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ABSTRACT: India’s diverse and complex media environment reflects the wide range of linguistic, social, political, and economic differences encompassed by the country’s population. A recent Islamophobic trend in the Indian media environment—the spread of fake news and incendiary narratives in online media against Muslims—has led to social, religious, political polarization, and recurrent violence against Muslims. It seems that Islamophobia is holding sway in the entire country and a certain mentality has developed. If we analyze contemporary Indian society, it is apparent that every layer of the society is in the grip of deep Islamophobia. The dissemination of Islamophobic information in media, particularly social media, often peddled by political actors and their supporters to further xenophobic politics, has in recent years emerged as a formidable challenge that threatens to tear apart the social fabric of India. This chapter will examine the Islamophobic media coverage in India, the deliberate and carefully designed dissemination of factually inaccurate narratives, signs of Islamophobia, and the government’s stance on this issue.

KEYWORDS: Fake News, Indian Media, Social Media, Factually Inaccurate Narrative, Islamophobia

INTRODUCTION

Muslims constitute 14.2 percent of the Indian population compared with a 79.8 percent Hindu population (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner 2011). Misinterpretation of medieval history, divide and rule policy of the then British government in India, subsequent social and political developments during the 19th and 20th centuries, the partition of the country, and communal-fascist agenda of hate all left an indelible impact on the Hindu–Muslim relations in India. All these factors have contributed to making the Muslims the most vulnerable, comfortably ignored, and deliberately discriminated community in India. They are often represented as “unclean,” “overpopulating,” “backward,” “unpatriotic,” “scheming,” “invaders,” and “outsiders” (Kaul 2020).

The history of hate and violence against Muslims in India is not new but after Narendra Modi became Prime Minister, the wave of Islamophobia has greatly intensified; and the radical Hindu groups have also got emboldened. Creating and sustaining Islamophobia has now become a profitable and rewarding venture. The political dispensation participates in the exercise and seems to encourage others, the administrative machinery of the State does not consider it a threat to the national security and integrity of the country, hence it gets normalized. Even the political leaders holding constitutional positions are engaged in constructing an Islamophobic narrative. After all, this Islamophobia has been one of the most important factors responsible for the
spectacular rise of the rightist political party in power in the center since 2014. Thus, politics of anxiety based on Islamophobia is also a necessity for the current political dispensation.

The Islamophobic trend has led to communal polarization and frequent violence against Muslims in India. In Germany, the character assassination of the Jews was conducted through movies, radio, and newspapers and the same methods are being adopted for the demonization and character assassination of Muslims in India now. The dissemination of Islamophobic information in media, particularly on social media, in many cases by political actors or their supporters to further their particular political interests, has recently emerged as a significant challenge. This disturbing trend should also be understood and analyzed in the context of an unhealthy nexus between crony capitalism and embedded media forming a deadly triangle (political class + capitalist class + partisan media). This trend poses a threat to democracy in almost all societies. A completely new paradigm is needed to study this trend which goes beyond the analysis of Karl Marx who found that the economically dominant class is always the politically dominant class and Antonio Gramsci who perspicaciously analyzed the intellectual hegemony and domination of the capitalist class.

THE CHILLING RISE OF ISLAMOPHOBIA AND COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE AGAINST MUSLIMS

The perils of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crime threaten to undermine the basic human rights of the community. With every passing day, Islamophobia in India is becoming more normalized. Drawing a parallel between Nazi Germany and present-day India, author-activist Arundhati Roy, observed that “efforts were being made to normalize Islamophobia” in the country (PTI 2020). Sadly, the fourth pillar of a vibrant democracy, i.e., media is hand in glove in sustaining Islamophobia and creating rage and anxiety in the majority community against Muslims in India. This kind of media environment not only normalizes Islamophobia but also contributes to encouraging collective violence against Muslims leading to lynching and anti-Muslim communal violence. The most disturbing feature of this phenomenon is the attempts by a section of media to legitimize the horrific violence against Muslims. Under these circumstances, lynching has become a new word added to the collective memory of Indians since 2014.

With the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party)’s rise to power at the center and Modi’s elevation as Prime Minister, the rightist forces seem to be emboldened to target Muslims, Christians, Dalits1, Communists, and rationalists across the country. It began with the brutal murder of Mohsin Shaikh, an IT professional who was killed in Pune for having a beard while returning from evening prayer on June 2, 2014. The government’s response to the brutal killing, the blame game, the pattern of reporting in the mainstream media, and the reactions on social media that followed made it clear that it is a new normal under the ruling dispensation. In a disturbing judgment, the Court granted bail to all the accused and shockingly observed that the victim sported a beard and wore Pathan suit (a South Asian ethnic dress worn by many Muslim men) which was the cause of the mob’s outrage (Haque 2018a).

