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Social Media as a Space for Islamophobia: COVID and Social-Environment Crisis Management

Swati Chakraborty[1]
Institute of Legal Studies and Research, GLA University, Uttar Pradesh, India
Email: swatichakraborty02@gmail.com

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed an emergency of prejudice and savagery via social media by traditional 'patriots' in India. Meta, Twitter, and Instagram have turned into digital spaces full of deception about the pandemic. Hindu Instagram accounts such as @Hindu_secrets and @Hindu_he_hum have been unwavering and dedicated in spreading Islamophobic crusades by utilizing the COVID-19 pandemic. This has opened doors for hatred directed at Muslim people in India. This study situates itself inside the system of Stuart Hall's encoding and translating hypothesis to reveal the visual and printed codes used to make shameful and obtrusive generalizations that dehumanize and slander specific networks utilizing social media platforms. This is an explorative request that took part through a semiotic examination of the Instagram accounts of @Hindu_secrets and @Hindu_he_hum. The review tracked down encoded generalizations of danger in the utilization of variety, strict designs, garments, and other actual markers of social character in producing Islamophobic content. COVID-19 was depicted to as having Islamic parentage in the images; consequently, it depicted the Muslim people group as sustaining and deliberately spreading the infection across India and abroad.

Keywords: COVID-19, social media, hate speech, Islamophobia, politics in India

Introduction

In March 2020, India, along with most countries in the world, imposed a nationwide lockdown as a collective measure to combat the coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic. The contagious nature of the disease coupled with India's lockdown situation echoed a state of fear and anxiety associated, with case numbers rising dramatically every day.[2] The psychosocial fear of the disease translated into a widespread tendency towards racism and Islamophobia. This was heightened by citizens' increased engagement with social media and television news channels during the lockdown.

[1] Swati Chakraborty is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Legal Studies and Research, GLA University, India.
[2] Ahuja et al. 2020,1.

India is a particularly discursive case to study where the public health crisis provided a continued harboring of negative attitudes towards the Muslim community, facilitated by the right-leaning central government. In India, the pandemic coincided with three major socio-political events: an ongoing countrywide protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) 2019, right-wing Hindu violence against Muslim residents at protest sites in Northeast Delhi, and the Tablighi Jamaat Religious Congregation in New Delhi. The Tablighi Jamaat congregation reportedly resulted in more than 1,000 cases of COVID-19, including some of the earliest recorded instances of death in India.[3]

Further, the television news coverage of the congregation members leaving New Delhi led to social media outrage expressed by the trending hashtags 'Tablighi Virus' and 'Corona Jihad' on the social media platform Twitter."[4] Nelkin and Gilman's study suggests that blaming a designated 'other' has often been cited as a way to make mysterious and devastating diseases comprehensible and possibly controllable. In the case of India, the pandemic becomes another site where repressed memories of Hindu–Muslim conflicts dating back to the country's violent partition and the overt prejudice towards the Muslim community are reprised.[5] According to Kidwai and Sahar in *Time* magazine, the hashtag 'Corona Jihad' appeared 300,000 times on both Twitter and Instagram in 2020 following the undivided media attention given to the congregation.[6]

The narrative of hatred and fear towards Muslims in India proliferated during COVID-19 due to the phenomenon of fake news. The ease of creating fake news and providing accessibility to the masses using news media channels, social media, and online chat platforms, amongst other sources, have played crucial roles in proliferating hate around the world.[7] A study of anti-Islamic stereotypes propagated by Romanian media can be used to draw parallels with India. Doru Pop argues that Romania was witnessing a generalized anti-Islam propaganda where a form of unjustified Islamophobia was cultivated for ideological purposes by their leaders and the media.[8] Academia has taken note of the role of social media during this pandemic and its connection with the rise in racism. For instance, a study by Yang et al. sought to understand whether the discrimination experienced by Asian Americans was associated with more screen time on social media.[9] Another study by Nagar and Gill found a correlation between fake news on social media nurturing Islamophobic attitudes and circulating negative content about the community.[10] Discrimination and prejudice in India have been studied mainly through inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts where the language of public discourse has been at the center of understanding identity politics. This public language, as Singh points out, is constructed of signs, symbols, and narratives that are used in shaping the 'other' during inter-ethnic conflicts.[11] Her study on the semiotics of anti-Muslim violence during the

[3] Johny 2020.
[4] Kidwai and Sahar 2020, n.pag.
[5] Nelkin and Gilman's 1988, 363.
[6] Kidwai and Sahar 2020.
[7] Rajan 2019.
[8] Pop 2016.
[9] Yang et al. 2020.
[10] Nagar and Gill 2020.
[11] Singh 2009.

2002 Gujarat riots highlights how opinion leaders use these language tools to inculcate inhumane and prejudicial attitudes in causing and legitimizing grotesque forms of violence.[12]

This study expands on work in semiotics to understand the moulding of the public psyche. A paradigmatic analysis is used to look at the content of memes posted by the administrators of two ideologically Hindu right-wing Instagram accounts. The constructive nature of meme formation and circulation within a sociocultural context was explored using Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding model to learn the circulation process of digital objects on social media.[13] Bødker's interpretation of Hall's model studying contemporary journalism and its circulation as products of culture made him position social media as replacing, supplementing, or interspersing with traditional mediums of mass communication like print and broadcast.[14] This study fills a gap in the literature around social media and its new role in public communication in order to focus exclusively on a digital object and present it as what Hall described as a 'symbolic vehicle'.[15]

Specifically, this paper studies the role of the digital object in reproducing dominant ideological perspectives in a religious and culturally diverse country like India. There is an attempt to steer away from earlier studies on global Islamophobia through anti-Islamic representations in Western news media and other forms of established news media circulations.[16] Both Copsey et al. and Awan[17] state that online Islamophobia remains under-researched, both on a policy level and an academic level, often covered instead under the umbrella label of 'cyber hate'. This research furthers our understanding of social media processes and how they dictate the construction of the 'demonic' or 'terrorizing' image of Muslims in India. Unraveling the loaded context of a digital object, the article looked at memes posted within the period of the first phase of the COVID-19 lockdown in India. Paradigmatic analysis of the Instagram accounts @Hindu_he_hum and @Hindu_Secrets as visual frames are undertaken, and the images are analyzed using the semiotic tools of signifier and signified to identify representations of anti-Muslim stereotypes. The digital objects play a role in perpetuating fear through public discourses blaming the community's religious practice as spreading the virus in contrast to the painting of Hindu right-wing outfits as saviours of the same.

Literature Review

From legislative issues to online spaces, Muslims, or indeed anything related to Islam, are often dehumanized. This is considered Islamophobia. Such correlations build up cognizant and subliminal inclinations, and prime society and officials to conduct extreme and oppressive measures to address the danger apparently presented by Muslims and Islam.

