EXPERIENCES OF MUSLIMS IN INDIA ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS WITH ANTI-MUSLIM HATE

PROF MOHAN J DUTTA
Dean's Chair Professor
Director, CARE, Massey University

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PROF MOHAN J DUTTA

DIRECTOR

CENTRE FOR CULTURE-CENTRED
APPROACH TO RESEARCH AND
AND EVALUATION (CARE)

ABOUT CARE

The Centre for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand, is a global hub for communication research that uses participatory and culture-centred methodologies to develop community-driven communication solutions to health and wellbeing. Through experiments in methods of radical democracy anchored in community ownership and community voice, the Centre collaborates with communities, community organisers, community researchers, advocates and activists to imagine and develop sustainable practices for prevention, health care organising, food and agriculture, worker organising, migrant and refugee rights, indigenous rights, rights of the poor and economic transformation.

Prof Mohan J Dutta is the Director of CARE and author of books such as Neoliberal Health Organizing, Communicating Health, and Voices of Resistance.

This white paper may include images and texts around topics such as sexual violence, physical violence, identity-based discrimination and harassment, and genocide. I encourage you to care for your safety and wellbeing while reading this paper.

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EXPERIENCES OF MUSLIMS IN INDIA ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS WITH ANTI-MUSLIM HATE[1]

PROF MOHAN J DUTTA
CARE, MASSEY UNIVERSITY

The proliferation and penetration of digital media across the globe over the past two decades has witnessed the accelerated growth of hate content online.[2] Hate content threatens social cohesion an democratic processes[3] and at the same time, adversely impacts the overall sense of security of those that are targeted with hate[4]. Hate erodes trust, and thus, depletes democracies. When uncontrolled, hate leads to growing violence directed at minority communities and genocide. Moreover, hate directly impacts the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities that are targeted. The effects of hate are multiplied manifold when minorities are subjects of these targeted attacks, exacerbating the sense of insecurity.

In India, the largest global democracy, the propaganda infrastructures of Hindutva[5], the political ideology that has shaped the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), are driven by hate, seeded, circulated, and reproduced through digital platforms[6]. Since the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014 and subsequent electoral victory in 2019, the hate on digital platforms in India and in the Indian diaspora has proliferated exponentially. The content of digital hate driven by Hindutva has been directed at India's religious minorities, Muslims and Christians, as well as oppressed caste communities (dalits).[7] Of particular significance are the extreme forms of hate that have been directed at Muslims, including calls for genocide issued by Hindutva ideologues.

A number of publised studies and reports by civil society document the scope and volume of the hate content on digital platforms. However, the literature so far has not really explored the xperiences of the exposure to the anti-Muslim digital hate among Muslims in India. In this white paper, drawing on a survey conducted with n = 1056 Muslims in India, I examine the exposure to digital hate among Muslims. The findings offer a descriptive framework for understanding the experiences of digital hate among Muslims in India, exploring the implications of the exposure to digital hate, and suggesting strategies for countering the hate.

METHOD

This report draws on two different components of a larger study examining the experiences of Muslims with anti-Muslim hate. The ethnography that shapes the inductive observations guiding the project involves in-depth interviews and 213 hours of online participant observations on digital platforms (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Reddit). The ethnographic insights are complemented by a survey of 1056 Muslims conducted by _____, a panel-based survey company. The data were gathered between November 2021 and December 2021. It is worth noting that these months, and particularly the month of December registered unprecedented levels of hate on digital latforms. The constructs were inductively derived from the ethnography, placed in conversation with the published literature on Islamaphopia and hate.

Participants were asked to respond on a 1 to 7 scale, with 1 reflecting and 7 reflecting to the prompt "Please answer the following with [1] being strongly disagree and [7] Strongly agree."

FINDINGS

The anti-Muslim hate on digital platforms reflects the broader political ideology of Hindutva that is rooted in the othering of Muslims. The organizing logics of a monolithic state (rashtra), one people (jati), and a monolithic culture (sanskriti) forms the ideological apparatus of Hindutva. Digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Reddit, and GitHub have hastened the proliferation of anti-Muslim hate that forms the architecture of Hindutva. The digital infrastructure of Hindutva is organized around building disinformation and accelerating the circulation of hate. The narratives of hate are often centered on specific events, policy decisions made by the ruling BJP, and dissenting responses to Hindutva. The production and circulation of hate in Hindutva is embedded within an ecosystem of hate produced and circulated by white supremacists, drawing upon white supremacist tropes and simultaneously feeding white supremacist tropes. Consider for instance the memes created around detention camps for Muslims, producing the trope of the illegal Muslim immigrant.

