

# TRENDS IN RELIGION-BASED HATE SPEECH

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by BIJO P. ABRAHAM



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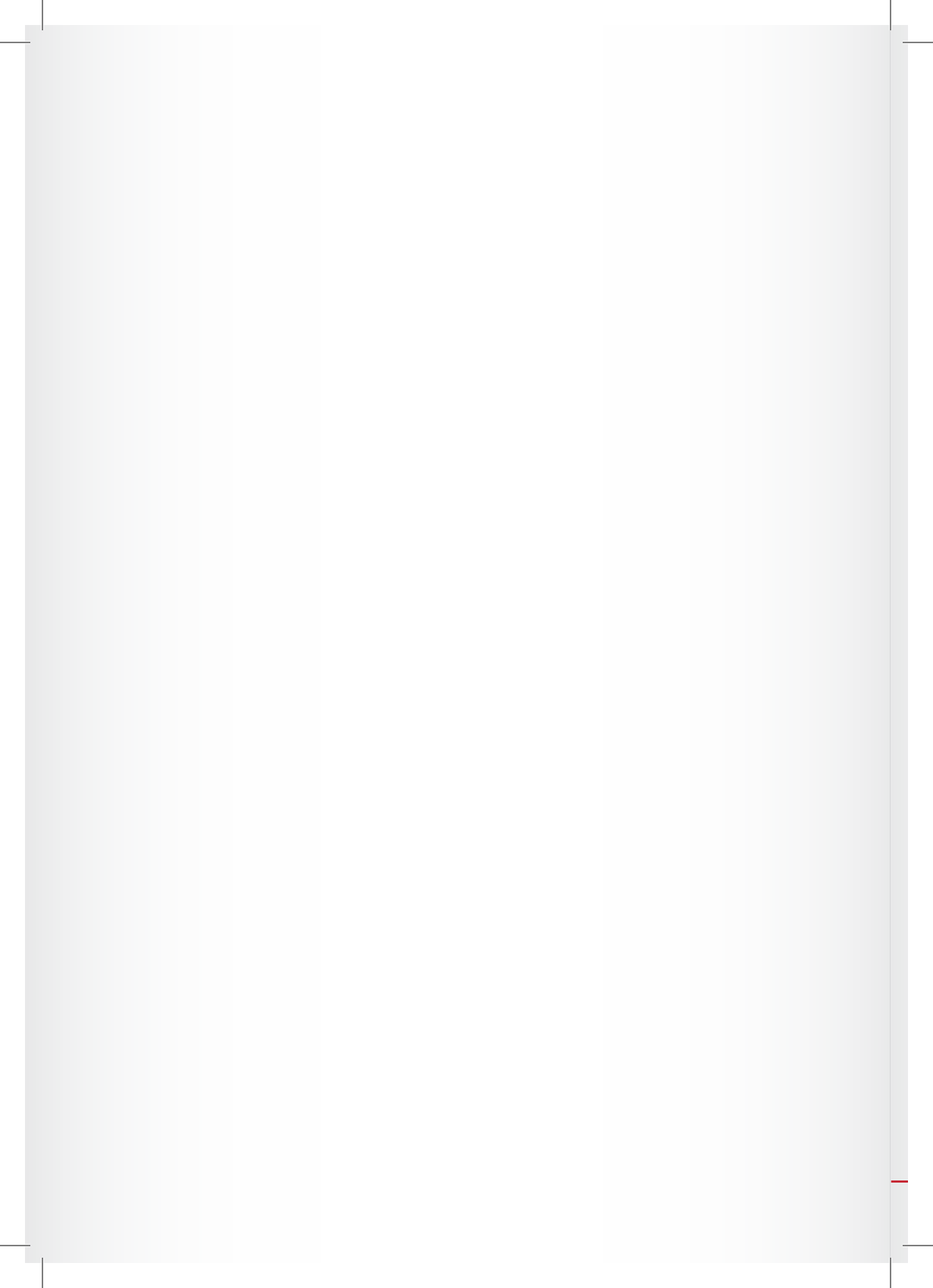
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## Introduction