[12] Ibid.
[13] Hall 1973.
[14] Bødker's 2016.
[15] Hall 1973.
[16] Baker et al. 2013; Tornberg and Tornberg 2016
[17] Copsey et al. 2013 and Awan 2016.

This cycle is the same old thing. As a result, it will shock no one that amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no lack of media mentions, Twitter hashtags, and legislators utilizing Islamophobia to incite frenzy and social division by connecting the pandemic with Muslims and Islam. There is no question that the resurgence of patriotic opinion in numerous regions of the world is one of the main peculiarities of contemporary legislation. While a few legislators use legislation to overcome social contrasts and bind together individuals locally, there are other people who, in Kenneth Burke's words, "abuse images" to make a split between one group and another.[18]

American rhetorician Kenneth Burke utilized the words "new way of talking" to portray his methodology in his book *A Manner of Speaking of Thought Processes*.[19] With this articulation, Burke was alluding to a rediscovery of those parts of ordinary language that have logical power — that is, language that is moving and enticing — yet we frequently disregard it, chiefly because we will isolate the expository parts of talk from its different elements. We have an outlandish inclination, Burke accepted, to regard a few texts as explanatory and to regard others like they need powerful desires. Burke evaluated this polarity and seemed to persuade that all talk has the property of the manner of speaking to some degree. At the end of the day, since Burke was keen on the expository elements of all types of talk, he dismissed the thought that specific sorts of language, like political discourses, ought to be viewed as logical.

One outcome of Burke's methodology is that the way of talking should be visible in all types of language, hence characterizing the manner of speaking as a different and explicit method of talk supports the measurement, the analysis and the modeling of human behavior. Yet, the arrangement, obviously, isn't to zero in on specific sorts of talk, but rather on the unambiguous properties of the talk itself. Burke offered various implications of approaches to talking as to how he would decipher those pieces of talk that he ensured applied an informative or hortatory charm, and which turned out to be logically different. Indeed, Burke's system does not include a redefinition of the way of talking, so much as it is an expansion of how we can decipher the approach to talking.

Criticism is important, for when definitional boundaries are eroded, the integrity of a specifiable domain can potentially be damaged. On the other hand, how boundaries are established is often a matter of convention—and perhaps even prejudice—and expanding those boundaries does not necessarily destroy whatever it was that those boundaries formerly guarded. When Marshall McLuhan decided to analyze comic books and advertising as important parts of the media environment, he provoked many critics to cry foul and claim that he was attacking the boundary that separated true literature from crass commercial texts. They complained, in other words, that those boundaries should not be breached, and they based that argument on the strength of their belief that one should never mix high and low cultures. But McLuhan’s approach prevailed in the end, and cultural studies have been richer for his success. Similarly, Burke’s determination to address the rhetorical properties of all forms of discourse helped make it possible to study newer forms of representation (such as visual communication) without abandoning

[18] Kenneth Burke's 1966, 16.
[19] Kenneth Burke 1950.

the theories and concepts first developed by the ancient rhetoricians. Things should not lose their inherent interest for scholars just because they are matters of everyday life.

Interest does not necessarily have an equal endorsement, though, and in studying the inherently rhetorical qualities present in all forms of discourse, Burke was not adopting the naive view that persuasion was always good or that it was never used for disreputable purposes. As far back as 1931, Burke was advising people to be on guard against rhetoric—to avoid being taken in by the clever and sometimes deceitful use of language. This was motivated precisely by his expanded understanding of the essential rhetoric of discourse, for he was aware of the power of rhetoric as a tool that might be used to promote ideas that ran counter to the public interest. Burke published The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle, an influential essay that used the tools of rhetorical analysis to trace Hitler's rise to power in 1930s Germany.[20] He was one of the first to look at Hitler's speeches not solely to condemn them but to try to understand why they might be persuasive in particular contexts. Tragically, hate speech is often persuasive, and simply dismissing it without trying to understand what makes it successful is to choose to be deliberately ignorant about things of considerable importance. It is difficult to be on guard against hate speech if we are unable to recognize it.

One of the things that distinguishes Burke from his predecessors, and even his contemporaries, is his interest in the subject of motive. Burke was concerned with more than the mechanics of persuasion; he also had a deep and abiding interest in what drives or motivates us, especially what motivates us to engage in persuasive discourse. He also possessed an equally intense interest in the ways that different motives can motivate different rhetorical appeals; that is, we make strategic choices regarding the means by which we endeavour to use the power of language to achieve our goals. These concerns led Burke to reconceptualize the idea of persuasion by framing it as a mode of identification or, as he preferred, 'consubstantiation'. Thus, Burke suggests that when trying to appeal to someone to gain their consent, you must first choose the appropriate appeal before making a gesture toward identification—or consubstantiality. Identifying with your audience—what Aristotle would have called pathos—is, therefore, a significant subject for Burke. The rhetorician J. Killingsworth, who was greatly influenced by Burke, clarifies this idea of identification/consubstantiation with an example: a politician claims to have grown up as a farmer when he addresses an audience of farmers.[21] He appeals to the common ground (sub-stance) of past experience in order to close the distance between himself and the people he seeks to please. Appeals always involve acts of transformation and substitution. The politician becomes a farmer for the moment, or he substitutes an image of a farm boy from days past for the present image of the politician that stands before the farmers. The identification depends upon the power of the appeal to close the distance.

Killingsworth's example, which he derives directly from Burke, returns us to Aristotle's idea of seeking the available means of persuasion for a given situation. In this example, that situation is a politician's stump speech, and thus the traditional rhetorical overtones are obvious. But one could easily imagine a less overt situation, in which the

[20] Burke 1939.
[21] Killingsworth 2005.

speaker seeks a more attenuated or modest degree of compliance and yet still makes an appeal that involves a kind of transformative or substitutional movement.

Because of the abuse of messages by legislators, racial and other collective contests have emerged in a few nations, such as Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, the former Yugoslavia, and the former Soviet Union, where individuals from minority networks have frequently been met with threatening and barbaric treatment from the majority of population.

India is no exception; in many events, Hindu patriot pioneers have incited viciousness against Muslims in India. Since the 1980s, radical Hinduism has emerged as a formidable force in Indian politics. In their effort to assert Hindu nationalism and to regain the perceived loss of Hindu dignity and identity, Hindu nationalist leaders frequently exploit Hindu-Muslim antagonism by propagating xenophobic discourse, resulting in violence against the Muslim community. In this communal antagonism, Hindu nationalist leaders often define their members as standing firm against the alien Muslim community: us against them. Balibar points out that 'bad' nationalism tends to subjugate and destroy. It excludes people from an "imperialist and racist perspective".[22] This form of 'bad' nationalism is derived from hatred and mistrust of other groups in the community. The rhetoric that emerges from such nationalist feelings endeavours to construct a sense of national identity by scapegoating other groups.