The Hindutva adoption of the white supremacist symbol Pepe the Frog depicts the connections and flows between the different discursive registers of hate, drawn together in their anti-Muslim ideology[8]. From the discursive architectures of 4chan to white supremacist Twitter spaces to the Hindutva architecture, Pepe the Frog has gone through multiple transformations rooted in Islamophobic hate (see Figure 1). In its avatar carrying our anti-Muslim violence in the context of Hindutva, Pepe the Frog is a torturing agent, coloured saffron, wearing a black uniform, a cap adorned with the "Om" symbol and a saffron armband with writing in Sanskrit. Nazi symbols and narratives are imported into the Hindutva narrative architecture (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Meme circulated on Reddit depicting detention camps for Muslims[9]

### Avg Detention Camp in Hindu Rashtra

Figure 2: Nazi poster transforms into Hindutva poster depicting the race purity narrative

Muslims are exposed to this hate when participating on digital platforms. In the survey, 39 percent of the participants responded that they had been called offensive names as a result of being a Muslim.

**Figure 3:** Called offensive names in the past 12 months as a result of being a Muslim.
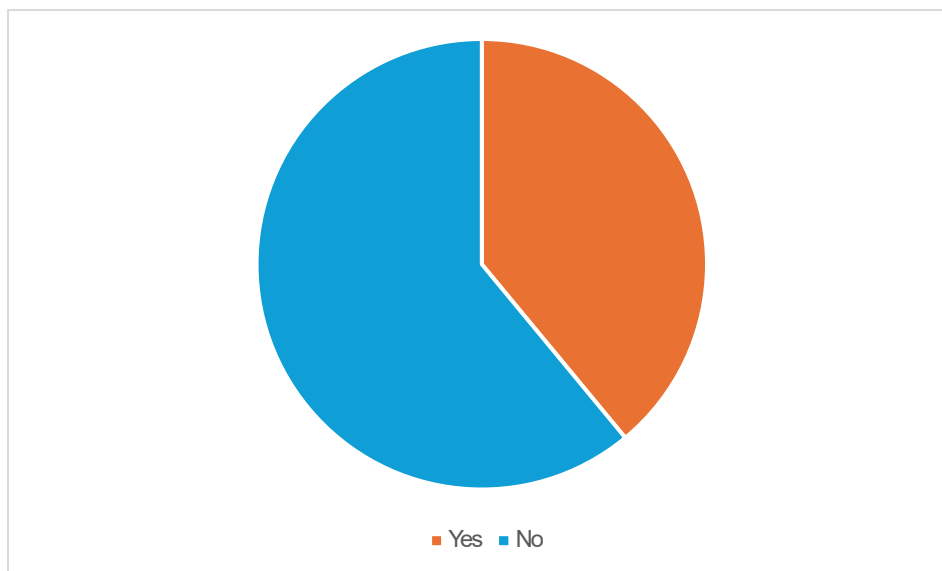
40 percent of the respondents reported they had been targeted on social media in the past 12 months as a result of being a Muslim.

**Figure 4:** Targeted on social media in the past 12 months as a result of being a Muslim
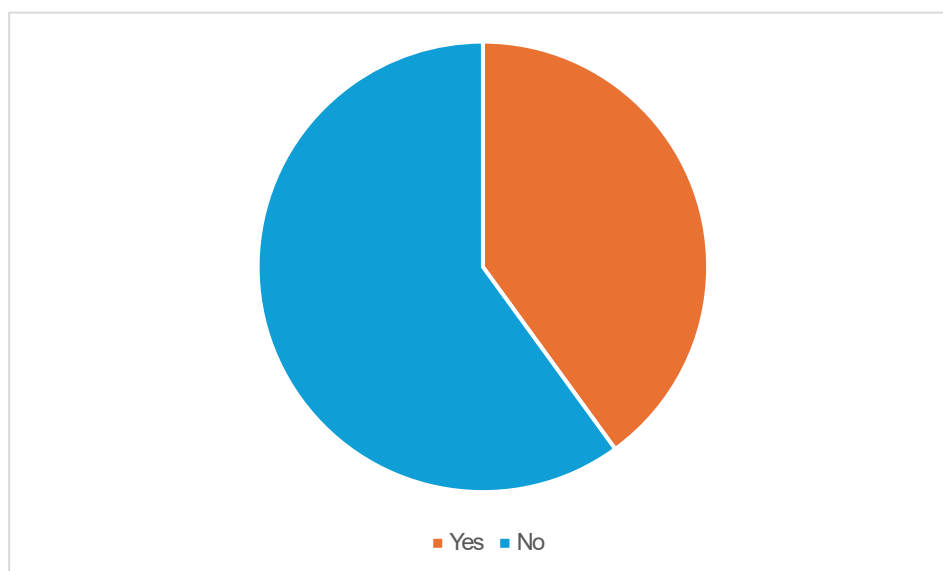
Note here the similarities in the percentages of respondents who reported being called offensive names and being targeted on social media in the past 12 months. 59 percent of the participants reported coming across content on digital platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp) that encourages conflict, hatred, and violence.