India is the land of many religions. However, by any measure, religious freedom has been under grave and constant attack in the country. Minority communities, especially Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs, have experienced numerous incidents of intimidation, harassment, and violence largely by Hindu nationalist groups. Numerous bloggers, writers, filmmakers, artists, and people from the dalit community have been criticised and harassed by various religious right wing groups. The national and a few state governments have enacted several laws to restrict religious conversion and prohibit cow slaughter. However, religiously hurtful speech and expression has become a central point of tension among religious groups and free thinkers. A recent report by Pew Research Center titled 'Global Restrictions on Religion Rise Modestly in 2015, Reversing Downward Trend' notes that government harassment and use of social hostilities involving religious groups has increased tremendously (Pew Research Center, 2017). Although most regions formally support the right to free expression, in reality many minority religious groups continue to be under attack. India has witnessed several instances of large-scale communal violence against religious minorities, notably Uttar Pradesh in 2013, Odisha in 2007-2008, Gujarat in 2002, and Delhi in 1984. This paper highlights the trends in religion based hate speech in relation with the right to free speech on the online space in India. The analysis of trends is based on media reports.

## Legal Frameworks for Freedom of Religion and Hate Speech on Religion

International law reaffirms the right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), guarantees the right to hold opinions without interference, guarantees everyone the right to freedom of expression, and the right to receive and impart information. However, Article 19(3) also sets reasonable limitations placed on this right which must meet the standards required and justified by the provisions. Article 18 of the ICCPR also guarantees the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Article 20 of the ICCPR declares that any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law<sup>1</sup>.

Concern with the protection of right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion can also be gleaned from related general comments, resolutions, and reports of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). These include General Comment No. 34 of the Committee on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR) on freedoms of opinion and expression<sup>2</sup>; General Comment No. 22 of the Human Rights Committee protecting the freedom to manifest religion or belief in worship<sup>3</sup>; UNHRC resolution 22/20 on freedom of religion or belief<sup>4</sup>; UNHRC resolution 17/19 on human rights, sexual orientation and gender identity<sup>5</sup>; and UNHRC resolution 16/18, which sets out a programme to combat intolerance, incitement to violence, stereotyping, and stigmatisation of and discrimination against people because of their religion or belief<sup>6</sup>. These rights are applicable to both offline and online spaces, as was reaffirmed by the UNHRC resolution 20/8 in 2012<sup>7</sup>.

1. See: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>
2. See: UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), General comment no. 34, Article 19, Freedoms of opinion and expression, 12 September 2011, CCPR/C/GC/34
3. See: UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), CCPR General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion), 30 July 1993, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4
4. See: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G13/136/50/PDF/G1313650.pdf?OpenElement>
5. See: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G11/148/76/PDF/G1114876.pdf?OpenElement>
6. See: [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A.HRC.RES.16.18\\_en.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A.HRC.RES.16.18_en.pdf)
7. See: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/G12/153/25/PDF/G1215325.pdf?OpenElement>



In a recent report to the UNHRC, the intersection of the rights to freedom of expression and religion was specifically looked by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. The report emphasises the interrelated and mutually-supporting nature of the two rights<sup>8</sup>. The Special Rapporteur has recognised individuals as the right holders and not the religions or belief systems. He also reiterated the need for restrictions to meet international standards.

Hate speech or publication is prohibited in India by various laws. Several sections in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) clearly control and set limits on the freedom of expression. According to Section 95 of the CrPC, the government has the right to ban and cancel certain publications if they promote communal violence or disharmony in the state<sup>9</sup>. Further, promoting communal violence or disharmony is punishable under Sections 124A, 153A, 153B, 292, 293 or 295A of the IPC. IPC Section 153(A) relates to the promotion of enmity between different groups and makes any person liable for punishment who tries to create resentment or conflict, disharmony or feelings of hostility among various religious or regional groups; or commits any deed which creates disharmony between various religious, ethnic, linguistic or any other kind of communities and which disrupts public harmony or unity. The punishment can be three years imprisonment, fine or both<sup>10</sup>.