Lynching is an organized form of collective violence. It cannot take place unless a large number of people in a given society are convinced that the time has come to go for collective violence against a real or perceived enemy. Therefore, lynching may appear or be misleadingly projected as a spontaneous act of violence but in reality, it is the outcome of a sustained hate campaign and organized propaganda in which the media plays an important role. It is the manifestation of deep-rooted biases, prejudices, and hatred found in a considerably high number of people in a given society. Lynching is also the collective dishonoring and degrading of a community. When a person from a particular community is lynched, a message is sent to all other members of that community that they are vulnerable and they must submit to the will of the majority.
The ruling-BJP government has stopped publishing any data on lynching incidents. However, media sources claim that incidents of lynching are on a sharp rise under the current right-wing government. According to IndiaSpend, there have been 117 cow protection-related incidents of violence in India since 2015. As per Quint, there have been 88 people killed in lynchings since 2015 across India (Daniyal 2019). In 2020, India witnessed 23 incidents of mob lynching compared with 107 incidents in 2019 as per the media reportage (Engineer and Dabhade 2021).

The sudden rise of Islamophobia and the increasing number of incidents of lynching since 2014 suggest an inherent relationship between the two. This upsurge of collective violence against Muslims is the result of carefully designed propaganda against Muslims by the Hindutva (a right-wing political ideology that advocates Hindu supremacy) groups. The emotive issues like “love jihad,” “Bhoomi [property] jihad,” “UPSC jihad,” “corona jihad,” “cow slaughter,” “population explosion,” “Islamic terrorism,” etc are deliberately brought into the political and social arena through the subservient media and a committed and paid army of the rightist force’s IT Cell managing social media campaigns to generate hate, which eventually creates anxiety and fear amongst the majority. This desired fear and anxiety is easily exploited for expanding social and political bases among the majority communities who are otherwise divided horizontally and vertically. It reminds us of Huntington’s observation: “People use politics not just to advance their interests but also to define their identity. We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against” (Huntington 1996). This “fear of the minority” would unite a significant portion of the majority to vote in the desired manner. Unfortunately, this design seems to be working for the rightist forces. However, the systematic propaganda against minorities especially Muslims has not only generated desired fear for the rightist forces but has also created a kind of mass approval for targeting the Muslims and teaching them a lesson. Some people from the Hindu community are swayed by the propaganda and commit heinous acts of violence. For instance, Shambhulal Reger, a highly motivated Hindu extremist who was provoked by the propaganda of “love jihad” seriously wounded a migrant Muslim laborer and then burnt him alive (The Quint 2017). The degree of hate against Muslims can be understood from the fact that the gruesome act of wounding and burning to death the victim was filmed by his aide and later released on social media with an open threat to Muslims against the so-called “love jihad.” He also instigated Hindus to organize and unite against Muslims and teach them a lesson. The normalization rather the encouragement of violence against Muslims can be gauged from the fact that a tableau of Shambhulal Reger was taken out by Hindu outfits during the Ram Navami (Hindu festival that celebrates the birthday of Rama) procession on March 25, 2018 in Jodhpur city, Rajasthan (Mukherjee 2018). Although Prime Minister Modi has noticed the incidents of lynching in the country twice after a considerable stretch of studied silence, but a new spate of lynchings continued even during the pandemic (Deka and Datta 2017). Even a government minister was observed adorning garlands to eight Hindus convicted for lynching a Muslim (G. Pandey 2021).

The Kashmir conflict is also used to inflame the passion against Muslims. The Kathua rape case in which an eight-year-old girl Asifa Bano was abducted, tortured, raped, and then murdered in a disturbingly barbaric manner is a manifestation of the deeply ingrained hatred against Muslims. The police solved the mystery of a difficult case by arresting eight men including four police officers for committing the crime and destroying evidence. The arrest of accused persons of this heinous crime was opposed by the rightist Hindu organizations. Lawyers tried to prevent police from filing a charge sheet while two ministers of the ruling BJP in Jammu and Kashmir marched shoulder to shoulder in a rally organized in support of the
accused persons (Haque 2018b). It is important to mention that many Hindus not only disapproved of these kinds of violent acts but also actively opposed the communal forces. For example, the case of Asifa was taken up by a Hindu woman lawyer Deepika Singh Rajawat despite all kinds of threat to her from rightist groups.

