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# On the politics of fear
## The role of politicians in stoking Islamophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic in India

# O polityce strachu
## Rola polityków w podsycaniu islamofobii podczas pandemii COVID-19 w Indiach

## On the politics of fear. The role of politicians in stoking Islamophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic in India

Muslims, India's largest minority group, have often found themselves excluded from the country's mainstream political power circles. The historically constructed clash between Muslims and Hindus has been used by the members of the far right – such as the Rāṣṭriya Svayaṃsevak Saṇgh (RSS) or the Viśva Hindū Pariṣada (VHP) – to present the Muslim community as outsiders and ill-intentioned others with a view to subjugating the Hindu majority. There has been a notable rise in majoritarianism since the Bhāratiya Janata Party (BJP) rose to power in 2014. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, many BJP and RSS members made overtly racist remarks and incited violence against the Muslim community. The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have exacerbated this religious polarisation that has been gradually intensifying since Narendra Modi (BJP) won a landslide re-election victory in May 2019. Fears surrounding the pandemic have rapidly fuelled societal divisions, as well as hyper-nationalism and religious extremism targeted at Indian Muslims. A tarnished social fabric would have obvious long-term ramifications, specifically relating to stigmatisation, stereotyping and violent attacks. In this paper, the author will attempt to examine the role of BJP politicians in stoking Islamophobia. The author will address the question of whether the COVID-19 pandemic has been politicised against the Muslim minority. Are politicians primarily responsible for stoking intercommunal fear and hatred? What roles have state actors played in fomenting sectarian discord during COVID-19? This article tackles these and other salient questions pertaining to the politicisation of the coronavirus outbreak and mounting hate speech authorised by the ruling party in India. The article concludes by suggesting that Hindutva-driven Islamophobia, supported by the BJP government, may have permeated the Hindu mainstream but cautions that this claim still needs empirical validation. This article informs readers of the specific process of Islamophobic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic which remains a largely understudied phenomenon in India. My interpretation is partially based on spending two months doing fieldwork, mainly in New Delhi, in February and March 2020 during the coronavirus outbreak.

## O polityce strachu. Rola polityków w podsycaniu islamofobii podczas pandemii COVID-19 w Indiach

Stanowiący największą grupę mniejszościową w Indiach muzułmanie doświadczają dyskryminacji i wykluczenia na niwie politycznej, ekonomicznej, edukacyjnej i społecznej. Wypowiedzi członków konserwatywnych, skrajnie prawicowych organizacji, takich jak Rāṣṭriya Svayaṃsevak Saṇgh (RSS) czy Viśva Hindū Pariṣada (VHP), nierzadko prowadzą do eskalacji konfliktu hindusko-muzułmańskiego, przypisując muzułmanom wrogie intencje i zdradę interesów narodowych. W prawicowej narracji muzułmanie występują w roli piątej kolumny, obcych, których należy stanowczo podporządkować hinduskiej większości. Począwszy od 2014 r., kiedy do władzy doszła Indyjska Partia Ludowa (Bhāratiya Janata Party – BJP), a fotel premiera objął Narendra Modi (BJP), popularność rządów większości (ang. *majoritarianism*) znacząco wzrosła. Od tej pory politycy BJP i aktywiści RSS coraz częściej sięgali po mowę nienawiści, podżegając do przemocy wobec społeczności muzułmańskiej. Pandemia COVID-19 w 2020 r. jeszcze bardziej spotęgowała polaryzację religijną między obiema grupami i szybko stała się paliwem dla polityki zarządzania strachem i pogłębiających się antagonizmów społeczno-religijnych. Długoterminowymi konsekwencjami takich działań są: stygmatyzacja, utrwalenie krzywdzących stereotypów, dyskryminacja, a nawet przemoc. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje rolę polityków Indyjskiej Partii Ludowej w podsycaniu islamofobii w Indiach. Autorka odpowiada na pytania, czy pandemia COVID-19 została upolityczniona i wykorzystana przeciwko mniejszości muzułmańskiej i jaką rolę odegrali wówczas politycy partii rządzącej w nakręcaniu spirali nienawiści. Artykuł kończy się sugestią, że napędzana przez hinduski nacjonalizm i wspierana przez rząd BJP islamofobia mogła przeniknąć do głównego nurtu hinduizmu, zastrzegając jednak, że twierdzenie to wymaga dalszych badań. Autorka opiera swoje interpretacje na kwerendzie źródeł prasowych w językach angielskim i hindi oraz dwumiesięcznych badaniach terenowych prowadzonych w New Delhi w lutym i marcu 2020 r., tj. w pierwszych miesiącach po wybuchu pandemii koronawirusa.

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> *The weight of history and the fallout of recent events have left many Muslims around the world feeling aggrieved and misunderstood, concerned about the erosion of their rights, and even fearing for their physical safety.*
>
> Kofi Annan, United Nations seminar on
> *Confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding*, 7 XII 2004

## Introduction*

**A**s the largest minority group in the country, Indian Muslims have often found themselves discriminated against in different spheres including law, housing, education and employment,[1] as well as marginalised from the mainstream political power circles.[2] The historically constructed clash between Muslims and Hindus has been used by members of the far right, such as the Rāṣṭriya Svayaṃsevak Saṅgh (RSS) or the Viśva Hindū Pariṣada (VHP), to portray the Muslim community as outsiders and malicious others with the objective being to subjugate the Hindus.[3] There has been a visible rise in majoritarianism[4] since the Bhāratiya Janata Party (BJP)[5]. Based on the data gathered, BJP members are accused of breeding

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1   A. A. Pandya, *Muslim Indians. Struggle for inclusion*, The Henry L. Stimson Center, Washington DC 2010: <https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Muslim_Indians-Complete_1.pdf> [access: 27 XI 2020].

2   L. Maizland, *India's Muslims: an increasingly marginalized population*, Council on Foreign Relations [online], 20 VIII 2020 [access: 27 XI 2020]: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/india-muslims-marginalized-population-bjp-modi>.

3   S. Subramanian, *How Hindu supremacists are tearing India apart*, "The Guardian" [online], 20 II 2020 [access: 27 XI 2020]: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/20/hindu-supremacists-nationalism-tearing-india-apart-modi-bjp-rss-jnu-attacks>.

4   The idea that the numerical majority of a population should have the final say in determining the outcome of a decision.