Charting Socio-Political Manifestations of Anti-Muslim Attitude

Pop states that a larger social divide is hidden behind the political use of anti-Muslim emotions in order to gain public support.[23] According to Mathur, the contemporary promotion of a 'fear of Islam' uses the medieval story of the divide in political discourses for anti-Muslim representations, which becomes a double disadvantage for the Islamic countries that are already in a state of economic distress.[24] This is implicit in anti-refugee and anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies deployed by Western politicians and leaders who encourage negative narratives around the Muslim community by evoking terrorist attacks, such as September 11 and the Paris attacks.[25] In countries like India, where the history of independence is tied with the violent memories of partition, anti-Muslim thinking is preserved in the collective psyches across generations through popular, official, and personal spheres of information. Singh demonstrates how culturally encoded prejudices and stereotypes against the Muslim community provide public legitimacy for targeted anti-Muslim violence by Hindu right-wing organizations, such as that which was enacted with state complicity during the 2002 Gujarat riots.[26] Drawing parallels with religious fundamentalism in Romania, the current government in India similarly applies a mix of fundamentalist religious discourse and politics in order to mobilize nationalist sentiments.[27] The 2014 election of Narendra Modi as prime minister

[22] Balibar 1991, 47.
[23] Pop 2016.
[24] Mathur 2008.
[25] Pop 2016.
[26] Singh 2009.
[27] Frunza 2015.

under his Hindutva political organization, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is an example of how religion operates within the political sphere.

While analyzing violence in different political systems, Mathur argues that it is important to recognize the link between culture and violence sponsored by democratically run state institutions.[28] She argues that violence in democratic contexts cannot be executed without tacit public consent. Acknowledging the complexity of such violence and the public discourse propagated, it is interesting to note the similarity in the political and cultural atmospheres surrounding some of the most defining moments of Islamophobia in India: the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992, the Gujarat riots of 2002, the introduction of Citizenship Amendment Act 2019, and the subsequent cases of violence against groups protesting the Act. All these events bear visible re-tellings of the Hindu-Muslim divide which Pandey states is the premise of colonial governance where Muslims were adventurers raiding the land, settling, and setting up towns and kingdoms, making religion and ethnicity a part of politics.[29] He further argues that with religion and ethnicity becoming a significant site of political inquiry, Indian nationalism became elaborate on this idea of 'we' against the Muslim community, with Muslims henceforth marked as a minority.[30] As Singh highlights, the British policy of divide and rule whispered the communal line of the 1947 partition which formed an Islamic Pakistan and a secular India ensured the continued existence of Hindu-Muslim conflict in India.[31]

The present context of the COVID-19 pandemic shows that cases of racism are emerging across the world, with the virus used as a cover prejudiced behaviour. Ruiz et al. find that since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, 31 percent of Asian Americans and 21 percent of Black adults in the United States (US) reported that they were subjected to expressions of racist views, slurs, or jokes, compared to 8 percent of white adults.[32] In 2013, when the Washington Post printed a map of world's least and most racially tolerant countries, India was labeled as one of the two least tolerant countries, with 43.5 percent of Indians stating that they would not want a neighbour of a different race.[33] When China reported the first site of the virus outbreak, Haokip observed how the pandemic in India reinforced overt acts of racism towards northeast Indians, who have more typical north Asian physical features.[34] Along with India, nations in Europe, Iran, and the US reported cases of racism towards people of Asian descent with leaders like then-US President Donald Trump and BJP Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) Raja Singh, who rechristened COVID-19 as the 'Chinese Virus or China Virus', advocating xenophobia, and intolerance.[35]

Amidst this heightened scale of racism in early 2020, Prime Minister Modi announced a 21-day lockdown in late March as the first step towards curbing the rising cases of the virus. The lockdown came at a time when the capital city of Delhi had

[28] Mathur 2008.
[29] Pandey 1999.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Singh 2009.
[32] Ruiz et al. 2020.
[33] Haokip 2020.
[34] Haokip 2020.
[35] In Haokip 2020.

witnessed rapid violence against Muslim and anti-CAA protestors in northeast Delhi. A report by a fact-finding committee appointed by the Delhi Minorities Committee showed that the Delhi police were "complicit" in targeted violence conducted by Hindu right-wing mobs.[36] The report accused the police of inaction at the site of violence and of conducting a biased investigation. Jain and Dwivedi noted that the First Information Report (FIR) was incorrectly registered by Delhi police; the perpetrators or 'conspirators' of the violence were reported as anti-CAA protestors including the common public, activists, and student leaders.[37] This shows the state's intervention in the anti-Muslim movement.

The Delhi Minorities Committee report recorded statements of several locals at the site of the assault.[38] They stated that the outbreak of the violence on 23 February 2020 ensued after BJP MLA Kapil Sharma gave an ultimatum to the police assigned to the anti-CAA protest site to clear out the protestors within two days of US President Trump's visit to India. The onslaught that followed expanded into anti-Muslim riots in the northeastern parts of Delhi. The violence, popularly known as the 2020 Delhi Riots, was still being investigated when the lockdown was imposed. This communal tension turned into public vilification of members who attended the Islamic congregation of Tablighi Jamaat in New Delhi on 13-15 March 2020, which included attendees from major Muslim countries around the world. The congregation received negative media attention when the earliest cases of death from COVID-19 were associated with the event: it was reported that six people from Telangana who had attended the congregation had succumbed to COVID-19.[39] Political analyst Shahid Siddiqui points out that although the group was 'callous' and failed to maintain social distancing rules, it was shocking to see the blame of the outbreak in India being deflected towards members of Tablighi Jamaat and, through association, the general Muslim population.[40]

Government officials specifically highlighted the Tablighi Jamaat incident in their public addresses to justify the rising number of cases of COVID-19 in India. Ahuja et al observed that such description of COVID-19 disseminated as the 'Tablighi spread', which was as detrimental as mislabeling the virus as the 'Wuhan virus' or 'Kung flu'.[41] Following the heightening cases of xenophobia in India, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) included India in its list of countries of particular concern' in their 2020 Annual report for the first time since 2004.[42] The report reasons that the Indian government used its dominance in parliament to implement national-level policies which violated religious freedom, especially of the Muslim community, referring to the CAA 2019.[43] When seen in the context of a public health crisis, the well-being of Indians was noted to be negatively affected due to the fear of COVID-19, as well as the spread of Islamophobia, which was no longer limited to bigotry.[44]

[36] Venugopal 2020.
[37] Jain and Dwivedi 2020.
[38] Dey 2020.
[39] Vetticad 2020.
[40] In Vetticad 2020.
[41] Ahuja et al. 2020.
[42] Anon. 2020a.
[43] Anon. 2020a.
[44] Ahuja et al. 2020.