The role of divisive media in creating, sustaining, and legitimizing Islamophobia and the environment of hate against Muslims leading to such gory incidents must be analyzed perspicaciously. It must be pointed out that it should not be seen as merely a spontaneous act of violence or a law-and-order problem. The collective violence against Muslims has a legitimizing ideological narrative behind it. It is pertinent to mention here that the Sangh Parivar’s ideologue M.S. Golwalkar projected Muslims, Christians, and Communists as “internal threats” (Golwalkar 1968). The perpetrators of collective violence are basically dealing with these “internal threats” identified by Golwalkar.

It is a systematic attack on Muslims to psychologically demoralize, economically destroy, socially isolate, and make them politically irrelevant. This ideological narrative of “othering” is contributing to horrific mass anger which is resulting in lynching after every brief interval and which is capable of generating enough emotional lava to destroy a delicate intercommunal harmony and the cherished ideals of a composite culture. This trend if not controlled through strong political will and social mobilization may culminate in genocide. The US-based well-known global human rights organization Genocide Watch has also claimed that there were early “signs and processes” of genocide in the Indian state of Assam and Kashmir (Aljazeera 2022).

There are some nongovernmental organizations who are sincerely and relentlessly working to maintain communal harmony, mutual goodwill and the spirit of peaceful coexistence between communities but they are certainly crying out in the wilderness. The silence of Indian society on incidents of merciless murders is more unfortunate. India has been an example of “unity in diversity” and there are hundreds of instances of this. However, what suddenly happened after 2014 was that mobs began baying for the blood of Muslims, Dalits, and anyone who opposed their views or dared criticize their actions. The fact is that the hatred has grown and seeds of Islamophobia are being sown everywhere. The bitter truth is that Hindutva has inspired terrorism and mob lynchings of marginalized people across India, especially targeted against Muslims and Dalits (Ramachandran 2020). The United Nations human rights chief on March 6, 2019 said: “We are receiving reports that indicate increasing harassment and targeting of minorities—in particular, Muslims and people from historically disadvantaged and marginalized groups, such as Dalits and Adivasis [tribal people]” (Kuchay 2019). Since untouchability exists in hundreds of villages with impunity even today, hundreds of thousands of Dalits have to spend their lives as bonded or child laborers, a crime is committed against a Dalit every 15 minutes, and every day six Dalit women are raped (Express News Service 2019). Even after 74 years of independence, the Dalit groom needs the court’s intervention to proceed for his wedding on a horse or an elephant (Uprety 2018), and a Dalit is attacked just for growing a mustache (PTI 2021).

There have been increasing incidents of hate crime against Muslims in India particularly after the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The extremists—inspired by India’s ruling-BJP and its Hindu extremist parent body, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—have blamed Muslims for the source of the pandemic with reports that some hospitals in India segregated Muslim patients from the Hindus (MN 2020). In April 2020, two newborn babies died after hospitals refused to admit their Muslim mothers amid a surge in coronavirus-related Islamophobia (Wallen 2020). When this virus first started spreading in India, the pro-government media and TV anchors started spewing venom against Muslims, “peddled fake news and made-up conspiracy theories,” and tried to hold the community responsible for its transmission (Sharma and Gupta 2020). A religious congregation of Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic missionary movement, at the Nizamuddin Center in New Delhi in March 2020 was used as a pretext to
target Muslims (Kolachalam 2020). A socioeconomic campaign to boycott Muslims has been duly started across the country. A hashtag was also started on Twitter called “corona jihad” (Bajoria 2020). The Indian Government’s ministries have continued to blame the Muslim religious body for the spread of COVID-19 across the country (Gettleman, Schultz, and Raj 2020).

Islamophobia has also become a normalized part of many workplaces and educational institutions in India. The Jawaharlal Nehru University is the most prestigious central institution in the country. It is known for its high standard and secular credentials. The university in September 2021 approved a controversial course on counter-terrorism that had been opposed by the university’s student council and teachers’ association. Titled “Counter Terrorism, Asymmetric Conflicts, and Strategies for Cooperation among Major Powers,” the optional course had courted controversy for allegedly “peddling RSS ideology” and singling out one religion (Agrawal 2021). The course targets “jihadi terrorism” to discredit Islam and Muslims. The launch of a course on Islamic terrorism is also sheer Islamophobia that is being unfortunately propagated by the government itself in a country such as India which has a huge Muslim population. And even more unfortunate is the fact that an institution—which has a unique identity across the world for its secular, scientific, and progressive character—is being used for this.