5   Vide: A. P. Chatterji, T. B. Hansen, C. Jaffrelot, *Majoritarian state. How Hindu nationalism is changing India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019, p. 544.

intercommunal phobias and nurturing anti-Muslim disinformation. Politicians wielding a toxic, dehumanising "us vs. them" rhetoric are creating a more divided and dangerous world. When the coronavirus broke out, Muslims in India became a demonised and feared other, and the social discrimination they already suffered from dramatically increased. Newspaper articles, TV shows, comics, social media and hate speech as well as politicians' divisive language, in addition to cultural conflicts over the holy city of Ayodhyā or the Citizen Amendment Act in 2019, produce ample evidence of the stigmatisation of Islam in public discourse.[6]

The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have exacerbated the religious polarisation that has gradually been intensifying since Narendra Modi was re-elected by a large majority in May 2019. Fears surrounding the pandemic have rapidly fuelled societal divisions, hyper-nationalism and religious extremism targeted at Indian Muslims. In this paper, the author will address the question whether the COVID-19 pandemic has been politicised against the Muslim minority. She will attempt to examine the role of BJP politicians in stoking Islamophobia, which has a long-term bearing on stigma and stereotyping. Are politicians primarily responsible for inciting intercommunal fear and hatred? What roles have state actors played in fomenting sectarian discord in times of COVID-19? This article tackles these and other salient questions pertaining to the politicisation of the coronavirus outbreak and on mounting hate speech authorised by the ruling party in India. It consists of three sections. The first is an attempt to define Islamophobia and recognise its very components. The second section discusses several studies on coronavirus disinformation carried out in 2020. The third section encompasses the role of Indian politicians in spreading fake news and stoking Islamophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was preceded by an in-depth overview of a significant number of caste theories, concepts, and various perspectives, providing a reliable baseline for this paper. The article concludes by suggesting that a Hindutva-driven Islamophobia, supported by the BJP government, may have permeated the Hindu mainstream, but cautions that this claim still demands thorough empirical validation.

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6    Vice News, *India burning (clip) | Vice on showtime*, You Tube [online], 1 IV 2020 [access: 27 III 2021]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCyBL8dB0E0>.

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### Defining Islamophobia

In any discussion about Islamophobia, a definition is required that acknowledges both direct forms of Islamophobic discrimination and also its more subtle, nuanced manifestations. The word *Islamophobia* was coined in the late 1980s, its first known use in print being in February 1991 in a periodical in the United States.[7] In November 1997, the UK's leading independent race equality think tank, the Runnymede Trust, published a report called *Islamophobia. A challenge for us all* analysing its features and the dangers it poses. At the time, the term *Islamophobia* was relatively uncommon, but it was argued that it was justified because "anti-Muslim prejudice had grown so considerably and so rapidly in recent years that a new item in the vocabulary is needed."[8] *Islamophobia*, as a term, only "reached public policy prominence" with the publication of the Runnymede Trust's report. During that time the term referred to three phenomena[9]:

- unfounded hostility towards Islam;
- practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities;
- exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs.[10]

In the abovementioned report it is also claimed that prevailing Islamophobic attitudes incorporate the following beliefs:

- Islam is monolithic and cannot adapt to new realities.
- Islam does not share common values with other major faiths.
- Islam as a religion is inferior to the West. It is archaic, barbaric, and irrational.
- Islam is a religion of violence and supports terrorism.

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7   "Islamophobia also refers to Moscow's reluctance to relinquish its position in Afghanistan, despite the estimated $300 million a month it takes to keep the Kabul regime going." "Insight", 4 II 1991, p. 37. As of March 1997 this was the first use in print known to the compilers of the Oxford English Dictionary.

8   *Islamophobia. Still a challenge for us all. A 20th-anniversary report*, ed. F. Elahi, O. Khan, Runnymede, 2017, p. 5: <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/Islamophobia%20Report%202018%20FINAL.pdf> [access: 27 XI 2020].

9   *Islamophobia. A challenge for us all*, The Runnymede Trust, 1997: <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/companies/17/74/Islamophobia-A-Challenge-for-Us-All.html> [access: 27 XI 2020].

10   *Islamophobia. Still a challenge...*, p. 7.

- Islam is a violent political ideology.[11]

The term was coined in the context of Muslims in Europe and formulated based on the more common xenophobia framework. Another definition created by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims states that Islamophobia is intrinsically linked to racism: "It is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness."[12] For the purpose of anchoring the current research and documentation project, a working definition of Islamophobia has been proposed. It can be illustrated by a range of examples rather than a list of essential features. It does not exhaust the aforementioned phenomena but rather shows the range of ways in which Islamophobia is experienced – from physical to verbal abuse and intimidation, as well as from socio-economic discrimination and exclusion, and, finally, to the entrenching of racism in our broader civic life. The challenge of understanding the current cultural and political period centres on providing a more workable and encompassing definition with regards to the phenomenon of Islamophobia. The Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project (IRDB) at the University of California's Berkeley's Center for Race and Gender defines Islamophobia as "a contrived fear or prejudice fomented by the existing Eurocentric and Orientalist global power structure." Also, it takes advantage of "a perceived or real Muslim threat through the maintenance and extension of existing disparities in economic, political, social and cultural relations, while rationalizing the necessity to deploy violence as a tool to achieve 'civilizational rehab' of the target communities." Islamophobia reaffirms a global racial structure through which disparities in resource distribution are maintained and extended.[13]

Islamophobia can indeed be simply defined as fear of, or anxiety about Muslims, but it also has a far more encompassing connotation that affects global law, economy, and society. On one level, its ideologues

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11  *Islamophobia. A challenge...*, p. 4.

12  *Report on the inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia / anti-Muslim hatred*, The All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims, 2017: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170c eee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf> [access: 27 III 2021].

13  *Islamophobia Research & Documentation Project*, Center for Race & Gender, University of California, Berkeley 2019: <https://www.crg.berkeley.edu/research/islamophobia-research-documentation-project/> [access: 27 IV 2021].

attempt to classify who belongs to the civilised world through the criteria for membership and who is the demonised and ostracised global other; but, on a more profound level, it serves as rationalisation for the existing domestic and global male power hierarchies and militarism. Islamophobia constructs a singular and homogenous undifferentiated image of Muslim men and women, one that presents them as religious fanatics, violent, and antithetical to civilisation itself. The otherness of Islam and Muslims is already underway with devastating consequences and has led to a virtual state of siege, not only in the affected communities but also in academia where the topic has not yet been comprehensively addressed. Islamophobia, as the current structural organisational principle of the Eurocentric world, is used by the ruling elite to extend and maintain patterns of racial, gender, colonial, ethnic and religious discrimination. This framing of Muslims is, of course, centuries old, but has re-emerged in new and toxic ways since COVID-19 spread in India.