The Indian central government's prioritizing of religious ideology over communal harmony was mirrored by the judiciary when 32 accused people, including former Union Ministers from BJP such as L. K. Advani and Uma Bharati, were acquitted 28 years after Babri Masjid was demolished by Hindu right-wing mobs.[45] This decision by the Supreme court came out a month after Modi laid the foundation for the construction of the Ram Janmabhoomi Temple (Lord Ram's birthplace) at Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, which was the disputed site of the Babri Masjid demolition.[46] Sanke et al. factors in fear of terrorism, international relations with Pakistan, and political conflict around Kashmir, as forming the core Islamophobic construct in India.[47] The turbulent pandemic events of 2020, coupled with the existing factors of the Islamophobic construct, rewired the people's relation with the media in terms of access and usage, especially given the mystery surrounding COVID-19 and restrictions imposed on physical movement. It was the focused visual and digital coverage of COVID-19 cases from the Tablighi Jamaat congregation that furthered the misrepresentation of Muslims as 'foreigners' trying to destroy the safety of the majority of the Indian population.

Islamophobia and the Role of Networked Media Representation

There is a trend of a rapid increase in Islamophobia during any social-environment emergency and COVID-19 proves it. The link between racism and news headlines, as studied by Djik, shows that media coverage of racial minorities is often associated with negative news, such as crime and violence.[48] Pop locates this observation in the current media discourse of Romania, where the racist identification of Muslim immigrants by emphasizing the 'danger' that they present helps to delegitimize the migrants' suffering.[49] With the rising cases of coronavirus in India, the anti-Muslim frame of news reporting promoted a similarly biased representation of the community. The most pertinent example was the unrelenting coverage and social media attention given to the Tablighi Jamaat congregation. Iyer and Chakravorty expounded that coverage of COVID-19 cases among Jamaat members was a powerful projection of how news and public interest reinforce each other in this age of instant digital communication.[50] Citing their analysis of media coverage between 20 March and 27 April 2020, they found that there were 11,074 stories published from 271 media sources during that period, with 94 percent sourced from English language print media. When migrant workers gathered at a railway station in Mumbai to return home when the lockdown was announced, Republic TV news anchor Arnab Goswami asked, "During this lockdown, why does every crowd gather near a mosque?".[51] This interpretation is based on the paraphernalia of the railway station, and

[45] Anon. 2020c.
[46] Anon. 2020b.
[47] Sanke et al. 2018.
[48] Djik 1991.
[49] Pop 2016.
[50] Iyer and Chakravorty 2020.
[51] In Vetticad 2020.

it imposes Chaurasia's implication that this Mumbai incident shows the sectarian face of television channels only because they spotted a mosque in the background.[52]

Therefore, when Hall argues against reading as a 'subjective capacity', he failed to see interpretation as a collective activity, seeing social/dominant as appointed discursively instead of the processes of appropriation linked to the medium of television.[53] But it is with participatory media that Langloise sees a 'new governance of meaning' based on interlinked processes which collaborate to shift attention from meaning to the management of circulation which decides the dissemination of content on 'less meaningful/more meaningful' axis.[54] Banaji and Bhat's research into hate speech and misinformation on the digital chat platform WhatsApp presents that upper- and middle-class Hindu social media groups who invest in the ideology of Hindu supremacy in India "knowingly produce and share" disinformation targeted against Muslims.[55] Although users engage with online media applications to further their ideological endeavors, it is important to understand that this new form of content governance is also partly facilitated by algorithms.[56] It is the awareness of this calculated approach of digital media that incited Banaji and Bhat to take an anti-racist approach to look at the political history of Indian "misinformation, and ask "whose interests are being served by sophisticated and systematic sharing of mediated and community-transmitted disinformation against Indian Muslims?".[57]

One of the most viral videos replicated into various digital forms and spread across social media was a 2018 video of Muslim children licking their utensils. shot to depict the Dawoodi Bohra Muslim tradition of not wasting food.[58] Ullmann points out that this video from 2018 was mislabeled as being reported from the 2020 Jamaat conference, with users using hashtags like #NizamuddinIdiots and #CoronaJihad, dispersed across Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and WhatsApp.[59] To intensify this claim of Muslims as 'super spreaders' of the virus, the mainstream English daily The Hindu printed a cartoon a week after the Jamaat incident, depicting a representation of coronavirus wearing a Pathani suit (loosely fitting tunic and pants, which is closely associated with the Muslim population) and pointing a rifle at an image of the earth wearing a surgical mask.[60]

Though traditional print and visual media can be made responsible with utmost certainty, it is the inability to track sources, and the end-to-end encryption in some applications that makes digital objects disrupt the idea of original, hence, it is difficult to place blame or pin singular meaning to the digital object. Couldry finds this algorithmically defined online making of the 'social' as one of the smartest semantic moves in the history of media institutions.[61] Though the emergence of 'online sociality' might seem like a

[52] In Vetticad 2020.
[53] Langlois 2014.
[54] Langloise 2014.
[55] Banaji and Bhat 2020.
[56] Bødker 2016.
[57] Banaji and Bhat 2020.
[58] Mohta 2020.
[59] Ullmann 2020.
[60] Ullman 2020.
[61] Couldry 2015.

natural extension to earlier forms of collective human communication, Couldry argues that it places content within contemporary ideological orders that may prescribe how we engage with current affairs.[62] If we take the hashtag #CoronaJihad, the term not only blames the Muslim community for spreading the virus but also implies that via this it is targeting the majority – the Hindu community – in India.[63] Behind the trending of these anti-Muslim hashtags, it is important to understand what makes something 'viral' or 'trending' across or within the networked digital communities.

Allocca elaborates that by what people assume is 'viral', they mean something is "exceedingly popular on the internet".[64] Both Clarke[65] and Allocca[66] explain that the process of a YouTube video going viral is based on its ability to transcend one group and permeate others, thus creating a chain of sharing often through a disorganized and temporary network. Focusing on Islamophobia on Instagram, the idea of Islamophobia gaining virality depends on the cultural trends, which help in it becoming popular faster, people participate in it by developing smaller variations rather than creating something really different.[67]

Manovich highlights how the visual language of contemporary designs imbibes local aesthetics along with 'designed' images, which are representative of a lifestyle or a subject.[68] For instance, he offers examples of South Korea and the use of white, grey, black, and beige to inform how different countries have additional versions of contemporary visual designs on Instagram which refer to local aesthetic traditions. The construction of a specific digital life by Muslim lifestyle bloggers and influencers on Instagram started losing followers when they began posting in opposition to the anti-Muslim hate campaign during the pandemic.