Figure 5: Come across content that encourages conflict, hatred and violence on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp
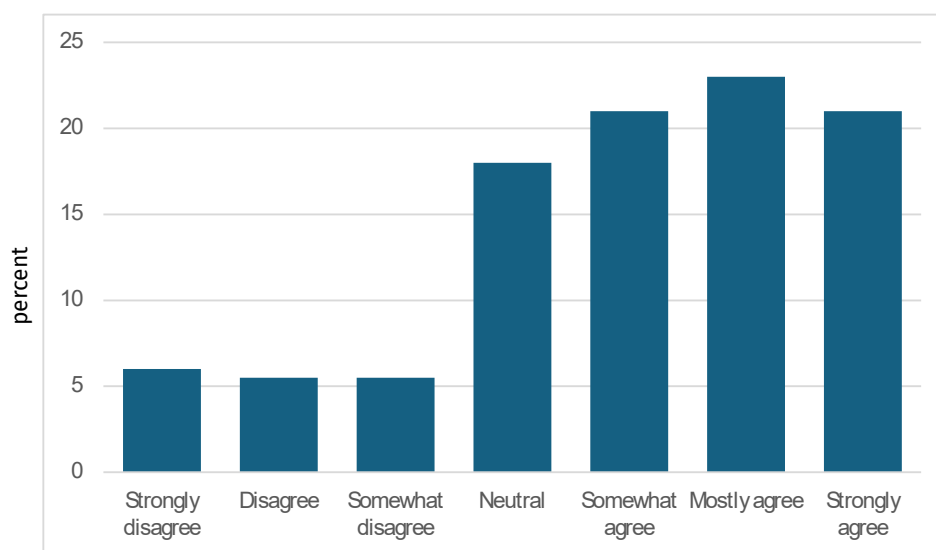
In 2019, the BJP-led central government introduced the National Register for Citizens (NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), that were widely criticized by civil society as attacks on the citizenship rights of Muslims. The discourses around the NRC and the CAA mobilized anti-immigrant sentiments, with a number of mainstream Hindutva politicians referring to the citizenship acts as mechanisms to filter out illegal Muslim migrants. The discourse of the Muslim migrant, and particularly the illegal Muslim migrant, has proliferated on digital platforms. 60 percent of the respondents reported coming across content on digital platforms stating Muslim immigrants will take over India (see Figures 1 and 5).