### Political weapon of fake news and mass disinformation

As stated by the chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov, "the point of modern propaganda isn't only to misinform or push an agenda. It is to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth."[14] When politicians engage in disinformation, it increases the potential damage due to their large following in the media space. Exposure alone, when repeated, makes the audience bound to take misleading half-truths and manipulative fake news as the truth.[15]

On the surface, various statements Modi has made about Muslims and terrorism appear counter-intuitive to an argument that attempts to characterise his narratives as Islamophobic. He has referred to Indian Muslims as loyal and patriotic citizens who will live for India and die for India,

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14   G. Kasparov, *The point of modern propaganda isn't only to misinform or push an agenda. It is to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth*, Twitter. Garry Kasparov [online], 13 XII 2016 [access: 27 XI 2020]: <https://twitter.com/kasparov63/status/808750564284702720?lang=he>.

15   J. Bayer et al., *Disinformation and propaganda – impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States*, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, European Union February 2019: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL_STU(2019)608864_EN.pdf> [access: 27 XII 2020].

and has even dismissed those who may think Indian Muslims would join groups like Al-Qāʿida as delusional.[16] It is noteworthy that Modi is the head of a Hindu right-wing populist government with a great deal of anti-Muslim leaders explicitly in favour of Hindutva ideology. His reputation was also shaken due to serious accusations of being responsible for the mass murder of nearly 800 Muslims during the infamous 2002 riots when he served as the Chief Minister of Gujarat.[17] The riots have long dogged Modi, who was blamed by human rights groups for turning a blind eye to the violence. The release of the Supreme Court report clearing Modi of all charges against him came amid massive protests in north-eastern India over the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that proposes excluding Muslim refugees from citizenship eligibility.[18]

As shall be demonstrated, however, it is precisely his use of language that appears empathetic toward Muslims that obscures his own mobilisation of Islamophobia, a potent strategy that perhaps enables the racism in his discourse to pass unchecked. The aim of this article is also to unravel how the BJP's politicians implicitly support and stoke Islamophobia and misinformation.

### COVID-19 disinformation research

A study on misinformation in India by the University of Michigan, released in April 2020, has shown a rise in the number of debunked stories, particularly after the announcement of the Janata Curfew by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 22 March 2020, and the countrywide lockdown two days later to contain the spread of COVID-19. From just two in the third week of January 2020, the instances of debunked disinformation rose to 60 by the first week of April 2020, according to the study. As concluded

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16   *Prime Minister's interview to CNN's Fareed Zakaria*, Narendra Modi [online], 21 X 2014 [access: 27 I 2021]: <https://www.narendramodi.in/pms-interview-to-cnns-farid-zakaria-2865>.

17   *Timeline: Ayodhya holy site crisis*, BBC News [online], 6 XII 2012 [access: 27 I 2021]: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11436552>.

18   *India's Modi cleared of complicity in deadly communal riots*, "Vanguard" [online], 11 XII 2019 [access: 27 I 2021]: <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/12/indias-modi-cleared-of-complicity-in-deadly-communal-riots/>.

in the study, although fake stories around a cure for COVID-19 lessened in this period, false claims that affected people emotionally increased.[19]
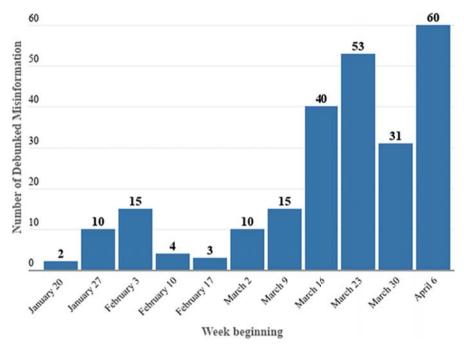


**Figure 1. Increase in the number of (debunked) misinformation stories. January–April 2020 (released on 18 IV 2020).**

Source: P. Salve, *Manipulative fake news on the rise in India under lockdown: study*, "India Spend" [online], 3 V 2020 [access: 29 I 2021]: <https://www.indiaspend.com/manipulative-fake-news-on-the-rise-in-india-under-lockdown-study/>.

The study uses 243 unique instances of disinformation from an archive maintained by Tattle Civic Technology (a Delhi-based news project that aims to make accurate information more accessible to mobile-first users).[20] The archive represents all the stories that have been debunked by six fact-checkers: "Alt News", "Boom"[21], "Factly", "India Today Fact Check", "Quint

19   S. Akbar et al., *Temporal patterns in COVID-19 related digital misinformation in India*, "Joyojeet Pal" [online], 16 IV 2020 [access: 27 I 2021]: <http://joyojeet.people.si.umich.edu/temporal-patterns-in-covid-19-misinformation-in-india/>.

20   Tattle [online, access: 27 I 2021]: <https://tattle.co.in/>.

21   A. Chowdhury, *Fake news in the time of coronavirus. A Boom study*, "Boom" [online], 8 v 2020 [access: 27 II 2021]: <https://www.boomlive.in/fact-file/fake-news-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-a-boom-study-8008/page-2>.

Webqoof", and "News Mobile Fact Checker"[22] between 23 January and 12 April 2020.

The momentum of misinformation was already building up before PM Modi's announcement of the Janata Curfew, but the study found there was a consistent rise in the number of debunked fake news stories following the third week of March 2020. The misinformation that was circulating on various social media apps, as found by the study, was classified into seven categories.[23] About 62 fake news stories were related to culture, defined as messages targeting a particular socio-religious, ethnic group, followed by 54 instances of fake news around government announcements and advisories.
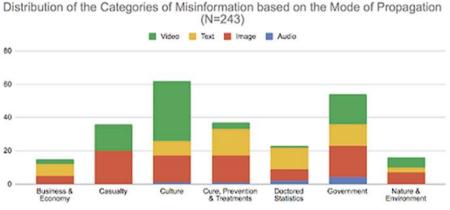


**Figure 2. Misinformation by mode of propagation (the green region signifies that video clips were used for spreading misinformation, the yellow, red and blue regions signify the usage of text, images and audio respectively).**

Source: S. Akbar *et al.*, *Temporal patterns in COVID-19 related digital misinformation in India*, "Joyojeet Pal" [online], 16 IV 2020 .

