violent Naxalite movement that has challenged state authority with the help of popular support in parts of central and eastern India.

III. Conclusion

The self-confident and assertive Bharat that Modi has shepherded in over the last decade is symbolised by the redesign of Delhi's iconic Central Vista in a bid to usher in an aesthetic that reflects the spirit of the times.⁵³ The Central Vista has been redesigned to demolish several historically significant buildings and make way for the redesigned area that includes a new Parliament building. When the national emblem, the Ashoka pillar with the four lions, was unveiled on top of the new Parliament building, it sparked a controversy. Critics pointed out that the original majestic, graceful and dignified image of the lions had been replaced by versions that looked menacing, muscular and aggressive.⁵⁴ This change in the portrayal of these lions is an apt metaphor for Modi and the BJP's vision for India/Bharat. It is the story of this change that the BJP has been able to tell skilfully, using traditional and online media, an efficient party machinery, and strong-arm and underhanded tactics to prevent any other popular alternative from emerging, keeping the opposition parties on the backfoot, and building a solid electoral base that has coalesced over its Hindu nationalist worldview. Hindu nationalist propaganda online has been crucial to these developments.

As we approach the 2024 general elections, the BJP's online propaganda is expected to shift to top gear.

Modi's inauguration of the Ram temple at Ayodhya in January 2024, on the site where the Babri Masjid was illegally demolished in 1992 by Hindu nationalist crowds, is expected to give the government and Modi enormous political mileage leading up to the general elections. The inauguration of the temple, when the idol of Rama will be consecrated by Hindu priests, has been touted by the BJP as one of the Modi government's biggest achievements and the fulfillment of a key pledge in its electoral manifesto. The temple is expected to attract millions of Hindu visitors, and the inauguration guest list includes the top central and state BJP leadership, social media influencers and many foreign dignitaries.⁵⁵

⁵³ Daniel Brook, *Narendra Modi's New New India*, New Yorker, Sept. 7, 2023, at <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/narendra-modis-new-new-delhi>.

⁵⁴ *Opposition, activists object to muscular, aggressive lions- in national emblem*, HINDU, July 12, 2022, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/opposition-activists-object-to-muscular-aggressive-lions-in-national-emblem/article65630798.ece>.

⁵⁵ Sagarika Ghosh, *In Rama's Name: The Politics of Spectacle*, DECCAN HERALD, Jan. 9, 2024, at <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/the-politics-of-spectacle-2840517>.

Modi and the top leadership of the BJP have carefully curated the tone and messaging around this event by conducting training sessions for BJP leaders to ensure that they are speaking in unison.⁵⁶ The Hindu nationalist propaganda machinery has been active, urging Hindus across the country to mark the occasion in their neighborhood temples. News channels have been providing extensive coverage to the preparations leading up to the event. Even opposition-ruled states like the India National Congress (Congress)-ruled Karnataka government, fearful that they will be seen as anti-Hindu, have directed state-run temples to offer a pooja (devotional ceremony) to mark the occasion.⁵⁷ Ironically, the BJP's minority wing is organising the lighting of diyas (lamps) in mosques and dargahs (sufi places of worship) across the country to mark the event.⁵⁸ Hindu nationalist propaganda on the inauguration of the temple is bound to burnish Modi's carefully cultivated image as a sagely figure who, in the words of a political commentator, "enjoys divine sanction from the Hindu pantheon."⁵⁹

Modi's rule by propaganda has had devastating consequences for democracy and the polity in India. While it is impossible to generalize in a country as large and diverse as India, the Indian polity has undergone a visible shift in the last decade. From being what Amartya Sen famously described as the "argumentative Indian,"⁶⁰ – loquacious, raucous, opinionated, questioning and tolerant with a long tradition of "public arguments and argumentative heterodoxy"⁶¹ – the citizen of Modi's India has been transformed into the "intolerant Indian," their worldview shaped by Hindu nationalist propaganda. It is a chest-thumping, overconfident, assertive Indian, full of hubris and civilizational pride, celebrating the story of a country that has rediscovered its pride and unleashed its economic and technological potential and talent. It is a country that will take its rightful place on the world stage, throwing away the legacy of British colonial rule and that by Muslim leaders. In this version of India, Hindu nationalists have weaponized hate speech online to

