

# How anti-Muslim disinformation campaigns in India have surged during COVID-19

*Shakuntala Banaji and Ram Bhat (LSE) explain why hate and disinformation campaigns against Muslims in India have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Some commentators naively assumed that a life-threatening pandemic would bring citizens together, and be enough to suspend if not completely stop the [now endemic barrage of disinformation](#) targeted at Indian Muslims. However, COVID-19 has simply added [a new dimension](#) to the hate speech and disinformation circulated about Muslim communities in India.

The [BJP, RSS and Sangh Parivar](#) campaign of producing hate and inciting violence against Muslims in India runs as a well-oiled machine that has internal complexity and leaves the ruling party with plenty of scope for [plausible deniability](#) when their supporters [resort to murder](#). The steps in this manufacture and circulation of violent disinformation often involve both mainstream and social media. Notorious journalists and anchors known to support the BJP government and the Hindutva cause raise apparently legitimate doubts: in this case, the [faux troubling questions](#) centred around the “intentions” of a Muslim gathering in Delhi, the [Tablighi Jamaat](#) held prior to the announcement of lockdown, even when there was never any basis to such reports.



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At the same time, dispersed IT-cells and supporters of Hindutva groups and the ruling party on WhatsApp and other social media flood their various groups and online spaces with a parallel set of misinformation and disinformation-laden memes, questions, images, GIFs and [speeches from politicians](#). This further casts aspersions on individual Muslims and suspicion on the Muslim community’s loyalty as citizens and human beings, accusing them of being COVID “super-spreaders”, and implicating them in a supposedly dastardly plot to infect Hindus by spitting on food, and infiltrating respectable middle class spaces through their jobs as salespeople, cooks, chauffeurs or watchmen.

In March 2020, within days, such networks of disinformation had led to entrenched rumours that Muslims were ‘intentionally’ infecting Hindus through a range of behaviours. As a result, several spaces – residential settlements and hospitals for instance – illegally and unconstitutionally denied entry and service to some Muslims, resulting in [further unnecessary deaths](#). In a parallel move, and implicitly supporting the BJP MLAs and supporters who were pushing the initial disinformation, the government of India [banned 2,550 individuals from entering India](#) for a period of ten years – all of them foreign Tablighi Jamaat followers.

The naïve notion that reporting or uncovering the ‘truth’ and the ‘facts’ will mitigate violence and undermine prejudice needs to be banished.

Meanwhile a more public and systemic disinformation campaign emanates from mainstream institutions. For instance, a civil society institution composed of ex-judges with ties to diaspora Hindutva groups, [recently submitted a report](#) that claimed to identify the instigators of the Delhi pogrom that took place in February 2020 and left [39 Muslims dead at the hands of Hindu far right mobs](#). This “report”, which consists almost entirely of ideological fabrications, recasts Muslim dissidents protesting against discriminatory citizenship laws as ‘urban naxals’ and ‘anti-nationals’. Even before such accusations had been made public, the Home Ministry had used the disarray caused by the pandemic as an opportunity to [imprison](#) Muslim democracy activists, and to take even [moderately critical journalists](#) from Kashmir and elsewhere into custody or [slap them with false charges](#). So, why does all of this clearly authoritarian and anti-democratic misrepresentation and action against mainly Muslim citizens continue with virtually no protest from a majority of the [Indian public](#)? There are several reasons.

First, the naïve notion that reporting or uncovering the ‘truth’ and the ‘facts’ will mitigate violence and undermine prejudice needs to be banished. Our research into [hate speech and misinformation on WhatsApp](#) suggests that upper and middle caste Hindu social media groups with an investment in the ideology of Hindu supremacy *knowingly produce and share disinformation targeted against Muslims*.

Second, less ideologically and politically embedded individuals within these groups share disinformation under the guise of more positive citizenship imaginaries: civic duty, protecting one’s religion or one’s community, national security, promoting good health and hygiene, promoting national unity and so on or do so to retain their position as key informants to the group without thought to the damage of sharing false information. Such deep-seated imaginaries disavow the violence perpetrated by the very people passing on the disinformation, project that violence onto the targeted communities, and legitimise anti-Muslim discrimination across India and the diaspora.