The two categories of disinformation that have received special attention from researchers for their consistent growth are stories about culture and government. This pattern has emerged with the apparent increase in stories about Indian Muslims and COVID-19, as well as stories of police brutality.

22   These six fact-checking projects have been certified by International Fact-Checkers Network (IFCN).

23   These categories were as follows: culture, cure, prevention & treatment, nature & the environment, casualty, business & economy, government and doctored statistics.

By the end of March 2020, the number of false stories had increased from 15 to 33. It is important to note that since then the Tablīghī Jamāʿat gathering at the Markaz Niẓām ad-Din mosque in New Delhi has been hailed as a coronavirus factory.[24] According to the study, the number of fake stories around the suffering of people in the pandemic or graphic imagery and COVID-19 cures peaked and fell from 18 instances to 12 during the same period. As stated by Jency Jacob, the editor of a Mumbai-based initiative that busts fake news:

> Post the Tablīghī Jamāʿat incident, we saw a change in the tone of fake news, focussing on a particular community that was being targeted as the super spreader. When it comes to communal posts, only text does not create the sort of required emotional connect with the viewer. And lay people cannot really figure out whether a video clip is new or old. In contrast, posts about cures, say drinking lemon water, don't really need an image for me to believe it.[25]

India appears to have entered a phase of disinformation. The misinformation has moved to cultural elements that are harder to verify.[26] As claimed by the authors of the research study:

> There are many reasons; one is pure mischief, people who enjoy seeing falsehoods – they create, propagate. Another reason is political; driven by those who want a certain agenda to prevail. And then, there is pure economics, on platforms where you can monetise virality (say YouTube), you can make money out of click-baiting people; the more extreme and controversial a piece of fake news sounds, the more likely it is that someone will click on it.[27]

According to the authors, "one thing that remains clear, however, is that misinformation travels fast", and that news sources may increase visitor numbers through deliberate misinformation (disinformation) or

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24  *Tablighi Jamaat is a factory of corona: VHP*, "The Siasat Daily" [online], 3 IV 2020 [access: 27 I 2021]: <https://www.siasat.com/tablighi-jamaat-factory-corona-vhp-1868672/>.

25  P. Salve, *Manipulative fake news on the rise in India under lockdown: study*, "India Spend" [online], 3 V 2020 [access: 29 I 2021]: <https://www.indiaspend.com/manipulative-fake-news-on-the-rise-in-india-under-lockdown-study/>.

26  Ibidem.

27  Ibidem.

advertising headlines. In such a situation, "mainstream news sources have been particularly complicit in Muslim-baiting."[28]

## Sources of disinformation

> Any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor. This is often rooted in, and generates, intolerance and hatred and, in certain contexts, can be demeaning and divisive.[29]

While we do not possess exhaustive data on political complicity in the spreading of misinformation and stoking of Islamophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is ample evidence that politicians have directly passed along information that has been found to be false. Based on the data gathered, it can be seen that most of the politicians engaged in spreading fake news used to be low-level public personas. Nevertheless, cases where top politicians, chief ministers or formal arms of the government, such as the Press Information Bureau, have spread misinformation[30] cease to be rare nowadays. It does not come as a surprise that politicians can play an important role in the management of misinformation. Owing that they can give an artefact more credence, public figures are often used to spread misinformation. This is due to the fact that they can amplify certain messages to their audiences and "make otherwise fringe beliefs get mainstream coverage."[31] As stated by Rebecca Lewis and Alice Marwick
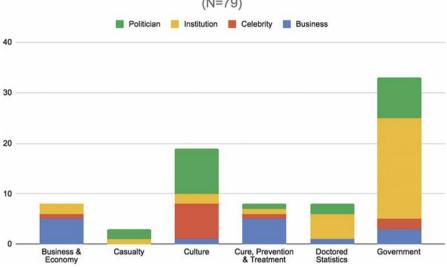
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28  S. Akbar et al., *Temporal...*

29  *United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech*, United Nations, September 2020: <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20 Strategy%20and%20PoA%20on%20Hate%20Speech_Guidance%20on%20 Addressing%20in%20field.pdf> [access: 27 I 2021].

30  *India and misinformation*, Storyful, August 2018, p. 4: <https://storyful.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Storyful-White-Paper-India-August-2018.pdf> [access: 29 I 2021].

31  B. Lewis, *Why influence matters in the spread of misinformation*, "Data & Society" [online], 20 XI 2018 [access: 29 I 2021]: <https://points.datasociety.net/ why-influence-matters-in-the-spread-of-misinformation-fc99ee69040e>.

in a report on media manipulation and disinformation online in 2017, "there are people who strategically spread so-called fake news to make money; trolls who create chaos for fun and politicians with a vested interest in propagating certain frames [...]."[32] Nowadays, widely followed and respected celebrities and politicians contribute enormously to misinformation.[33] Research by Oxford's Reuters Institute found that while politicians, celebrities and other prominent public figures were responsible for producing or spreading 20% of the false claims about coronavirus, their posts accounted for 69% of total social media engagement. This perfectly illustrates the point that celebrities and politicians with large social media followings are proving to be key distributors of disinformation relating to coronavirus.[34] India seems to be in line with this world trend.

Like many countries, India is witnessing a proliferation of spurious websites passing off fake news, hoaxes and conspiracy theories as news. Their sources are not usually related to foreign countries or non-state actors, as is often found in other parts of the world. Most of them serve domestic politics and focus on religious and political matters such as coronavirus, elections, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019, migrants, the situation in Kaśmīr or anti-Pakistan sentiments, to name but a few. The information technology units of Indian political parties (mainly BJP and Congress[35]) have been accused of continuously spreading disinformation against their political adversaries.[36] Numerous times the ruling party's politicians have

32 R. Lewis, A. Marwick, *Media manipulation and disinformation online*, Data & Society, 15 V 2017: <https://datasociety.net/library/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/> [access: 29 II 2021].