Further, Dasgupta mentions how fashion blogger Ameena Azeez's followers asked her not to discuss politics or condemn atrocities against Muslims at the same time she found her inbox filled with two questions: why did the Tablighi Jamaat spread coronavirus?[69] And, did she publicly condemn them? Though this falls into a broader context of how Islamophobic content is dispersed and reproduced on social media, it is important to narrow down on a digital object of this present study: the meme. Neog insists that although memes haven't yet attained political salience in India, their creation and circulation have become an important vernacular for everyday practices.[70] His research analyses the production and circulation of memes to understand how they are remediated in order to make contesting claims on religious pluralism, secularism, and liberalism within the Indian political context. But what is significant is his question of the political 'subject/subject' formation online through techno-social-cultural practices of

[62] Couldry 2015.
[63] Bazian, in Mohta 2020.
[64] Allocca 2018, 5.
[65] In Allocca 2018.
[66] Allocca 2018.
[67] Manovich 2016.
[68] Manovich 2016.
[69] Dasgupta 2020.
[70] Neog n.d.

'lurking' and 'circulation' of a meme.[71] Between 2017 and 2018, social media giants like Twitter and Meta (parent owner of Instagram) were called out by official bodies such as the US Senate Committee to investigate their role in nurturing hateful and radicalized posts; the committee argued that Twitter and Meta should provide platforms, not content.[72]

Such studies highlight online platforms' influential roles with digital objects (content) in the political-cultural formation of its users while exploring practices of dissemination within a general political context. The present study dives into a focused space of semantic analysis of the same digital objects (memes) uploaded on Instagram accounts led by Hindu right-wing administrators. Content analysis of the memes divulges online Islamophobia and amplified anti-Muslim sentiment during the COVID-19 outbreak in India.

Methodology

There are so many research tools available, but this particular study investigates the role of digital objects during the pandemic in intensifying the blame on the Muslim community as 'super-spreaders' of coronavirus in India. It employs the theoretical framework of Stuart Hall's model of encoding and decoding. With the use of Hall's model, the article unearths textual and visual codes used in constructing stereotypes and stigmas that create or maintain narratives of 'fear' and 'threat' towards minority communities such as Muslims in India. The analytical process follows a paradigmatic form of semantic analysis of memes or posts on the pages of two ideologically Hindu right-wing Instagram accounts: @Hindu_he_hum and @Hindu_secrets. These two accounts are the major online hate speech creators. In 2011, Instagram added features of hashtags and direct messages which has helped the photo-sharing platform double as a messaging service where people carry their social engagements and in the course of sending pictures to each other. Every user account has a 'following' and 'followers' count tab which represents how many users are following the account and how many people the user follows.

The methodology relies on the followers and following count tab by considering the visual posts as commodities that are marketed via social media. The goal of social media marketing (SMM) is primarily to produce content that users will share with their online network in order to increase the name of the brand and broaden the customer base. The article employs the two Hindu right-wing accounts with the most followers out of similar accounts trading in the propagation of the brand Hindutva or Hindu right-wing ideology. Therefore, the sample of the Instagram accounts, @Hindu_he_hum and @Hindu_secrets was shortlisted based on the number of followers, which were as follows: 354,000 (@Hindu_he_hum) and 213,000 (@Hindu_secrets) followers (as of 16 June 2023). These numbers were higher than similar ideologically Hindu-right Instagram accounts. For the project, the search feature of the application was used with the keywords 'Hindu' and 'Hindutva' in order to come across right-wing posts and accounts specific to India.

[71] Neog n.d.
[72] Mirchandani 2018.

The memes and posts uploaded during the first phase of lockdown in India (mid-March to the second week of April 2020) is studied as it is immediately after the event held by the Islamic Congregation of Tablighi Jamaat in New Delhi from 13-15 March. The police were using the lockdown to clear out the last vestiges of the anti-CAA protest sites led by Muslims in New Delhi. This period is also important as Tablighi Jamaat became the center of undivided media, social media, and state attention when participants of the conference reported COVID-19 cases and deaths. Hence, this event marked the start of Islamophobic media and opinion leaders' displacement of the blame on the Jamaat members and the government's inefficiency in the implementation of COVID-19 rules to the Muslim community in general.

Hall believes that production and circulation in communication were distinct from other types of productions in which the product was a 'message.'[73] Furthermore, Hall understands that a commodity was only realized completely in the consumption stage, which meant that in the case of communication if no 'meaning' was generated then the 'consumption' did not happen.[74] The need for understanding meaning-making helps to uncover the relationship between language and culture. The premise of Hall's book on representation is set with the underlying argument that representation through language was at the center of all processes by which meaning was produced.[75]

Language operates as a representational system made of signs and symbols – be it visual, sonic, electronic, or written – which stands for the people's 'media' for expressing concepts, feelings, and ideas, forming a culture or a shared understanding of the world.[76] In this era of globally connected networks of communication, technology is able to circulate meaning between cultures at a larger scale and at a speed which overtakes Hall's observation of history defying rapidity of mass media at the time of his study.[77] The circulation of meaning hence provides both a sense of self-identity and our place in relation to others or where we 'belong'. Woodward argues that this function of meaning is tied to the question of how culture is used to codify boundaries to contain identity within a group and construct differences between groups.[78] The formation of the 'other' and representational markers of stereotypes are produced through this practice of meaning-making in everyday life.

This article's adoption of the semiotic approach comes embedded in Hall's argument that language provides the general model of how culture and representation work through the study of signs and their role as vehicles of meaning in culture.[79] Stereotyping is the practice of creating types or broad categories of things with similar traits. This practice of making meaning of the world is not necessarily negative until people are reduced to simplified characteristics. When such characteristics are believed to have no possibility for change, and it is insisted that they are natural; that is when

[73] Hall 1973.
[74] Hall 1980.
[75] Hall's 1997.
[76] Hall 1997.
[77] Hall 1997.
[78] In Hall 1997.
[79] Hall 1997.

negative connotation gets associated with stereotyping. The semiotic approach which is concerned with the 'how' of the representation will be used with Hall's model of encoding and decoding which are moments of production and consumption of shared meanings of a culture.[80] The process of encoding and decoding will be externalized through Roland Barthes concept of denotation and connotation,[81] which employs Saussure's linguistic model of signification to a discursive field of semiotics.[82] The analysis process will first employ the linguistic tools of signifier and signified in order to narrow down a list of 'signs' which indicate Islamophobic stereotypes in the images. The next level will dive into the broader cultural spectrum of denotation and connotation which links the 'signs' to a level of themes, concepts, and meanings or 'signification.' The first level of signification or denotation is the simple, basic, and descriptive level of meaning which is accepted as a general consensus.[83]

Barthes suggests that the second level or connotation deals with unraveling fragments of ideology, and it is here where the signified communicates with knowledge, history, and culture to enter the process of representation.[84] Hall highlights that it is at the level of the connotation that we as consumers begin to interpret completed signs within the realms of social ideology; that is, the general beliefs, conceptual frameworks, and value systems of society.[85] The need to move from linguistic inquiry to the cultural level of semiotics is required to complete the representation process by which there is an attempt by the Hindu-right administrators and their followers to produce meanings that propagate anti-Muslim narratives.