IPC Section 153(B) clearly states that whoever makes or publishes any imputations or utters statements harmful to national integration by words either spoken or written, or by signs or visible representations or otherwise on the grounds of any religious, racial, language or regional group or caste or community shall be punished<sup>11</sup>.

Section 505(2) of the IPC states that whoever makes publishes or circulates any statement or report for creating or promoting enmity, hatred, or hostility on the grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, caste shall be punished.

The IPC Section 295(A) also declares that if any person tries to intentionally hurt or offends the religious feelings of other citizens of India by words, signs or otherwise, they are liable for punishment. The punishment can be three years imprisonment or fine or both<sup>12</sup>.

Section 125 of the Representation of the Peoples Act, 1951, states that any person who promotes enmity between classes in connection with election on the grounds of religion, race, caste, community or language shall be punished<sup>13</sup>.

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8. See: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17188&LangID=E>

9. See: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/875455/>

10. See: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/345634/>

11. See: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/771276/>

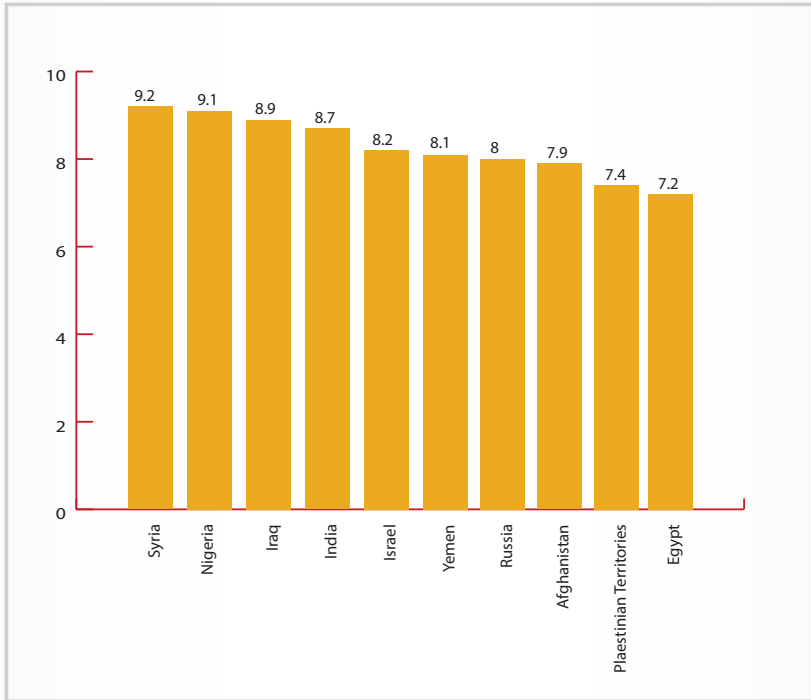
12. See: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1803184/>

13. See: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/28226194/>

## Trends in Hate Speech on Religion in South Asia

The related concerns of balancing public order and religious harmony with the right to freedom of expression are particularly sensitive in many societies. Governments, however, are becoming more aggressive in the way they target citizens by restricting freedom of expression online. A growing number of countries are introducing more extensive online censorship and monitoring practices. Like other parts of the world, the South Asian region is grappling with the issue of freedom of expression and its reasonable restrictions as a key test for the realization of human rights. Countries across Asia have sought to protect religion by enacting legislations preventing criticism or hostile comments which, in practice often have the effect of promoting intolerance. One threat to the fundamental exercise of freedom of expression is the growing reliance on defamation and blasphemy laws to combat discord and criticism of religion or beliefs in Asian countries. Additionally, discrimination against religious minorities, which in effect curbs their freedom of expression, is systematized in some Asian countries. In South Asia, minority and indigenous communities often experience a sense of being ignored by the respective governments.

According to the report by Pew Research Center on global restrictions on religion, the Social Hostilities Index, which measures hostilities around the issue of religion, has seen a rise in 2015 compared to the previous year. The SHI scores for India, however, have always been on the higher side over the past decade.