MEDIA’S ENMITY

The media in India seem to be one of the biggest causes of growing hatred, enmity, envy, and jealousy against each other. The dubious blame for dividing the society on religious grounds by destroying India’s communal harmony and brotherhood goes to electronic and social media. Over the last few years, it seems that the media has been running a hate campaign against the Muslims of the country by becoming a formal party. Whether it is a marriage, divorce, or polygamy, the issue of a growing population is under discussion, or there is a campaign to stop the transmission of COVID-19, in all these cases the media unilaterally target Muslims and is working to spread hatred in society against them. Now it has come to the point that in any incident that takes place in any part of the world, every effort is made to discredit Muslims by associating that with Islam and Muslims. Muslims face the brunt in India if oil supplies from Saudi Arabia decline, when the President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan talks about the unity of Muslims (Edroos 2018), the germs of treason begin to appear in the Muslims of India. The situation has reached the point that the Muslims of India are even being targeted for the change that is taking place in Afghanistan. The Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan has given yet another excuse to India’s Hindu supremacists to unleash a new wave of Islamophobia against the Muslim community (Ameen 2021). Indian television news channels broadcasted 24-hour coverage revolving around Afghanistan, the Taliban, Muslims, and terrorism, and anti-Muslim hate content was being used extensively in every talk show. After the change in Afghanistan, it appears that television channels have started working to sway public opinion against Muslims in the country. Some prominent English and Hindi-language television news channels were observed to push very hard to prove the involvement of Indian Muslims in the Afghanistan incident. The ruling party and its leaders are also recklessly using the arrival of the Taliban to spread hatred and Islamophobia against Muslims in India. As a tool of the ruling party, electronic media is fulfilling this purpose. Meanwhile, the same thing is being seen on social media, blogs, and individuals’ Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and so on. Social media is full of poisonous anti-Muslim material and the number of people spewing poison is increasing day by day. The cold and indifferent attitude that some newspapers, TV channels, and social media sites have adopted against Muslims for their character assassination has hurt the entire community for a long time. The media have made lies, propaganda, and character assassination their biggest agenda. Not only the social media, in this all-out attack on Muslims, the cinema has also been made a weapon which has fueled
communal hatred in India. The recently made movies—The Kashmir Files (2022), The Kerala Story (2023), and 72 Hoorain (2023)—blamed the Indian Muslim community for following “a barbaric, oppressive, harsh, uncivilized religion” and peddled Islamophobia (Mujtaba 2023). Influenced by The Kashmir Files, Hindutva workers in April 2023 threatened to remove Muslims from Uttarakhand’s village (Pal 2023).

HATE SPEECHES AND MEDIA REPORTING

If we analyze the media environment in India, we find that hate speeches of the political leaders mostly of the ruling BJP and other rightist political parties are given wide coverage. Many a time, the excerpts of the speeches are quoted out of context to peddle anti-Muslim hate. The nefarious design of the media can be understood in the light of the coverage given to the hate speeches. It seems that there is a nexus between the media and the hate mongering leaders which will be more evident when we watch prime time talk shows, news items, and the so-called “Big Fights” on mainstream TV channels like Sudarshan News, Zee News, Republic TV, Times Now, Aaj Tak, India TV, and so on, or the reporting in the print media.

The media have time and again reported on BJP politicians making public comments that Indian Muslims are a threat to the country’s social and political fabric and must be viewed with suspicion. While campaigning for state elections in 2017, Prime Minister Modi himself accused other political parties of catering to Muslim voters at the expense of Hindu voters. He accused the Uttar Pradesh government—which was led by an opposition party—of pandering to the Muslim community by spending more on Muslim graveyards than on Hindu cremation grounds (Roy 2021). The media have also reported instances of leaders from the RSS, articulating communally divisive and incendiary remarks. For example, in March 2017, an RSS leader boasted that Hindus had “sent 2000 [Muslims] to the graveyard” during the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat state (The Wire 2017). Uttar Pradesh Rural Development Minister Anand Swaroop Shukla in January 2021 said that many Muslims did not leave India at the time of partition under a conspiracy and added that such people would be killed in “encounters” (S. Pandey 2021). Suresh Tiwari, another BJP leader from Uttar Pradesh, in April 2020 openly asked people not to buy vegetables from Muslims (Shah 2020).