Figure 6: Come across content on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp that state Muslim immigrants will take over India
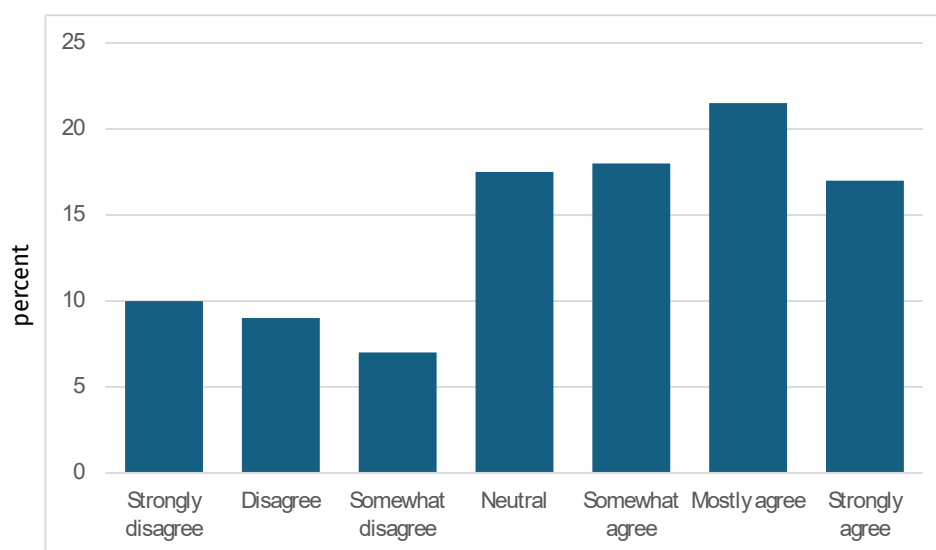
As the protests against the NRC and the CAA gained momentum across India, offline and online hate directed at protestors and minority communities multiplied exponentially. In March 2020 as the COVID-19 cases started appearing in India, COVID-related Islamophobic content proliferated across digital platforms[10].

The framing of questions arounds intentions of the Tablighi Jamaat gathering in Delhi held prior to the announcement of lockdown fuelled misinformation around Muslims plots to infect Hindus by spitting on food, and infiltrating respectable middle class spaces through their everyday jobs. The #CoronoJihad narrative projected the Muslim as a terrorist attacking Hindu communities with the COVID-19 bomb. The stigmatization and blaming of Muslims as super-spreaders based on misinformation resulted in some neighbourhoods attacking and banning Muslims[11] and some healthcare organizations denying treatments to Muslims. Mainstream media repeatedly circulated misinformation, claiming that Tablighi Jamaat members were coronavirus "superspreaders". This disinformation fed and complemented the disinformation spread on digital platforms, with hashtags such as "coronaJihad", "CoronaTerrorism" and "CoronaBombsTablighi" trending on Twitter in India.

Figure 7: Islamophobic meme around COVID-19
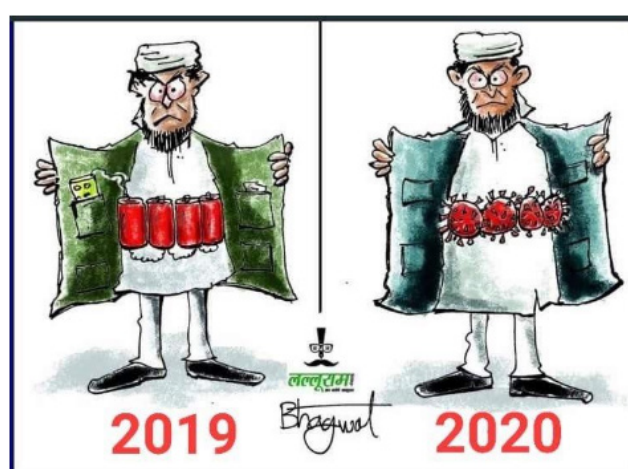
64% of the respondents in the survey reported coming across content on digital platforms that blamed Muslims for the pandemic. 20.5% of the participants somewhat agreed, 21.5% of the participants mostly agreed, and 22% of the participants strongly agreed with the statement "I have come across content on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp that blames Muslims, suggesting that they are responsible for the spreading of the pandemic."