**Figure 1:** Social hostilities against religion (Source: Pew Research Centre)

(This chart shows top 10 countries with the highest social hostilities against religion in 2015; countries are given a score of 0 to 10 with 10 indicating the highest restriction)

The graph shows that, between 2007 and 2015, the average SHI score for India was as high as 8.7 (Jain, 2017).

## Climate of Hate Speech on Religion in India

Incitement to religious and communal hatred has been an issue of considerable concern in India. The increasing reference to religion during elections has heightened communal tensions and restrictions on the freedom of expression. Hate speech against religious minorities which was encouraged by certain political parties and actors to appeal to voters often became the cause of communal tensions and clashes. These clashes, which have claimed thousands of lives, are seen with concern by many as a part of real and growing threat to the survival of the nation itself as an interrelated and secular body. Meanwhile Prime Minister Narendra Modi has defended India's human rights record (PTI, 2016), citing the Constitution - which provides freedom of faith and speech to all citizens regardless of their background as the 'real holy book' for his government. On the other hand, the annual report of the US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) claimed religious freedom in India was on a negative trajectory in 2015 as religious tolerance had deteriorated while violations of religious freedom had increased. When the Prime Minister said, "800 million of my countrymen may exercise the freedom of franchise once every five years, but all the 1.25 billion of our citizens have freedom from fear which they exercise every moment of their lives", this was clearly not the case for the Bengali poet Srijato Bandyopadhyay. In March 2017, a police complaint was lodged against him for posting a 12 line poem on social media that allegedly hurt Hindu religious sentiments. The poem, titled 'Abhishaap' ('Curse'), was posted on Facebook on the day Yogi Adityanath was sworn in as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (IANS Feeds, 2017).

Trends in religion based hate speech and freedom of religion can be explored through four categories, namely: hate speech during elections, hate speech which leads to communal violence, hate speech which hurts religious sentiments, and hate speech related to beef ban.

The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that every receipt, invoice, and bill should be properly filed and indexed for easy retrieval. This is particularly crucial for businesses that operate in highly regulated industries where compliance is a top priority.

In addition to record-keeping, the document also addresses the need for regular audits. These audits should not only focus on financial statements but also on operational procedures to ensure that all activities are conducted in accordance with established policies and standards.

Furthermore, the document highlights the significance of transparency in financial reporting. Stakeholders, including investors and creditors, rely on accurate and timely information to make informed decisions. Therefore, it is essential to provide clear and concise reports that detail the company's financial performance and any potential risks.

Finally, the document concludes by stressing the importance of staying up-to-date with the latest accounting practices and regulations. The accounting profession is constantly evolving, and professionals must engage in continuous learning to remain effective in their roles.

In conclusion, the document provides a comprehensive overview of the key aspects of financial management and record-keeping. It serves as a valuable resource for anyone looking to improve their organizational efficiency and ensure compliance with relevant laws and regulations.

## Hate Speech During Elections

According to an analysis of self-disclosed crime records of candidates who have contested various elections nationwide over the last 12 years conducted by IndiaSpend, as many as 70 Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of the Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) have hate-speech cases pending against them. The date comes from their own disclosure to the Election Commission (EC) of India (K, M., 2016). Notable among them are Minister of State for Food Processing Industries, Sadhvi Niranjana Jyoti; Minister of State for Human Resource Development, Mr. Ram Shankar Katheria; Minister for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Mr. Giriraj Singh; Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath; Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) MPs Saakshi Maharaj and Raj Kumar Saini; Samajwadi Party MLA Azam Khan; and the BJP National President Amit Shah.