We need to understand that the very basis of the ideology of the RSS is “Us versus Them/Outsiders/Aliens.” Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains are included in the “Us” and Muslims and Christians are considered “Them/Outsiders/Aliens.” According to the Sangh Parivar’s ideology, Aryans developed a great civilization and culture in this geographical region by composing great scriptures in an evolved language such as Sanskrit, and those coming later, i.e., the Muslims and Christians, created various kinds of deformities in it. In Bunch of Thoughts, the guidebook of the RSS, written by M.S. Golwalkar, the second RSS Sarsanghchalak [chief], Muslims have been branded as the biggest threat to the country in clear words and linked to anti-India conspiracy. As pointed out earlier, the book has a chapter titled “Internal Threats” that starts: “It has been the tragic lesson of the history” of several countries that “the hostile elements within the country pose a far greater menace to national security than aggressors from outside.” The chapter further says: “It would be suicidal to delude ourselves into believing that they [Muslims] have turned patriots overnight after the creation of Pakistan. On the contrary, the Muslim menace has increased a hundred-fold by the creation of Pakistan which has become a springboard for all their future aggressive designs on our country” (Golwalkar 1968).

Taking inspiration from Bunch of Thoughts, RSS, with 6 million active members assembling in 70,000 shakhas (branches) each day across India (Outlook 2018), and even the responsible leaders of the ruling BJP who hold important constitutional positions are now openly demonstrating religious sectarianism and are trying to outdo each other in it. Guiding such leaders is
Yogi Adityanath, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. He is known for making highly toxic Islamophobic statements. During a TV program on August 31, 2014, Adityanath said: “We want you (minorities) not to kill anybody and live peacefully and concentrate on progress ... If the other side does not stay in peace, we will teach them how to stay in peace ... in the language that they understand” (Jeelani 2017). In a rally in Uttar Pradesh, Adityanath claimed that “Hindu culture and Muslim culture can never co-exist and that a religious war is inevitable which is why Hindus need to get organized and face this challenge in the most aggressive fashion possible.” Adityanath’s co-speaker in the same rally asked for Muslim women to be raped and also taken out from graves (Sinha 2017). Now, Adityanath has again targeted the Muslim community by making remarks about “Abba Jaan” (a term used by Muslims to address their father). In fact, on September 13, 2021 Adityanath, while addressing a rally in Uttar Pradesh, said that it was difficult for the poor to get rations before 2017 as the whole ration was taken away by the people who use the word “Abba Jaan” (A. Pandey 2021). A staunch Hindu priest named Yati Narsinghanand Saraswati was also seen openly abusing the Prophet Muhammad and Islam at the Press Club of India in New Delhi (Ojha 2021). There are hundreds of videos on YouTube where hatred has been spewed against Islam and Muslims, and the majority community is provoked to take up arms. For this, baseless statements and fictitious stories of history are spiced up and narrated.

**MISUSE OF LAWS AGAINST MUSLIMS**

Sometimes the NRC (National Register of Citizens) resorted to harassing Muslims and sometimes a discriminatory law was enacted in the name of the Citizenship Amendment Act and when women and Muslim youths raised their voices against it, they were pushed behind bars. Article 25 of the Constitution allows everyone to promote and preach their religion, but banning religious preaching activities in India has long been the goal of the Sangh Parivar. First, Islamic televangelist Zakir Naik was targeted (Khalid 2017). After that, the Tablighi Jamaat was discredited and now, by blowing out of proportion the issue of religious conversion, life has been made difficult for those who are engaged in preaching activities staying within the ambit of the law. State repression against the followers of Islam and the Muslims engaged in the propagation of their religion has been carried out with all its might. The arrest of prominent Muslim cleric Maulana Kaleem Siddiqui is the latest example of the government’s bigotry against Muslims and Islam in the name of religious conversion (The Quint 2021).