Figure 8: Come across content on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp that blames Muslims for the pandemic
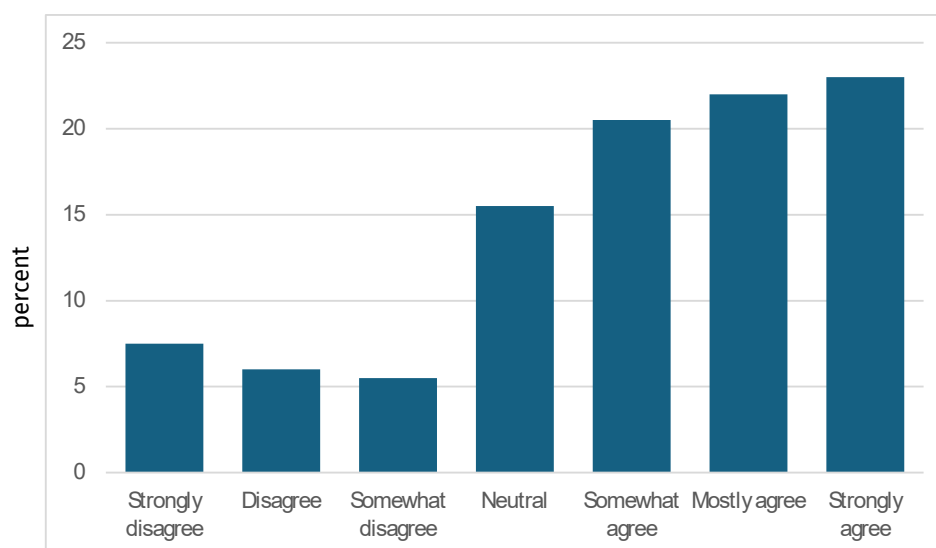
The disinformation portraying Muslims as conspirators plays out in content that projects Muslims as targeting Hindu women for conversion through romance[12]. The hashtag #LoveJihaad is part of a broader global Islamophobic digital infrastructure that flows from far-right, white supremacist, anti-immigrant spaces[13] in Europe to the Islamophobic discursive space in Myanmar[14], and the anti-Muslim hate in India. The circulation of the #LoveJihaad trope has resulted in violence directed at Muslims, including contributing to the genocide in Myanmar[15]. Moreover, the #LoveJihaad conspiracy has been legitimized through the policy structures pushed by Hindutva.

Figure 9: The love jihad conspiracy placed alongside other conspiracy frames, land jihad, Corona jihad, population jihad and media jihad

58.9% of the participants agreed that they had come across digital content stating Muslims targeted Hindu women for marriage. 17.7% of the participants indicated they somewhat agreed, 20.9% of the participants stated they mostly agreed, and 20.3% of the participants stated they strongly agreed with the statement, "I have some across content on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp that states Muslims are targeting Hindu women for marriage."