Rather than only countering disinformation with empirical facts or presenting the dangers of spreading hate amidst a pandemic, it is imperative for anti-racists, researchers and ethical journalists to look at the political history of Indian disinformation and to ask *whose political interests are served by the sophisticated and systematic sharing of mediated and community-transmitted disinformation against Indian Muslims?*

In India (and the diaspora), [Hindu society is currently and has historically been controlled](#) by a select few organisations and dominant caste individuals. The process of maintaining control through [hegemony](#) is required since a minority cannot control a majority by force alone. Muslims, as one of the largest distinct non-Hindu social groups in India, have consistently been cast as the “threatening other” by Hindu-chauvinist [politics, literature and media](#). The Muslim as an enemy outsider has come to constitute the tie that binds disparate groups with competing social interests together into a mythical Hindu-ness. In the early years of the 20th century, such a production of Hinduism (via the Muslim) was transparent in the writings of early [Hindutva functionaries and leaders](#).

Over the last four decades, incremental social reforms and uneven capitalist development has necessitated a more sophisticated approach to building the idea of a Hindu nation. The old broadcasting technologies of writing, radio and television are inadequate to account for proliferation of identities. In many states of India, intermediary caste groups have become extremely influential – Lingayats and Vokkaligas in Karnataka, Kammas and Reddys in Andhra Pradesh, Marathas in Maharashtra, Jats in Haryana and so on. Social media platforms and applications powered by global digital networks have begun to be put to use in significant ways for political goals in contemporary societies. The basic architecture of othering Muslims to constitute Hinduness and [Hindu nationalism remains a historical fact](#). The affordances of platforms and devices, as well as new possibilities of differentiated mass distribution, present enormous potential to produce the idea of India as a Hindu nation with an internal enemy community in new ways. The fabricated association of Muslims with the spread of Covid-19 is a prime example.

Whose political interests are served by the sophisticated and systematic sharing of disinformation against Indian Muslims?

In different locations, depending on the class and caste composition in a given society, the same vicious anti-Muslim imaginaries are incubated either as a health and hygiene problem, a religious provocation, [a national security threat](#) or danger to other communities through extreme fecundity and [population growth](#). Disinformation distribution networks are built like inverse pyramids where local actors (often younger males with some basic computer skills looking for entrepreneurial opportunities) receive money from shadowy firms or NGOs (with very loose and hard to trace links to the BJP party), are able to inflect broad imaginaries with local contexts. Other groups engage in disinformation not only for money but also as a way to get noticed as a rising political personality.

This design ensures that [anti-Muslim disinformation](#) is tremendously [flexible, local](#) and persuasive to those who are already looking for confirmation of their hatred and deep-seated prejudice. Mirroring [white rightwing Islamophobia](#), common features of disinformation in India today include the use of extreme emotions and images. Disinformation frequently hinges on the use of shocking images that seek to elicit a strong emotion in the user, compelling him or her to share it with others. The active attachment of the idea of sharing of information against the Muslim other – as a form of civic duty and national security – further enhances the likelihood of misinformation’s journey from a systemic propaganda towards less ideologically embedded sections of a community.

Another tactic used is the embedding of disinformation in a constant flow of banal messaging from “trusted elders” or “community leaders”, which ensures that users are *habituated* both to receiving and to sharing content without much intellectual pause or critique. Receiving and forwarding messages in a particular group or across groups is a mark of sociality and acceptance in those groups. In fact, belonging to a group without being seen to share comes to be seen and understood as suspicious: a performance of (Hindu/caste) group loyalty is thus a facet in the spread of malevolent misinformation and disinformation.

Given that discrimination, violence and disinformation against Muslims is [an extensive historical and political problem in India](#) and [the diaspora](#) just as violence and misinformation against social groups such as [Ahmadis](#), [Christians](#) and [Hindus](#) is a problem in neighbouring Pakistan, strategies for countering it need both short and long-term solutions. Short-term solutions involve a far stronger commitment from mainstream media organisations, governments and social media companies on ideas about civil and human rights and the right to life rather than the current and narrow emphasis on free speech as defined by those in powerful positions, as well as a recognition of the multiple forms taken by Islamophobic rhetoric. Long-term solutions include the building of a culture of anti-racism, historical awareness and critical media literacy from childhood upwards, involving widespread open discussions about [linkages](#) between technologies of representation and political power, as well as pointing towards the benefits for all of a society with less violence and more equity and solidarity.

*This post was originally published on the [Students Against Hindutva Ideology blog](#), then [MediaLSE](#), and is reposted with thanks. It represents the views of the authors, and not the position of LSE blogs, nor LSE.*