The Instagram accounts, @Hindu_he_hum and @Hindu_secrets, share a similarity in their use of communally shaded frames for presenting news events and quoting/referencing subjective opinions of news channels and cabinet ministers as sources. This is done using a mix of verbal and visual tools in creating memes, which this article looks at as visual frames for the paradigmatic method of semiotic analysis. The method concerns itself with how oppositions hidden in given texts generate meaning.[86] By treating Instagram posts as visual texts, the process of paradigmatic analysis primarily recognizes signs and differentiates their denotative and connotative meanings. The study attempts to find structures of oppositions that are encoded within these frames and whether they suggest connotations of marginal attitudes towards the Muslim community in India.

[80] Hall 1997.
[81] Roland Barthes 1968.
[82] Saussure 1915.
[83] Hall 1997.
[84] In Hall 1997.
[85] Hall 1997.
[86] Berger 2004.

Analysis

Saffron-tinted Lenses of Posts

On arrival at an event organized by Indian residents in New York in 2014, Prime Minister Modi's appearance in a saffron-colored jacket was the preview of what turned into a symbolic assertion of 'Hindutva or Hindu-nesses' on a world stage.[87] Saffron appears as the primary choice of background colour on the posts uploaded by @Hindu_he_hum, specifically addressing the events and claims around the Jamaat incident. Pastoreau insists that any writing of a historical account of colour will coincide with its social history, displacing the academic practice of working with universal meanings of shade.[88] The colour saffron in the case of India is embedded with the history of national symbols standing for the country's socio-political-cultural values. While explaining the tri-colour palette of the Indian national flag in 1947, S. Radhakrishnan denoted the use of *bhagwa* (saffron) as the 'renunciation of disinterestedness'.[89] This was meant for the leaders to follow an indifferent attitude towards material gain and only focus on their work.

But it is the communal meaning of colours that disrupts the secular meaning implied in the making of the national flag. In the late 1920s, saffron as a colour gained importance when Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS) started an organizational ritual where men would perform their oath-taking ceremony in front of the Bhagwa flag, similar to the one used by the Maratha rulers like Chhatrapati Shivaji.[90] The year when the RSS was founded in 1925, Jha notes that V.D. Savarkar wrote passionately about the sacred *gerua* (red ochre, a shade of saffron) of the Maratha rulers and how Shivaji's fight was essentially a Hindu movement in defense of the Hindu Dharma to overthrow the alien Muhammadan (Muslim) domination.[91] It was for the establishment of an independent Hindu empire. Savarkar's 1925 book *Hindu-Pad-Padashahi* was essentially an image of India as a Hindu land with the claim of the term Hindwi Swaraj to have come from Shivaji himself.[92] Hedgewar did not want to encourage idol worship or provide divine status to human personalities; the saffron flag took this space for the divine spirit/Guru.[93]

The allegiance to RSS' Hindu right-wing ideology was hence embodied by the saffron flag, with RSS propagating the spirit of complete self-sacrifice towards the flag or the Guru during a Hindu festival celebrating one's mentor, Guru Purnima.[94] Nair found the saffron is one of the signifiers standing for the allegiance of the BJP to RSS in their socio-political effort to make India a Hindu land, maintaining the 1920s spirit of service towards the flag and what it stands for.[95]

Coming to the background of the posts uploaded by @Hindu_he_hum, on applying the oppositional frame of paradigmatic analysis, the colour saffron is used in

[87] Nair 2014.
[88] In Jha 2014.
[89] In Jha 2014.
[90] Anderson 1972.
[91] Jha 2014.
[92] Jha 2014.
[93] Jha 2014.
[94] Anderson 1972.
[95] Nair 2014.

opposition to green. Jakobson underlines that binary oppositions are the fundamental way in which the human mind operates, as does the construction of language.[96] For instance, one of the uploads on the account is a digital cartoon of a Muslim man shouldering a green-coloured baby whose bodily protrusions mirror the general picture of a virus, against the caricature of Indian Home Minister Amit Shah leaning away from the baby and the man grabbing a model of India held by Shah. Though there was no information or diagrams indicating the colour nor any visible characteristic of the coronavirus itself, the representation of the virus as green sitting on the shoulders of a Muslim man is placed on the left side of the image and the cartoon of Shah in an orange jacket is placed on the opposite side with a speech bubble in the bottom saying, 'Go Corona Go'.

It is important to understand that the colour green is understood to be sacred in Islam. It is also the colour of the national flag of the Islamic state of Pakistan.[97] The binary relationship between the colours had a different connotation when Mahatma Gandhi was rallying for the need of a '*swaraj* flag' (independent flag) in 1921.[98] The design of the flag was the initial arrangement of the tricolour, where Gandhi chose green to stand for Muslims and dark orange to stand for Hindus. The use of the two colours along with a spinning wheel was to represent a harmonious relationship between Hindus and Muslims. By employing these two colours, the connotation of the religious beliefs of Gandhi presented an argument that if two major communities could practice tolerance, then together they could flourish with all other faiths (denoted by white).[99]

The March 2020 events of Tablighi Jamaat were dispersed on social media with the hashtag #CoronaJihad. This encouraged Islamophobic enterprises to use the colour saffron in multiple ways, such as background colours for digital colour correction of existing images and by using pre-existing images of opinion leaders wearing saffron clothes. Television and digital media collaborated in framing the conference as a 'conspiracy' of the general Muslim community to spread the virus in order to destroy the dominant Hindu community. But these posts, uploaded as memes on Instagram, went a step further to use signifiers, such as the saffron wearing minister trying to fight against the greencoronavirus for the sake of saving the nation. The religious encoding brings colour as a cultural sign, such as how Singh states she received stares from people on the street when she was wearing a green ensemble one year after the Gujarat riots in 2002,[100] and how the eyewitnesses to a case of violence said that they saw a group of men wearing saffron-coloured scarves coming after them.[101] This also resonates with the 2020 northeast Delhi violence, where witnesses noted that Hindu residents put up saffron coloured flags a day before the violence took place, with only the unmarked Muslim houses burnt and looted.[102]

[96] In Berger 2004.
[97] Singh 2009.
[98] Jha 2014.
[99] Jha 2014.
[100] Singh 2009.
[101] Singh 2009.
[102] Pillai and Iftikhar 2020.