Figure 10: Come across content on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp stating Muslims target Hindu women for marriage
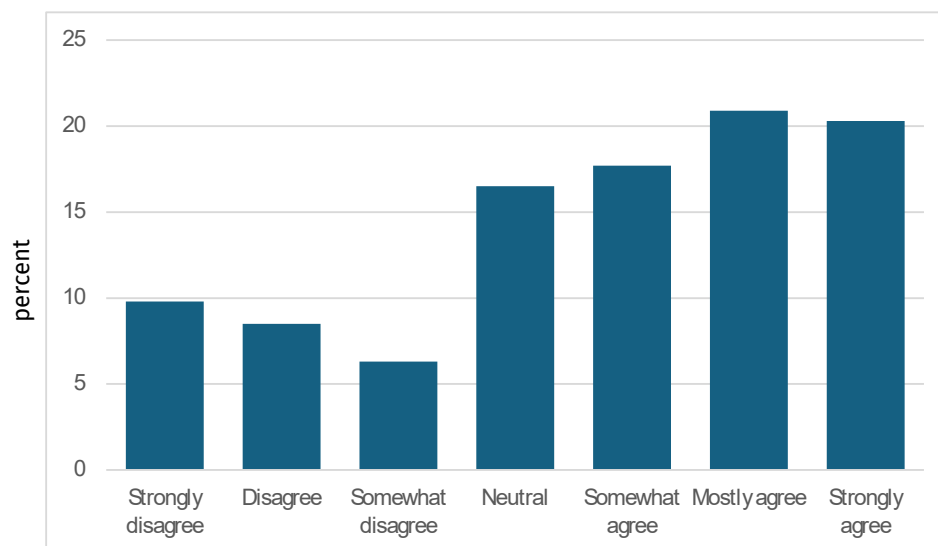
In this backdrop of the #LoveJihaad conspiracy narrative, digital platforms are rife with content targeting Muslim women with sexual violence[16] (Figures 10 and 11).
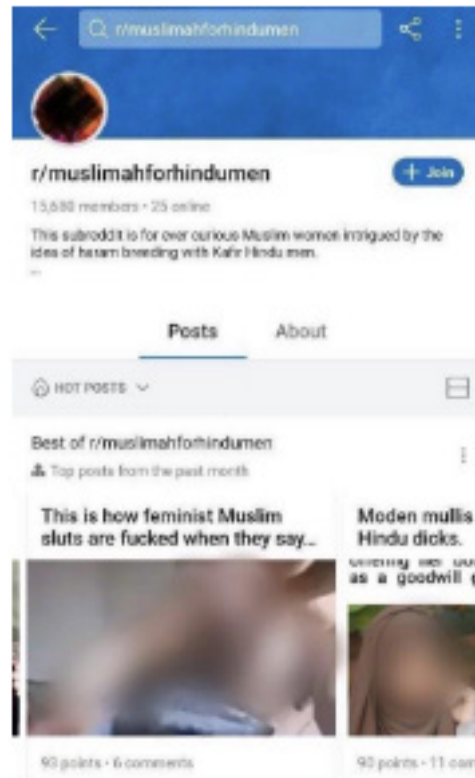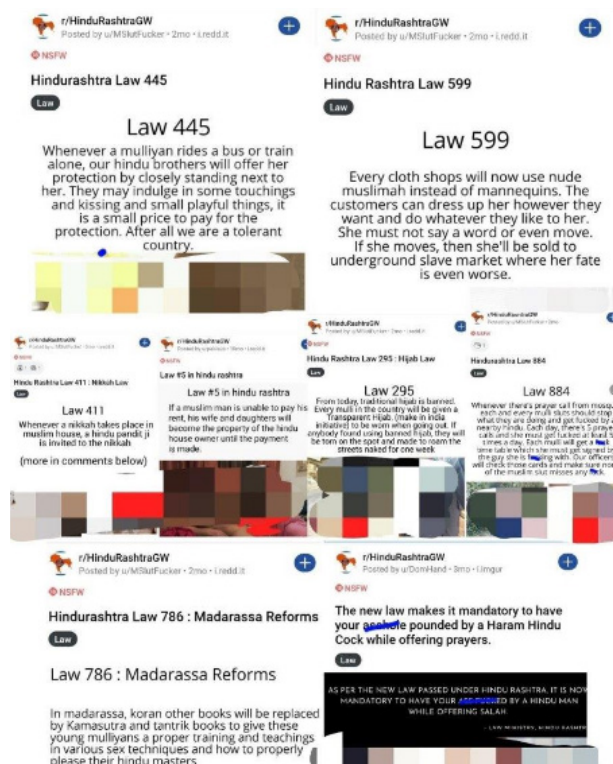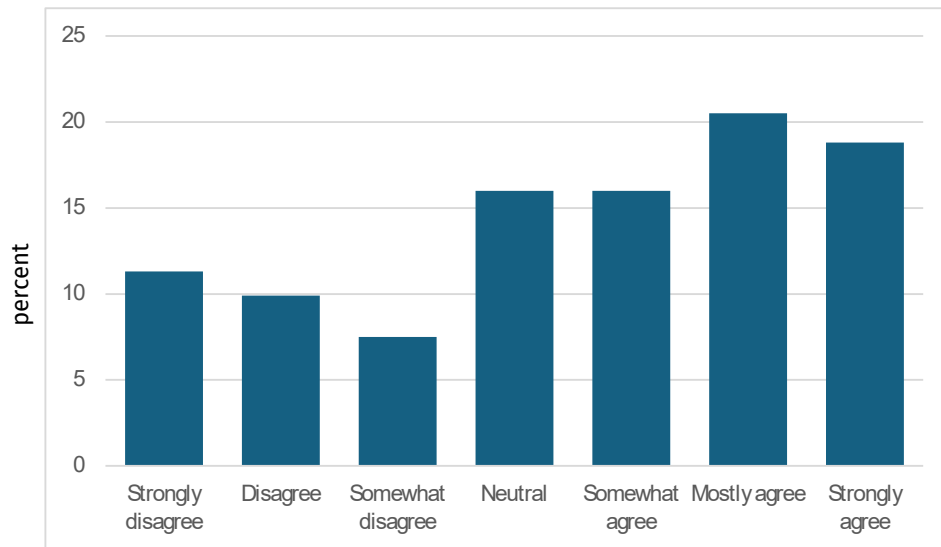
Figure 11:

Figure 12: Sexually violent content targeting Muslim women on Reddit

The threats of sexual violence targeting women are carried out alongside dehumanizing content depicting Muslims as animals. 55.3% of the participants agree with the statement, "I have come across content on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp that compares Muslims to pigs and dogs." 16% of the participants indicated they somewhat agreed, 20.5% of the participants stated they mostly agreed, and 18.8% of the participants stated they strongly agreed with the statement.