There are double standards of law in many provinces of India today. If a Muslim girl marries a Hindu boy, she will be encouraged in every possible way and if a Hindu girl marries a Muslim boy, it will be projected as love jihad. It is also shown as a sinister design by a Muslim youth to lure an innocent Hindu girl. Interestingly, the Indian Government or the government of any province of the country has not shared data relating to inter-religious marriages so-far. It means that the issue of the so-called love jihad is a creation of the media. If a Muslim converts to Hinduism, it will be called his “return to home,” and if a Hindu converts to Islam, it will be termed a forcible conversion. This double standard is noticeable in the cases of hate speeches, communal, and divisive posts on social media. The law enforcement agencies will not bother arresting and torturing Muslims for such acts but similar posts by people belonging to the majority will not attract prompt police action. It is pertinent to mention that Article 25 of the Constitution of India unequivocally declares that “all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion subject to public order, morality and health.” This phenomenon can be better understood by applying Social Constructivist theory. The posts by a Hindu communalist are often interpreted in the context of friendship (us) whereas a similar act by a Muslim communalist will be interpreted in the context of the “other” (they). Hindu communalists’ divisive posts are considered as motivated by the
spirit of nationalism and patriotism whereas such acts involving Muslims will always be considered as a potential threat to the unity and integrity of the country. During the February 2020 Delhi violence, the conspiracy angle was attributed only to Muslims and civil society dissenters against the citizenship law. The role of BJP leaders Kapil Sharma, Parvesh Verma, and Anurag Thakur who gave provocative speeches were not even probed by police (Trivedi 2020).

Analysts have noted widespread impunity for those who attack Muslims; in recent years, courts and government bodies have sometimes overturned convictions or withdrawn cases that accused Hindus of involvement in violence against Muslims (Maizland 2020). During the 1984 riots, collective violence was committed on the streets of Delhi against the Sikh community, and all the agencies and institutions were running away from their responsibilities and were busy supporting the government, however, in 2020 Delhi riots, while providing impunity to the criminals, the opponents of the government were sent to jail. Those who were the victims of the riots were arrested as accused. A 2017 report by the Mumbai-based Centre for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS) and the UK-based Minority Rights Group International (MRG) said that failure by authorities to investigate or prevent these attacks—often led by extremist right-wing groups, including vigilante groups such as cow protection or “anti-Romeo” squads enforcing violent moral policing—have “created a climate of impunity” which might lead to continued attacks (Bhowmick 2017).

According to prominent author Rana Ayyub: “The hate crimes might be committed by seemingly ordinary men on the streets of India but the impunity of their actions is being given a new lease of life from within the aisles of the Indian Parliament” (Ayyub 2019).

**ISLAMOPHOBIA ON THE WEB**

The ruling BJP, with its effective use of social media, is creating a “perception” and implanting false memories in Hindus, that they are under threat from a rising Muslim population (Basu 2019). Two trends are visible in disseminating Islamophobic information in India. In the first instance, a carefully manipulated Islamophobic narrative is pushed through BJP’s IT Cell. As well as the IT Cell, mainstream media including pro-government news channels carry the stories, communalizing the issue by accusing the Muslims. These channels love to add the word “jihad” to everything. Corona jihad, property jihad, love jihad, narcotic jihad, aarthik [economic] jihad, UPSC jihad, bureaucracy jihad, marks jihad, and so on. After that, this dis-information reaches all the social media platforms and creates an atmosphere of hate. In the second instance, deeply inflammatory, anti-Muslim, and Islamophobic narrative is pushed through Hindu radicals’ mouthpieces “Organiser” and “Panchajanya” and other right-leaning news and opinion websites such as “TFIPOST,” “Swarajya,” “OpIndia,” “PGurus.com,” “Hindu Post,” “Hindu Jagruti,” etc. After that, the narrative is picked up by the mainstream media, and it provides fuel for all the social media platforms.

Islamophobic narratives appear widely on social media and other online platforms. Indian media have reported multiple incidents of right-wing “trolls” criticizing Muslims and other minorities and disparaging those, including mainstream journalists, whom they perceive to be acting against Hindu interests. Right-leaning websites criticize opposition parties for allegedly appeasing Muslims and critically counter-reporting the BJP government.

In an attempt to harness online support to establish and sustain a right-wing nationalist “alternative media narrative,” intellectuals—some with ties to the ruling BJP or its cultural organization the RSS—have been promoting the creation of news and opinion websites to counter mainstream media narratives they feel are antagonistic to India and Hinduism. Many such new websites have started up since 2014 and they all share Islamophobic themes.

**The Threat of Muslims**—At least ten websites were observed to express strong anti-Muslim sentiments, criticizing Indian Muslims’ history, political leaders, and faith practices.
While more mainstream sites use cautious wording and often claim that Hindutva is not “against” Islam or Muslims, some more fringe sites use harsher rhetoric (Shukla 2017). Many authors argue that Indian Muslims “claim” to be peaceful and pluralistic, but hide an intolerant, anti-India hidden agenda. Articles on these sites often catalog crimes committed by Muslims and complain of leaders appeasing the Muslim community.