The other Instagram account, @Hindu_secrets, which primarily constitutes its images with heavily textual content, uses saffron along with shades like yellow and red ochre as the colour of the text in images. Along with the text, the images and posts uploaded post the Islamic conference had images of RSS members with saffron face masks or wearing saffron clothes placed in the center, with the text content propagating their services for hospitals and vaccine trials. The consistent use of saffron in oppositional and unitary terms goes beyond signifying religious identity and difference and becomes a sign of an assumed religious enmity and violence between Hindu and Muslim communities.

Religious Structures and Their Reinterpretation

Singh highlights that attacks on religious structures are one of the most obvious ways of performing symbolic offense or declaring victory over the 'other religion' in cases of communal violence.[103] This encoding of 'victory' or 'offense' in structures of religious significance has to be disseminated through communication channels in order for people to decode the sense of achievement from such events. In the case of the visual posts uploaded on the two Instagram accounts, one of them stands out in terms of the use of headstones. The upload is a digital caricature of an old woman wearing a hijab with a young boy pointing at a set of headstones in a barren land. It has a speech bubble with the old woman pointing at the headstones and telling the boy that this is where the members of the Tablighi Jamaat who died of COVID-19 are buried. Of a divided frame, this part figures on the top with the bottom half depicting many headstones lined in several rows.

Now, this part has the same figure of the old woman pointing at the enormous number of headstones and telling the boy (shown crying) that these deaths were caused due to the virus spread by the Jamaat members. Here the headstone, which signifies the death ritual followed by the Muslim community, provides a sign of difference from the death ritual of cremation followed by Hindus. But what is significant is that this religiously encoded structure of death in the bottom half of the visual frame now becomes connotative of deaths of people, irrespective of religious faith, caused was actively caused by Jamaat Tablighi. The representation of mourning through the figure of the young boy and the old Muslim woman in front of the headstone is decoded through the textual content as a sign of shame towards the members of their community. Hence this visual encoding of reaction solicited by the headstones encodes the structure with the connotation of shame rather than death. Further, it employs the support of the Muslim community in legitimizing the conscious role of Jamaat members in mobilizing their efforts to spread the coronavirus in order to vanquish people of other religions.

At the same time, the Instagram account @Hindu_he_hum uploaded a collage of six still images of Hindu temples from across India. Under each image of the temple, a sum of money was specified with a central title praising the temples in their effort to help financially in combating the pandemic. The textual colour of the central title is saffron with the amount written in black and emboldened inside an apricot orange box. In another post from the same page, a text heavy post (divided into a heading in bold, a body

[103] Singh 2009.

with more details and an ending commentary) has a mosque in the background. This was posted a few days after the news about coronavirus cases from the Tablighi Jamaat conference was reported. The textual content positioned on the left side of the visual frame informs us about the number of members who attended the conference and how many were infected. But it is the commentary at the end of the frame type in the saffron tint that declares that the people of 'this' faith; that is, that Muslims have always put their religion before the nation's betterment. On the right side of this text are two still images placed vertically depicting the Jamaat members leaving the Nizamuddin area, the location of the conference in New Delhi. The dome structure of the mosque is made to subtly pop out in a faded black background behind the textual content.

Many of the mosques in a district in Gujarat were reported to have anti-Muslim slogans, writings, and idols of Hindu gods placed inside them before they were burnt in the 2002 violence.[104] The Public Union of Democratic Rights (PUDR) wrote in their report that such act of desecration before the actual destruction of mosques was a 'systematic attempt to stamp out the cultural identity of Muslims'.[105] By placing binary structures of religious beliefs, that is, Hindu and Muslims with a narrative which pitches one as philanthropic and the other as the cause behind a crisis, displaces their common connotation as unusual places of worship. These visual mnemonics then facilitate encoding one religious' structure as propagating 'good' and the other as 'evil', with the Hindu temples (and not Muslim mosques) representing a superior place of divinity and goodwill.

Diffusing Muslim Identity with Coronavirus

In 2002, PUDR reported that some Muslims stayed back at relief camps in Gujarat because they were threatened to lose visible markers of their religious identity (skull cap for men and *salwaar kameez* for women) if they wanted to return to their villages.[106] Though a traditional form of clothing, *salwaar kameez* is worn by many non-Muslim Indian women, so these marked threats meant the encoding of communal difference by stereotyping visible codes of cultural identity. Instagram accounts are similar in their characterization of Muslim identity through still images and digital caricatures. Along with the specific addition of hijab, skull caps, and long beards, it is the religious encoding of the virus itself as a Muslim which is important. In the digital cartoon discussed earlier of a man wearing a skull cap and sporting a long beard shouldering a personification of the virus as a green-coloured child, the virus is given a human association. This association is with the man with the physical signs of a follower of Islam, who carries the physical signifiers of religious identity, and the figuration of the virus as a child makes a paternal association with the man.

In another post uploaded by @Hindu_he_hum, the visual frame is divided horizontally with the upper half bearing a still image of then-Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and a lower half of the image of Bollywood film actor Nana Patekar. Between

[104] Singh 2009.
[105] Singh 2009.
[106] In Singh 2009.

the two images, a green-shade digital model of the virus is placed, with both halves of the frame united by a conversational dialogue. The image of the Pakistani prime minister is followed with lines expressing the inability to combat the pandemic, and the lower half image responds by saying that the prime minister should destroy his country with an atomic bomb. This post uses the figuration of the virus as a green-coloured ball not only encodes the association with Islam but also connotes a global network of Muslim communities enjoined in the sole effort of 'spreading' the virus. By drawing a tangible form of the virus with human traits, the Instagram posts now digitally realize the anti-Muslim media discourse during the pandemic in India, with the humanized virus connoting the 'threat' or 'danger' that is posed by the Muslim community to Hindus and other faiths, both in India and globally.

Social Media Use and Health Behavior

Covid-19 has impacted all circles of society, prompting reshaping human mentalities toward life. The pandemic has impacted human ways of behaving, prompting individuals to depend on endlessly refreshing social media and other web-based platforms. Online platforms assist with giving the most breaking news and wellbeing-related refreshes in the midst of the Coronavirus emergency. Individuals look for exact data connected with the viral infection, and online platforms have assisted individuals with tracking down information to follow preventive measures.