33 J. Waterson, *Influencers among "key distributors" of coronavirus misinformation*, "The Guardian" [online], 8 IV 2020 [access: 27 I 2021]: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/apr/08/influencers-being-key-distributors-of-coronavirus-fake-news>.

34 J. S. Brennen et al., *Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation*, Reuters Institute [online], 7 IV 2020 [access: 27 I 2021]: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation>.

35 S. Bansal, S. Poonam, *Misinformation is endangering India's election*, "The Atlantic" [online], 1 IV 2019 [access: 27 III 2021]: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/04/india-misinformation-election-fake-news/586123/>.

36 *Massive crackdown on fake news! Facebook removes 687 pages linked to Congress IT cell*, "Financial Express" [online], 1 IV 2019 [access: 28 III 2021]: <https://www.financialexpress.com/elections/massive-crackdown-on-fake-news-facebook-removes-687-pages-linked-to-congress-it-cell/1534375/>.

Attribution Prefences of Category-Wise COVID19 Related Misinformation
(N=79)

**Figure 3. Different kinds of sources used to persuade a reader of misinformation including attribution to a politician, an institution, a public figure such as a celebrity, or a business entity.**

Source: S. Akbar *et al.*, *Temporal patterns in COVID-19 related digital misinformation in India*, "Joyojeet Pal" [online], 16 IV 2020.

been found responsible for disseminating fake news subsequently targeting, for instance, left-leaning students of Jawaharlal Nehru University[37] or religious minorities.[38] But, even more than in the United States, fake news seeps into the national narrative as politicians and a credulous news media seize on reports that praise the country and bash its critics.[39] It is suspected that the lion's share of the fake news stories are not publicly refuted because

37 *From spreading fake news on JNU to garnering support for CAA through dubious claims, netizens are calling out BJP's IT cell*, "Firstpost" [online], 8 I 2020 [access: 27 III 2021]: <https://www.firstpost.com/india/from-fake-news-on-jnu-attack-to-luring-people-to-back-caa-through-false-promises-bjps-gargantuan-it-cell-is-being-called-out-by-netizens-7876491.html>.

38 V. Sharma, *BJP on backfoot on migrants issue and "fake" news targeting minorities*, "The Tribune" [online], 12 V 2020 [access: 28 III 2021]: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/reviews/story/bjp-on-back-foot-on-migrants-issue-and-fake-news-targeting-minorities-83777>.

39 M. N. Parth, S. Bengali, *Fake news fuels nationalism and Islamophobia – sound familiar? In this case, it's in India*, "Los Angeles Times" [online], 11 VII 2017 [access: 29 I 2021]: <https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-india-fake-news-20170711-story.html>.

they tend to serve the ruling BJP and its anti-Muslim nationalist agenda. As stated by the "Wall Street Journal's" South Asia journalist and expert Sadanand Dhume, "no single party or ideology has a monopoly on fake news in India, but it's certainly true that in many prominent cases stories that were later debunked took a pro-BJP line."[40]

The emergence of the pandemic only exacerbated the conflicts that tore apart the social fabric of India. It reached its climax when the government announced that one of the coronavirus hotspots in early March was the Tablīghī Jamā'at congregation and that their organisers violated the quarantine regulations.[41] Since then, the congregation has become the ultimate punching bag of the ruling BJP's agenda. As noted by the Minister for Minority Affairs Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, it was a "Talibani crime, not negligence."[42] Soon after, Indian politician Shobha Karandlaje deemed the meeting a deliberate attempt to spread the virus across the country. She pointed out that "one can smell corona jihād behind all this"[43] in reference to the religious gathering. Indeed, "many Hindus say Muslims are deliberately attempting to spread coronavirus to wage a holy war or jihād against the majority Hindus," said Zainab Sikander, a political commentator based in New Delhi.[44] According to Kapil Mishra, a local BJP leader notorious for hate speeches, "Tablīghī Jamā'at people have begun spitting on the doctors and other health workers. It's clear their aim is to infect as many people as possible with coronavirus and

40  *How fake news is fuelling India's nationalism*, "South China Morning Post" [online], 14 VII 2017 [access: 30 I 2021]: <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/2102639/how-fake-news-fuelling-indias-nationalism>.

41  N. Zajączkowska, *Hindu-Muslim relations in times of coronavirus*, "Studia Orientalne" 2020, nr 2 (18), p. 85.

42  V. Venugopal, *Tąblighi Jamaat is a Talibani crime, not negligence: Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi*, "The Economic Times" [online], 2 IV 2020 [access: 29 V 2020]: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/taąblighi-jamaat-is-a-talibani-crime-not-negligence-mukhtar-abbas-naąqvi/articleshow/74940835.cms?from=mdr>.

43  *Tablighi event: Shobha smells "Corona jihad"*, "The Hindu" [online], 4 IV 2020 [access: 29 V 2020]: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/tablighi-event-shobha-smells-corona-jihad/article31259288.ece>.

44  S. Yasir, *India is scapegoating Muslims for the spread of the coronavirus*, "Foreign Policy" [online], 22 IV 2020 [access: 29 V 2020]: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/22/india-muslims-coronavirus-scapegoat-modi-hindu-nationalism/>.

kill them."[45] Fake news that Muslims were spitting and dropping currency notes has been deliberately floated to spread the falsehood that they are responsible for COVID-19. By the time the rumour was proved to be false, it had spread like wildfire. In Karnataka, there was a record number of attacks on Muslims after the former Union Minister of State for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Anant Kumar Hegde, condemned members of Tablīghī Jamāʾat and called them terrorists. The political leader from Karnataka is no stranger to Islamophobic controversy. As he said in 2016, "as long as there is Islam in the world, there will be terrorism. Until we uproot Islam, we can't remove terrorism."[46] Another example of a BJP politician accused of misinformation is Amit Malviya, on social media also known as Mr Misinformation.[47] He is the head of the BJP's information technology unit and is said to serve as its chief propagandist.[48] In late March, Malviya tweeted to his nearly 500,000 followers:

> Delhi's dark underbelly is exploding! The last 3 months have seen an Islamic insurrection of sorts, first in the name of anti-CAA protests from Shaheen Bagh to Jamia, Jaffrabad to Seelampur. And now the illegal gathering of the radical Tablīghī Jamāʾat at the markaz. It needs a fix![49]

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45  H. Ellis-Petersen, S. A. Rahman, *Coronavirus conspiracy theories targeting Muslims spread in India*, "The Guardian" [online], 13 IV 2020 [access: 29 V 2020]: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-targeting-muslims-spread-in-india>.