Figure 13: Come across content on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp that compares Muslims to pigs and dogs

Finally, 59.7% of the participants agree with the statement, "I have come across content on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp that incites violence against Muslims." Note in Figure 12, the transformation of Pepe the Frog into a Hindutva symbol, with the saffron skin tone, wearing a saffron tika, and driving over a Muslim. The text states, "Die you m-----f-----."

Figure 14: Come across content on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp that incites violence against Muslims
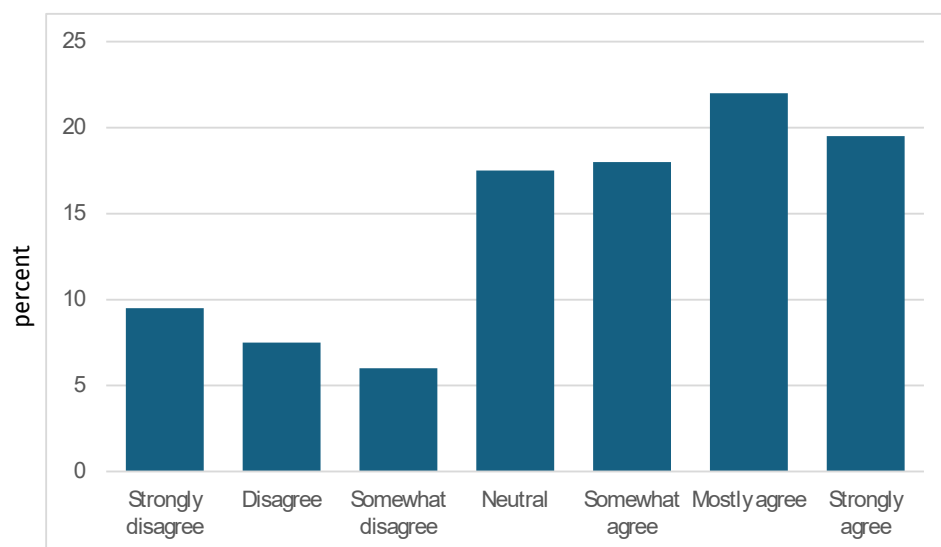
Figure 15: Violent content targeting Muslims with the Pepe the Frog meme

This preliminary descriptive analysis offered in this paper fills an important gap in the current understanding of the volume and scope of anti-Muslim digital hate that flows on platforms. It depicts the flows of anti-Muslim hate across discursive registers, mapping the interpenetrating symbols across diverse registers of hate on digital platforms. It is worth noting that some of these digital hate content has been correlated with offline violence, including with large-scale violence such as genocide.

This analysis draws on a survey with Muslims in India to document the actual exposure to hate content on digital platforms. The majority of Muslims participating in this survey report being exposed to digital hate. This raises vital questions regarding the health, wellbeing, sense of security and safety felt by Muslims in India. Future scholarship ought to examine the effects of exposure to digital hate on life, health and democratic participation. One of the limitations of this report is the design and distribution of the survey in English, which limits its reach. Another limitation is the limited timeframe within which the data were gathered.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop a comprehensive framework for monitoring digital hate across platforms, the various themes in hate content, the forms of hate content, and the features of hate content. Operationalize and categorize the different forms of hate content, the levels of hate, and the relationship of the various categories of hate content with virality of the content.

- Map out the similarities and differences between the different forms of hate content.
- Develop and cultivate grassroots community capacities to critically interrogate and counter hate, particularly anti-Muslim hate.
- Co-create anti-hate pedagogies hrough the participation of communities at the "margins of the margins" experiencing hate.
- Co-create digital communication strategies that counter disinformation and hate through the participation of communities at the "margins of the argins" experiencing hate. Community voice and participation in creating messages of peace and harmonious co-existence are vital to building and sustaining social cohesion.
- Co-create community literacies and build community capacities for de-platforming hate content.
- Co-create solidarities across anti-hate struggles at the "margins of the margins."
- Connect across global struggles against hate. Build infrastructures of solidarity between movements challenging white supremacy and movements challenging Hindutva.
- Co-create and sustain inter-faith spaces anchored in social justice and ed by the voices of communities at the "margins of the margins." Anchor interfaith dialogues in critical pedagogy hat interrogates the workings of power and control in the circulation of hate.
- Advocate globally to create global policy solutions for addressing hate across diverse marginalized identities.

LINKS TO SOME NEWS STORIES AND HATE CONTENT

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