The pandemic has advanced ways of behaving, and individuals have taken on preventive measures, such as social distancing, staying away from get-togethers, washing hands, and utilizing facial coverings. Hypotheses about well-being behaviour assist with depicting a well-being change models. This model provides significant data. It deciphers that people have engaged with well-being behaviours when they see weakness to a lethal and infectious viral sickness that can prompt hazardous well-being-related outcomes. This kind of preventive well-being-related measures assists individuals with combatting viral infection.

Digital platform innovation is therefore crucial for providing information on how to avoid COVID-19 and other illnesses.

Discussion

The study reveals that polarizing and Islamophobic content circulating on two Hindu right-wing Instagram accounts uses colour, religious structures, clothes, and physical features to encode stereotypes of the Muslim community in India. This has influenced Hindus' attitudes towards Muslims, placing them as spreaders of COVID-19.

The appropriation of the colour saffron highlights the RSS's oath-taking ritual in front of the saffron-coloured flag. This is a ritualistic reminder to defend – physically and ideologically – the Hindu nation from threatening cultural and religious minorities. The 'saffronization' is focused on the superiority of the Hindus and the physical defense of *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu Nation), meaning the use of saffron as the background colour for text and posting pre-existing images of opinion leaders wearing saffron aligns the account to the RSS ideology of defending Hinduism. The spiritual connotation of saffron is used by

the Instagram accounts to inculcate a sense of religiosity to the accounts themselves, as it builds credibility in the eyes of followers.

In Islam, green is associated with paradise, and it is believed to be the prophet Mohammed's favourite color. Thus, it features extensively throughout Islamic history. In India, green has been extensively used as the colour to depict coronavirus. Therefore, it was not a surprise when the country's focus shifted from fighting and containing COVID-19 to fighting the Tablighis and the Muslims, whom the general population began equating as the same. The use of Islamic structures in memes signify spaces where the Muslim community assemble for prayer and worship. These structures were shown to function in violating the lockdown protocols through various videos circulating on social media, becoming the site of an undercover investigation where it was believed Muslims were allegedly spreading the virus in madrasas and mosques, which would subsequently be used to pass the infection to other communities.[107] Thus, such structures carried a connotation of being hotspots of COVID transmission, contributing to the prevailing anti-Muslim sentiments across the nation.

Cartoons and memes uploaded on @Hindu_he_hum and @Hindu_secrets use signs such as Islamic headstones, hijab, skull caps, and long beards as a handy tool to stigmatize communities and people associated with these symbols. The sectarian twist has been signified by diffusing Muslim identity with coronavirus where posts and cartoons have directly implied the pandemic as a conspiracy by Muslims to infect and poison Hindus in India. The meta-analysis of these accounts' posts emphasizes Muslims as the 'super spreaders' who need to be stopped and defeated by the saffron-clad Hindutva leaders. The BJP leaders in the posts are portrayed as saviours on a mission to rescue India from the evil virus spreading Muslims. Therefore, the use of Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding in the contemporary system of digital media is located in its central idea of thinking through various mechanisms through which people view current affairs.[108] This study uses this model as the larger framework to understand the visual encoding of Islamophobic stereotypes in digital objects and uses semiotic analysis to categorize markers that become connotative of hate and fear towards the community.

While the article acknowledges the utilization of semiotic tools for meme analysis, it falls short in providing a thorough explanation of the specific methods and procedures employed. Furthermore, it is crucial for the findings to be discussed in relation to the existing body of literature, offering insights into their broader significance for understanding racism and Islamophobia in India. By providing detailed explanations and contextualizing the findings, the author can contribute to a more comprehensive comprehension of these social issues and their implications.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic, along with the resulting global crisis of health and economy, reframed systems of maintaining sociocultural modes of discrimination. The extended period of lockdowns across the world amplified the need for digitally networked

[107] Hasan 2020.
[108] Bodker 2016.

systems of communication given the physical and social restriction of movements mixed with unrestricted time in hand. A consumer survey conducted by Hammerkopf found an 87 percent increase in the use of social media in the four metro cities (New Delhi, Chennai, Mumbai, and Bengaluru) in India from a week before the lockdown.[109]

With the increased screen time, the fear of the virus fuelled racially profiled cases of social media discrimination and stigmatization, especially towards people of Asian descent.[110] Along with the discrimination towards northeastern Indians, it was the undivided media attention towards an Islamic conference in March 2020 that resulted in Islamophobic discourses centric to India. The article intervenes in the academic inquiry on the role of social media amidst the coronavirus pandemic by focusing on the negative representation of the Muslim community in India encoded through visual digital objects like memes uploaded by Instagram accounts run by Hindu right-wing administrators. By analyzing posts using semiotics and the media discourse of encoding/decoding, it was found that the posts adopted tools of colour, religious structures, and physical markers of cultural identity from groups like RSS. These have become the visible symbols of religious-driven segregation. What stands out amongst the posts from the two Instagram accounts @Hindu_he_hum and @Hindu_secrets are the digital personification and religious profiling of the virus, in the form of a green-coloured child or a round figure. This effort by the social media accounts encoded the vacant space of information around the virus with the negative stereotype of 'threat' and 'fear' towards the Muslim community. History of Hindu-Muslim animosity in India has been strategically employed in generating Islamophobic content. Barthes was of the view that signs have both overt (visible and tangible) as well as covert (invisible and intangible) aspects.[111]

The visible signs observed in the posts embody both these aspects and branch out to catalyze Islamophobic cases of violence and marginalization in biased news reporting and other social media platforms. With the use of the paradigmatic system of semiotic analysis, the study tries to bring out a pattern of oppositions that are followed in the design and the framing of content in the posts. The dividing of the space of the visual frame into two, along with the placement of objects in opposite locations, can be observed as a general design style of digital cartoons. On the other hand, textual and visual signifiers are framed within the Hindu right-wing discourse of Hindus as victims of a continued source of Muslim aggression and invasion of a 'Hindu' nation.[112] By erasing differences between the two communities, the posts turn Hindus and Muslims into two homogenized entities, opening the area to caricatures with fixed cultural representations. The use of design, discourse, and content, and binary structures in the visual frames of the posts suggest the need to draw and define communal boundaries, which Singh states often leads to coding 'the other' not just in contrast but in opposition to the 'self'.[113] The problem that Das sees in such a collective identity is the violent, homogenizing, and dehumanizing tendencies that emerge in such practices, which trickle down into the

[109] Hammerkopf 2020.
[110] Stechemesser et al. 2020.
[111] In Singh 2009.
[112] Singh 2009.
[113] Singh 2009.

catalysing of social boundaries.[114] Such investigations also open future studies into other social media platforms and the use of digital objects like memes, music videos, and hashtags in framing events of global and national crises.

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