46  *"Can't end terror until we uproot Islam," said minister Anantkumar Hegde. Old video surfaces*, New Delhi Television [online], 8 XII 2017 [access: 29 II 2021]: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/union-minister-anantkumar-hegde-cant-wipe-out-terrorism-till-we-uproot-islam-1785351>.

47  News Laundry, *TV Newsance Episode 77: Delhi election and Amit Malviya's fakery*, You Tube [online], 9 II 2020 [access: 29 II 2021]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJdCcXQtW4k&t=539s>; P. Chaudhuri, *Amit Malviya's fake news fountain: 16 pieces of misinformation spread by the BJP IT cell chief*, "Scroll" [online], 10 II 2020 [access: 10 III 2021]: <https://scroll.in/article/952731/amit-malviyas-fake-news-fountain-16-pieces-of-misinformation-spread-by-the-bjp-it-cell-chief>.

48  *ABP News invents "research" to praise Modi. BJP's Amit Malviya amplifies the fake news*, "News Laundry" [online], 10 IV 2020 [access: 29 II 2021]: <https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/04/10/abp-news-invents-research-to-praise-modi-bjps-amit-malviya-amplifies-the-fake-news>.

49  A. Malviya, *Delhi's dark underbelly is exploding! [...]*, Twitter. Amit Malviya [online], 31 III 2020 [access: 29 II 2021]: <https://twitter.com/amitmalviya/status/1245083081305776128?s=20>.

The pandemic inflamed greater racial profiling, entrenching pre-existing inequalities. According to a large-scale study conducted in 12 Indian states in 2020, stigma affected Indian Muslims already hard hit by the pandemic, with 84% of Muslims having lost their jobs during the lockdown compared with 66% of Hindus.[50] The findings prove that urban Muslims were significantly worse off with respect to employment and food security.[51] According to "The Wire's" report published in April 2020, medical attention was also denied to or delayed for Muslim patients.[52] A discriminatory policy has also manifested itself in a communally divisive announcement made towards residents in Ankanahalli village on the outskirts of Bengaluru in south Karnataka in early April: "Listen, everyone! The gram panchayat[53] is making this announcement. No sahibs (Muslims) should come into the village. No one should work for Muslims. If you do, you should pay a fine of Rs 500 to Rs 1,000."[54] The cities of Telangana, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka were also covered with posters prohibiting Muslims from entering certain districts.

Added to this, there have been several cases of boycotting Indian Muslims' services and goods.[55] As noted by the "Mint" journalist Shrabonti Bagchi, the call for an economic boycott of Muslim businesses is a banal,

50 S. Kesar et al., *Pandemic, informality, and vulnerability. Impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods in India*, Centre for Sustainable Employment, June 2020 (CSE Working Paper, 27), p. 18: <https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Kesar_et_al_Pandemic_Informality_Vulnerability_June_2020.pdf> [access: 20 III 2021].

51 Ibidem, p. 21.

52 *FIR against UP hospital which wouldn't allow Muslim patients without COVID-19 test*, "The Wire" [online], 20 IV 2020 [access: 20 III 2021]: <https://thewire.in/communalism/fir-meerut-hospital-muslim-patients-covid-19>.

53 An elective village council in India.

54 A. S. Mounika, *Video: Karnataka panchayat bans and ostracises Muslims over COVID-19 stigma*, "The News Minute" [online], 9 IV 2020 [access: 20 III 2021]: <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/video-karnataka-panchayat-bans-and-ostracises-muslims-over-covid-19-stigma-122222>.

55 A. Pandey, *"Was I wrong?" BJP MLA says boycott Muslim vegetable sellers, defiant*, "New Delhi Television" [online], 28 IV 2020 [access: 20 III 2021]: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-lockdown-on-camera-bjp-mla-suresh-tiwari-says-boycott-muslim-vegetable-vendors-defends-himself-2219589>.

yet dangerous trend.[56] Mounting claims that any interaction with a Muslim may expose people to the virus were immensely amplified by social media's wide-ranging influence. Islamophobic resolutions posted online by ordinary Indians or Facebook groups calling for an immediate economic boycott of Muslim-owned stores and businesses, such as the infamous case of MK Agrotech, are only a few examples of the anti-Muslim climate and growing communal mistrust.[57] In the state of Maharashtra, messages went viral on Whats App encouraging people to separate from the entire Muslim community because 16 of the 17 local COVID-19 patients were Muslim.[58] Ranjit Rajput, a newspaper publisher from Buldhana, said the discrimination was evident, "Messages were doing rounds on social media asking people to avoid buying from Muslims."[59] Leaders of the ruling party, such as Mahendra Bhatt, the MLA from Badrinath in Uttarakhand, legitimised the economic boycott of Muslims. He advised the people of Uttarakhand not to buy vegetables from Najibabad and asked people to think twice before patronising the shops of barbers and shoemakers, occupation groups that are traditionally Muslim.[60] In Uttar Pradesh, Muslim street vendors were also accused of infecting vegetables with saliva, even by local politicians. Soon after, alarming acts of violence against Muslims were observed, for instance, attacking Muslim volunteers on the pretext they were poisoning water and food.[61] Probably one of the most controversial cases

56   S. Bagchi, *The religion of business*, "Mint" [online], 13 IV 2020 [access: 20 III 2021]: <https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/features/the-religion-of-business-11586495537981.html>.

57   Ibidem.

58   S. Arya, *Muslims face social boycott in Buldhana, business too hit*, "The Times of India" [online], 20 IV 2020 [access: 20 III 2021]: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/muslims-face-social-boycott-in-buldhana-business-too-hit-article-show/75102273.cms>.

59   M. Afeef, *Does law allow calls to boycott Muslims during the COVID-19 lockdown?*, "The Wire" [online], 28 V 2020 [access: 20 III 2021]: <https://thewire.in/communalism/covid-19-lockdown-muslims-boycott-law>.

60   D. Trivedi, *Targeting a community*, "Frontline" [online], 8 V 2020 [access: 15 VI 2020]: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/article31374077.ece>.