**Criticizing the Islamic Faith and Practices**—Sites frequently display animosity towards Islam, arguing that it is an inherently dangerous religion. Several articles argued that because the Islamic Call to Prayer promotes monotheism, it is an “attack on other faiths” and “blasphemy” (Saxena 2017). Sites also allege that Islam condones violence and misogyny (Kapoor 2016) (HinduPost 2016). One writer said that “while there was nothing wrong with choosing to practice Islam” he encouraged Muslims to declare “all verses in the Koran and Hadith that are the backbone of radicalism” as “hate speech” (Malhotra 2017).

**Cataloging Crimes by Muslims**—Sites frequently highlight crimes allegedly committed by Indian Muslims, which they say are often suppressed by mainstream media. They often post reports about alleged instances of “love jihad.” (Hindu Janjagruti Samiti 2017). Sites also often write about rapes and domestic abuse committed by Muslim men, as well as sensational comments made by Muslim religious leaders (HinduPost 2017).

**Allegations of “Minority Appeasement”**—Sites frequently complain of political “appeasement” of India’s Muslim community, saying it is done under the guise of “secularism” or to get votes (Gaurav 2017) (Kapoor 2017). For example, Swarajya criticized the Telangana Chief Minister’s “insatiable thirst to appease Muslims” by attempting to increase Muslim quotas in jobs and education and warned against “pandering to Muslims” while OpIndia carried a commentary critical of the Uttarakhand Congress-led government’s provision of a 90-minute break for its Muslim employees to attend Friday prayers (Pawariya 2017) (OpIndia 2016). Sites frequently discuss “triple talaq,” a practice in Islamic law by which a man may divorce his wife by repeating the word “talaq” three times, as an example of “Muslim appeasement” (Swarajya 2017).

Unfortunately, social networking sites Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube have also become patrons of anti-Islam elements. Despite Muslims and other groups demanding the removal of content based on racism, anti-Islam propaganda, and humiliation of the Prophet that is being uploaded by hundreds and thousands of racist and biased users all around the world, it is never done. In its investigative report, renowned British newspaper *The Independent* in 2015 named major social networking sites Twitter and Facebook as remaining helpful in the spread of Islamophobia (ANI 2015).

In a study of fear speech, examining two million messages in more than 5,000 Indian WhatsApp groups, researchers from the Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur and Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that one in three posts in these groups incites fear of Muslims and Islam (Banerjee 2021). The problem of Islamophobia in the Indian media predates YouTube too. Misleading and inflammatory claims are also quickly surfacing and spreading on YouTube. An analysis of YouTube’s recommendations showed that several TV segments about the Tablighi Jamaat led viewers to videos containing anti-Muslim content and misleading claims. For example, a video uploaded by Sudarshan News titled “If India is to be saved from #Corona_Jihad. #BanTablighiJamat and immediate sanctions on foreign clerics,” leads viewers to a video of violence against Muslim buildings and communities. This video was posted by a fringe Hindu nationalist channel that regularly posts false, fearmongering videos targeting Muslims (Ahmadi 2021).

**GLOBAL COMMUNITY EXPRESS CONCERN OVER ISLAMOPHOBIA**

Numerous international bodies have also expressed concerns over Islamophobia in India. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)—a commission of
the United States that keeps an eye on religious freedom—has expressed concerns over the situation in India. Bear in mind that the USCIRF has also, in the past, expressed concerns over the targeting of Muslims in India because of COVID-19 (USCIRF 2021). The report says that the ruling BJP has given free rein to those making statements that are hateful and incite violence against Muslims, religious places of Muslims are being targeted, and the leaders of the ruling party are themselves involved in this. It is worth noting that Home Minister Amit Shah and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Adityanath have also been named in this report. These leaders had warned of strong retaliation against the activists opposing the controversial CAA. The February 2020 Delhi riots have also been mentioned in this report. Since the 2002 anti-Muslim Gujarat riots, this was the first time the USCIRF has lumped India with countries where religious freedom is being violated (USCIRF 2020).

The US envoy for International Religious Freedom, Sam Brownback, has also said: “In India, we’ve seen reports of unfortunate COVID-related rhetoric and harassment, particularly against the Muslim community. This has been exacerbated by fake news reports and misinformation being shared via social media. There have also been instances of Muslims being attacked for allegedly spreading the coronavirus” (Lakshman 2020).

It is worth noting that Gulf countries, too, have started arriving at a consensus and speaking out against the incidents of Islamophobia in India. Sheikha Hend bint Faisal Al Qasimi, an Emirati princess of the Al Qasimi family of Sharjah, has also reacted to this issue. Qasimi said that such discrimination against Muslims must not “go unnoticed” while many other figures in the Arab world sought the expulsion of Indian nationals propagating the RSS ideology (Pasha 2020).