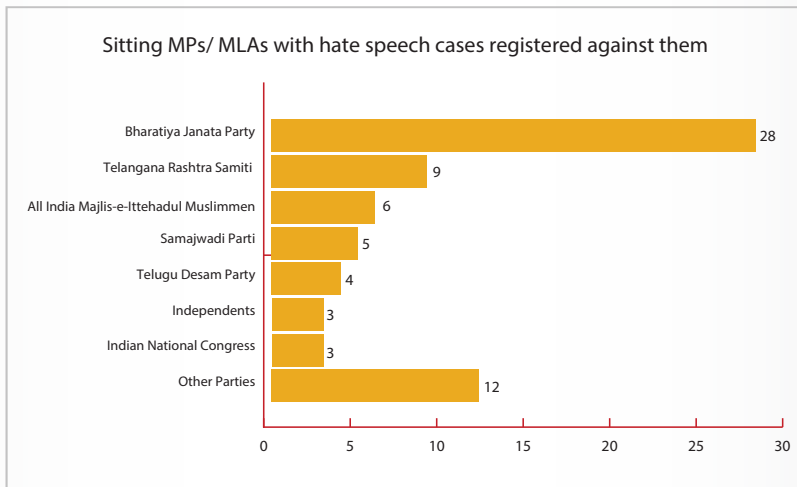
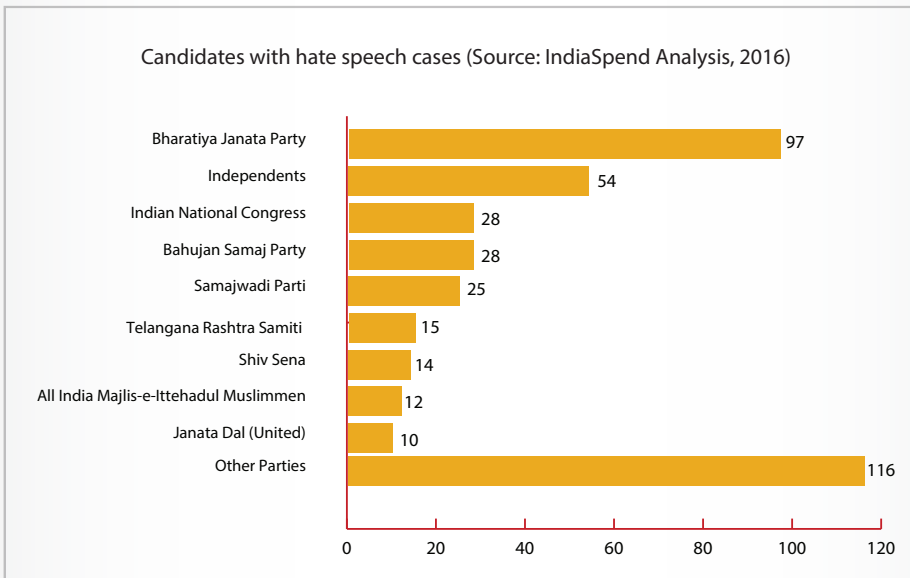


Figure 2: Sitting MP/MLAs with hate speech cases registered against them (Source: IndiaSpend Analysis, 2016)

According to the report, 399 candidates with hate speech cases have been fielded by different political parties in various parliamentary and state legislative elections over the past 12 years. The figure below shows that BJP has given tickets to 97 such candidates to contest in the elections. Political parties consider religion as a vote bank. Although the Supreme Court had ruled that no political party or contender can seek votes in the name of religion, caste, race, community or language ahead of Uttar Pradesh election. But the data shows that political parties and candidates use religion for collecting votes. In September 2014, the EC reprimanded BJP MP Yogi Adityanath for provoking enmity during his speech in Noida ahead of UP by-polls. The EC criticised him for allegedly invoking religion to appeal for votes on the basis of religious grounds.



**Figure 3:** Candidates with hate speech cases (Source: IndiaSpend Analysis, 2016)

## Cases of Hate Speech-led Communal Violence

Media reports indicate 296 incidents of communal violence occurring in the first quarter of 2017 in India both online and offline, following 703 incidents in 2016. Data shared by the government in parliament show a decline in communal violence in 2016 as compared to 2015. According to the data, Uttar Pradesh has the highest occurrence of communal violence with 162 incidents in 2016, followed by Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh (Times News Network, 2017).