61   K. V. Aditya Bharadwaj, *Volunteers distributing relief material attacked*, "The Hindu" [online], 6 IV 2020 [access: 15 IV 2021]: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/volunteers-distributing-relief-material-attacked/article31274032.ece>.

was the refusal of hospital assistance to a pregnant Muslim woman. As alleged by the husband, doctors at a government hospital in Bharatpur district in Rajasthan refused to attend to a pregnant woman in labour after finding out that she was a Muslim. These circumstances led to the death of the child.[62]



**Figure 4. Selected headlines from Hindi TV channels in 2020**

Source: L. Murthy, *The contagion of hate In India*, Association for Progressive Communications, November 2020, p. 12: <https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/APC_Hate_Speech_V10_0.pdf> [access: 15 VI 2020].

Starting in March 2020, Islamophobic headlines and hashtags such as *#CoronaJihad, #TablighiJamaatVirus, #CoronaBombsTablighi* began to circulate rapidly in a large section of the Indian media. These are a few examples of Islamophobic headlines published by Hindi TV channels (see: figure 4): "In the war on Corona, a blow struck by Jamaat", "Save the nation from Corona Jihad", "Who is the villain of Nizamuddin?", "Murderous sin in the name of religion."[63] The pervasive narrative is best exemplified by a meme portraying China as a producer of the virus and Muslims as

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62    D. Trivedi, *Targeting...*
63    Translated from original text in Hindi.

its distributors.[64] Another tweet with the words *corona jihād*, which was removed for violating Twitter's rules, contained a caricatured representation of a Muslim trying to push an Indian off a cliff. Also, "The Hindu" newspaper displayed a cartoon of coronavirus with Muslim attire but later apologised for its "completely unintentional" decision to link the crisis to Muslim terrorists, and replaced it with a more neutral image. A great deal of attention has been focused on often unrelated or manipulated films, showing Indian Muslims spitting on police and medical services, poisoning food before selling it, and ostentatiously ignoring the lockdown guidelines. The hate campaign took place primarily on Twitter, Facebook and Whats App but the growing and most dangerous reach has been reported on Tik Tok, the Chinese short-form video app which was banned in India in June 2020.[65] At this point it is worth emphasising that, nowadays, India is one of the biggest markets for several social media and communication companies with 390 million users of Whats App (2019),[66] 290 million registered on Facebook (2021)[67] and over 17.5 million Twitter accounts (2021).[68]

According to Media Scanner, a fact-checking platform, there have been at least 69 fake videos used against the Muslim community in India[69] which

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64  L. Murthy, *The contagion of hate In India*, Association for Progressive Communications, November 2020: <https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/APC_Hate_Speech_V10_0.pdf> [access: 15 VI 2020].

65  *Government bans 59 mobile apps which are prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order*, "Government of India Press Information Bureau" [online], 29 VI 2020 [access: 30 VI 2020]: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleseDetailm.aspx?PRID=1635206#>.

66  M. Iqbal, *WhatsApp revenue and usage statistics (2021)*, "Business of Apps" [online], 17 XII 2021 [access: 17 XII 2021]: <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/whatsapp-statistics>.

67  *Countries with the most Facebook users 2021*, "Statista" [online], 9 II 2021 [access: 15 IV 2021]: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/268136/top-15-countries-based-on-number-of-facebook-users>.

68  *Countries with the most Twitter users 2021*, "Statista" [online, access: 15 IV 2021]: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/242606/number-of-active-twitter-users-in-selected-countries/>.

69  *Fake Alert: Long list of Islamophobic fake news which is going viral during coronavirus pandemic*, Media Scanner [online], 16 V 2020 [access: 15 IV 2021]: <https://mediascanner.in/fake-alert-long-list-of-islamophobic-fake-news-which-is-going-viral-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

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engendered at least 28 attacks.[70] Other fake news journalist initiatives, such as "Alt News" or "Boom",[71] also played a significant role in chasing disseminating misinformation and effectively debunking it. A similar fate befell a majority of films imputing Muslims to deliberately spread the virus.

**Coronavirus negligence among people regardless of religion or politics**

There is a clear pattern of scapegoating and singling out of events held by Muslim associations even though other faith communities have hosted similar large-scale gatherings.[72] "Coronavirus exposes the idiocy of Islamophobia"[73] writes Al Jazeera journalist Mehdi Hassan. The Indian media and government tirelessly blamed Muslims for the infection, as if Tablīghī Jamā'at is the only reason behind this pandemic. There is also a bit of hypocrisy in stigmatising only one of many groups, both religious and non-religious, since several illegal gatherings were proved to have taken place during the lockdown. As reported by an Indian journalist Laxmi Murthi, "on 24 February, a month and a half after the first coronavirus case was detected in the country, nearly 100,000 people gathered in Ahmedabad for the »Namaste Trump« extravaganza to mark US President Donald Trump's visit." Soon after, thousands of Hindu devotees publicly celebrated Mahāśivaratrī (Eng. Great Night of Shiva) organised by Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev.[74] It was also BJP politicians, including Yogi Adityanath, who

70  *India: aftermath of hateful Islamophobic campaign and fake news amidst corona virus pandemic*, Media Scanner [online], 14 IV 2020 [access: 15 IV 2021]: <https://media-ascanner.in/india-aftermath-of-hateful-islamophobic-campaign-and-fake-news-amidst-corona-virus-pandemic>.

71  *Fact Check*, "Boom" [online, access: 15 IV 2021]: <https://www.boomlive.in/fact-check>.

72  *Defying lockdown, devotees in Bengal assemble at temples on Ram Navami*, "The Hindu" [online], 2 IV 2020 [access: 15 IV 2021]: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kol-kata/defying-lockdown-devotees-in-bengal-assemble-at-temples-on-ram-navami/article31237211.ece>.

73  M. Hasan, *The coronavirus is empowering Islamophobes – but exposing the idiocy of Islamophobia*, "The Intercept" [online], 14 IV 2020 [access: 15 VI 2020]: <https://theintercept.com/2020/04/14/coronavirus-muslims-islamophobia/>.