In Gulf countries, a Twitter campaign was being run against the growing Islamophobia in India. The Kuwaiti Cabinet in April 2020 expressed its “deep concern” about the treatment of Indian Muslims (Middle East Eye 2020). Sweden-based V-Dem Institute was also harsher in its latest report on democracy and said India had become an “electoral autocracy” (Biswas 2021).

Amid these developments in India, a German institution has published a report highlighting different countries of the world, including India, where authoritarianism is growing and democracy is weakening and degrading. According to this new report, the repressive attitudes of governments have increased because of these trends, and COVID-19, too, poses a threat to democratic governments all over the world.

Expressing concern over the plight of the minorities in India, “South Asia State of Minorities Report 2020” says that under Modi, India has become a dangerous country for minorities and those who disagree with the government’s ideology. According to the South Asia State of Minorities report on the protection of civil rights, democracy, freedom of expression, and secularism in South Asian countries, a series of renewed and direct attacks on minorities and the weaker sections have been launched since the pro-Hindu party BJP came to power in 2014 and it has affected the rights and freedom expression of Muslims and Muslim organizations (The South Asia Collective 2020).

**CONCLUSION**

There is no denying the fact that the BJP government at the center follows an ideology that has been constructed based on hatred against India’s minorities and more particularly against Muslims and Christians. The ruling BJP cannot be seen in isolation from the RSS. In fact, BJP is the political wing of the RSS. The aim of RSS as expressed by its ideologues like V. D. Savarkar, M.S. Golwalkar, and K.B. Hedgewar is to establish a monocultural India (one people, one culture, one nation). With this aim and object in mind, the leaders of BJP have been trying to construct a narrative under which Muslims are often projected as invaders and all wrongs are attached with them. Thus, Islamophobia is inherent in the ideology of the BJP right from the very beginning.
After coming to power in the center, the BJP made all attempts to have a controlled media towing to its line, and unfortunately, it is successful in its goal to an appreciable extent. The Islamophobic media environment in contemporary India should be understood in this context.

What is needed is that the spewing of venom against Muslims and Islam be stopped, the storm of fake news be controlled, India’s reputation as a tolerant nation across the world be preserved, and action taken against those responsible for anti-Muslim propaganda. It is indeed the responsibility of the government to maintain the secular ethos of the country and celebrate the exciting diversities of the country. It is also important to see that the highly opinionated anchors in the mainstream TV channels do not initiate the atmosphere by misusing the freedom of expression granted by the Constitution of India. They should not run such a campaign against Muslims that distorts India’s image lest India is compared to countries where minorities do not have freedom. The Constitution of India has granted equal rights to all the citizens irrespective of religion, caste, sex, creed etc. Muslims have all the rights and powers in India. For Indian Muslims, India is “better than the whole world.”

Democracy, composite culture, communal harmony, national unity, and national integrity of the country demand that this media slander and hostility towards the country be ended as soon as possible, otherwise it will not be long before the poison of hatred and enmity will run in the veins of every person in India and the war that is happening on television channels and social media will hit the streets. It will be a war in which whoever wins, India will lose.

ENDNOTES

1Dalits are a minority numbering some 200 million who historically existed as outcasts from the Hindu hierarchical system, tending to do menial labor (Withnall 2020).

2A term used to describe Muslim boys and men who allegedly lure non-Muslim girls to convert to Islam by feigning love (Manve and Wani 2017).

3The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) is India’s premier central recruiting agency for central government public servants. Indian right-wing news channel Sudarshan News in September 2020 described the success of Muslim youths in the UPSC services and other high-level jobs as a jihad.

4Sangh Parivar, literally translated as united family, is the umbrella term used to describe Hindu extremist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliated organizations, including the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

5India’s new Citizenship Amendment Act, enacted on December 12, 2019, makes it easier for non-Muslim immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan to become citizens of India. Though the Act does not explicitly exclude Muslims, it specifically entitles Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians facing religious persecution in these three nations to seek Indian citizenship, with no mention of Muslims. The Act says that the refugees from the six communities listed will be given Indian citizenship after residing in India for five years, instead of the previously required 11 years (Latief 2019).

6Article 25 states that every individual is “equally entitled to freedom of conscience” and has the right “to profess, practice and propagate religion” of one’s choice.

REFERENCES