⁵⁶ Amrita Madhukalya, *Ahead of Ram Temple Consecration, BJP Trains Party Leaders to Tackle Opposition Barbs*, DECCAN HERALD, Jan. 10, 2024, at <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/ahead-of-ram-temple-consecration-bjp-trains-party-leaders-to-tackle-opposition-barbs-2841943>.

⁵⁷ K Akram, *In Karnataka BJP Claims Sweet Victory as Congress Govt Announces Prayers to Mark Consecration*, INDIAN EXPRESS, Jan. 9, 2024, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/karnataka-bjp-congress-siddaramaiah-ram-temple-9100631/>.

⁵⁸ Piyush Mishra, *BJP to Light Diyas at 1,200 Mosques Across India Before Ram Mandir Inauguration*, INDIA TODAY, Jan. 9, 2024, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/ram-mandir-ayodhya-inauguration-bjp-minority-wing-light-diyas-mosques-dargahs-2486468-2024-01-09>.

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ AMARTYA SEN, *THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN: WRITINGS ON INDIAN HISTORY, CULTURE AND IDENTITY* 3-33 (2005).

⁶¹ *Id.* at 13.

target Muslims and other minorities, crush any form of dissent, silence critical voices, and disparage opposition parties and a political alternative to their narrative. Hindu nationalists have mobilized crowds both online and offline, through online propaganda to create a narrative of Hindu unity and pride (equated with Indic civilization pride) that has resonated with many sections of Indian society.

Any attempt to combat this narrative through counter-propaganda will not be easy. The Congress party has won important electoral victories in the key states of Karnataka and Telangana. They have also been part of an effort to cobble together the INDIA bloc, a disparate coalition of opposition parties with very different ideological persuasions brought together by the existential threat posed by the BJP's strong-arm tactics and Modi's seemingly undiminished popularity.⁶² If the positive public response to Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra (Unite India March) is any indication, the Opposition is on the right track. Key to their electoral viability however is their ability to envisage a coherent counter-narrative and leverage the affordances of social media and traditional media to effectively counter Hindu nationalist propaganda online.

IV. Postscript

Following the 2024 election results, the BJP led by Modi has kept power for a third consecutive term. However, the BJP suffered substantial losses in the elections, and will now depend on coalition partners to pass legislation in Parliament. The election results have diminished Modi's aura of invincibility and shown the limits of the BJP's propaganda machine. The opposition I.N.D.I.A. alliance's robust performance, despite the unequal footing on which it was contesting, is a remarkable achievement. The opposition parties were successful in building a strong counternarrative around rising economic inequality and unemployment. They capitalised on widespread unease over another massive mandate for Modi and the BJP that could have resulted in a two-third majority and allowed for changes to fundamental aspects of the Indian Constitution such as affirmative action through reservations in employment and education for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Besides the opposition parties, key actors during this election campaign included gutsy independent journalists and media organizations, online influencers, civil society actors, and human rights activists, many of whom

⁶² *PM Modi Retains 'World's Most Popular Global Leader' Position: Report*, LIVEMINT, Sept. 16, 2023, at <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/pm-modi-retains-world-s-most-popular-global-leader-position-report-11694836930418.html>.

effectively utilized social media platforms to counter the BJP's propaganda.⁶³ The results of the elections have emboldened the voices of those opposed to Modi's brand of Hindu nationalist politics, and laid the foundation for strengthening the role of democratic institutions such as the Parliament, the judiciary and the mainstream media.

⁶³ Prominent among these were the political satirist Dhruv Rathee and the journalist Ravish Kumar, both of whom effectively used social media platforms such as X, YouTube and WhatsApp to counter the BJP's formidable propaganda machine during the election campaign.