74  *COVID-19: was Tablighi Jamaat event the only mass gathering leading up to the lockdown?*, "Sabrang" [online], 18 IV 2020 [access: 15 IV 2021]: <https://sabrangindia.in/article/covid-19-was-tablighi-jamaat-event-only-mass-gathering-leading-lockdown>.

actively participated in a large religious gathering during which no social distancing was practiced.[75] Unlike the Tablīghī Jamāʿat, this happened after Modi ordered the lockdown of the whole country, and admonished that people's lives and health were at stake. Suffice to say that the Prime Minister himself did not stop parliament, even when he ordered quarantine all over the country on 22 March. As late as 23 March, he focused on the state of Madhya Pradesh, in which the BJP party successfully overthrew the local government under the leadership of the biggest opposition party – the Indian National Congress.[76] It is worth adding that the Tablīghī Jamāʿatheld on 16 March, before the beginning of the lockdown in New Delhi, with the consent of the city authorities.

### Conclusions and remarks for further research

COVID-19 has fuelled communal tensions and scapegoated many communities including the Chinese, Jews, Africans, Muslims, refugees and minorities who have faced both covert and overt forms of violence. This not only harms minorities but also prevents accurate scientifically informed public health information from reaching the public and can exacerbate the spread while extending the pandemic for all. The new narrative that Muslims are planning to spread the virus and partake in a corona jihād is a continuation of the underlying anti-Muslim propaganda initiated by hardliners in Indian politics. Indeed, BJP politicians are often accused of making little attempt to resolve the conflict, instead, some of them are known for nourishing Hindutva-oriented movements as it serves their political interests. Modi's claim in 2017[77] that "India takes pride in being the land of diversity", becomes an obsolete and groundless slogan. This article has

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75  A. Jain, *BJP ignores PM Modi's social distancing advice at Shivraj Singh Chouhan's oath taking*, "Huffington Post" [online], 24 III 2020 [access: 15 VI 2020]: <https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/bjp-madhya-pradesh-social-distancing-shivraj-singh-chouhan_in_5e79a7bbc5b62f90bc508234>.

76  A. Ashraf, *How Modi's BJP lagged on COVID-19 response in Central India*, "TRT World" [online], 21 IV 2020 [access: 15 VI 2020]: <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/how-modi-s-bjp-lagged-on-covid-19-response-in-central-india-35617>.

77  *The interview of PM Narendra Modi with "Time"*, Narendra Modi [online], 8 V 2015 [access: 15 VI 2020]: <https://www.narendramodi.in/the-interview-of-pm-narendra-modi-with-time-7846>.

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provided an analysis of the recent Islamophobic narratives within social media and the BJP's discourse.

The one salient conclusion that can be drawn is that there appears to have been a significant normalisation of Islamophobia in India and it has permeated outside of Hindutva and into the Indian socio-political mainstream. The rapid-fire distribution of Islamophobic COVID-19 hate speech and disinformation was enabled by a media ecosystem in India that saw news organisations abandoning the norms of unbiased reporting to embrace vitriolic Islamophobia in their coverage. The political context is then crucial in understanding how India has become such a fertile ground for Islamophobia and the spread of disinformation. Hate speech targeting Muslims continues to run rampant across social media platforms. Owing to the incessant anti-Muslim remarks made by Indian politicians which have been meticulously collected and thoroughly analysed, the hypothesis that the BJP plays a vital role in stoking Islamophobia and contributing to the spiral of distrust aimed at Indian Muslims appears to be fully legitimate. Nonetheless, future researchers would be advised to conduct qualitative and quantitative studies to verify this hypothesis, and if validated, analyse the extent to which Islamophobia has been normalised in India. Only then can strategies to dismantle Islamophobia be proposed to improve the conditions of the lives of Indian Muslims and protect their rights. This article is not an exhaustive elaboration of the topic at hand, but merely a brief sketch of the novel phenomenon of growing Islamophobia in times of coronavirus. According to the data gathered, there is solid evidence of Indian politicians perpetuating, neglecting and, at times, stoking the corona jihād narrative. There are, certainly, a number of interpretations of this apparent empirical trend that do not immediately assume Indians are pro-Islamophobia. In fact, the assumption that 90% of Indians are racist because they approve of Modi's leadership would be ridiculous and illegitimate[78].

Effectively combating community-transmitted disinformation against Indian Muslims necessitates placing greater importance on strategies and

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78  B. Stokes, D. Manevich, H. Chwe, *Three years in, Modi remains very popular. Broad public satisfaction with economy; declining support for U. S.*, Pew Research Center, 15 XI 2017: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/11/15/indiamodi-remains-very-popular-three-years-in/> [access: 15 VI 2020].

long-term solutions. Another paradigm shift is inevitable and there seem to be two main approaches – protection or empowerment.

> They 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, whereas long-term solutions include the building of a culture of anti-racism, historical awareness and critical media literacy from childhood upwards. They involve 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.[79]

As stated by Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, a renowned Indian journalist against whom an arrest warrant has been issued, "there needs to be greater vigilance and monitoring. Several political parties and corporate bodies have an army of anonymous purveyors of the net. They spread false information about targets that are real."[80] One should never forget that populists tend to exploit whatever communications channels are available. Historian and internet pioneer Ian Peter argues that:

> It is not in the interests of either the media or the internet giants who propagate information, nor of governments, to create a climate in which information cannot be manipulated for political, social or economic gain. Propaganda and the desire to distort the truth for political and other ends have always been with us and will adapt to any form of new media which allows open communication and information flows.[81]

79   S. Banaji, R. Bhat, *Disinformation against Indian Muslims during the COVID-19 pandemic*, Students against Hindutva Ideology [online], 15 IX 2020 [access: 15 IV 2021]: <https://www.studentsagainsthindutvaideology.org/post/disinformation-against-indian-muslims-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

80   M. Krishnan, *How fake news is widening social rifts in India*, Deutsche Welle [online], 9 X 2017 [access: 15 IV 2021]: <https://www.dw.com/en/how-fake-news-is-widening-social-rifts-in-india/a-40875997>.

81   J. Anderson, L. Rainie, *The future of truth and misinformation online*, Pew Research Center [online], 19 X 2017 [access: 15 IV 2021]: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/10/19/the-future-of-truth-and-misinformation-online/>.

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As the contagion of fake news has gripped the world in equal parts, the issue of fake news is not likely to disappear anytime soon. Researchers agree that human reasoning, when applied appropriately, should be a powerful salve against the lure of misinformation.[82] All the same, the question of how to make global society verify and discern the truth remains unanswered.

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82  G. Pennycook, D. G. Rand, *The psychology of fake news*, "Trends in Cognitive Sciences" 2021, vol. 25, p. 388–402: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1364661321000516> [access: 15 V 2021].

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