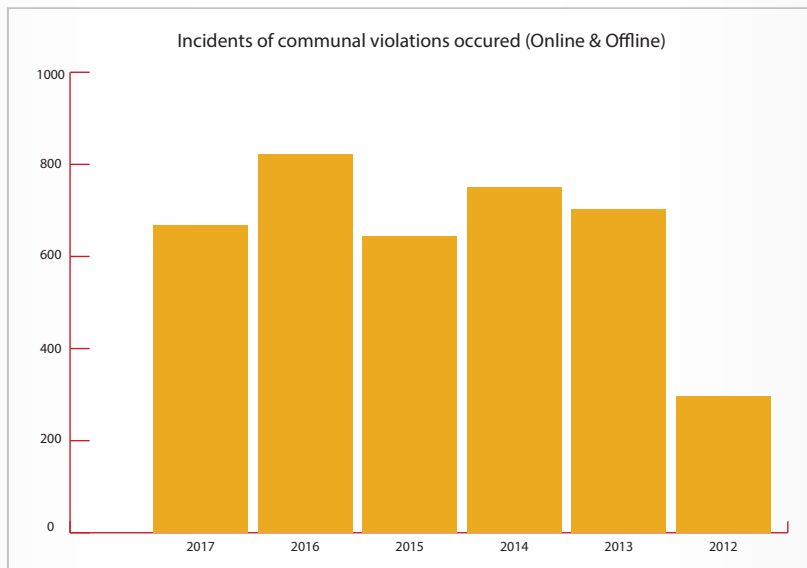


Figure 4: Incidents of communal violence (Online & Offline) (Source: Times News Network, 2017)



There are many cases of hate speech reported in India by numerous media. Abuse or attacks targeting a community verbally on the basis of personal attributes such as race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation etc., are amplified online and are commonly categorised as hate speech. Hate speech also covers content which may not be abusive in nature but is sufficient to incite violence against a particular section of the society. In July 2017, an offensive post by a class 11 student on Facebook sparked communal violence in West Bengal (Bhattacharya and Chaudhuri, 2017). In June 2017, Karnataka police arrested two people for posting hate messages on Facebook which were also circulated via popular messaging services like WhatsApp causing violence against the targeted communities (Yamunan, 2017).

In another incident in Mumbai in October 2016, police arrested a person named Barun Kashyap for encouraging enmity between Hindus and Muslims (Firstpost, 2016). The accused used social media to circulate false information, provoking vigilante harassment for the same. Later, he was let out on bail and the trial is ongoing.

In July 2016, Maharashtra Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena Party leader, Uddhav Thackeray, during an interview with his party's publication Samana, called for action declaring the country a Hindu state. He affirmed that this would be to prevent attacks on Hindus (IANS, 2016).

In December 2015, the then Uttar Pradesh Minister Azam Khan was quoted as saying that many Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) leaders are unmarried because they are homosexuals (Tiwari, 2015). In response to his comments, Hindu Mahasabha chief Kamlesh Tiwari made an objectionable comment against Prophet Mohammed which led to his arrest (PNS, 2016). The protest has led to the Kaliachak riots.

In September 2014, Gujarat Police arrested Sunil Jagdishsinha Rajput whose Facebook post provoked Muslims to go on riot. He was booked under IPC 153(C) and 295(C) and denied bail. Vadodara police had banned internet to prevent the spread of hate messages through social media which would inflate the riot ('Internet Banned in Vadodara for three days', 2014).

## Cases of Hurting Religious Sentiments

In June 2016, the former MP and current Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath of the BJP stated that Mother Teresa had been on a mission to Christianize India (Rai, 2016). Many Catholic Bishops termed Adityanath's comments rash and denied that Mother Teresa had ever engaged in conversion. Following Adityanath, some social media users also stated that Mother Teresa had engaged in forcible conversions.

In April 2017, the Delhi BJP spokesperson filed a complaint against senior advocate Prashant Bhushan for his tweets against the Hindu god, Krishna. The complainant, Tajinder Pal Singh Bagga, accused Bhushan of intentionally and deliberately posting "derogatory remarks, for the purpose of insulting and outraging the religious sentiments of Hindu community" (Alavi, 2017). Bhushan later clarified his position, stating that his criticism was directed at the Uttar Pradesh government's 'Anti-Romeo' squad. The squad, which was instituted to check eve-teasing, was widely criticised as instituting moral policing.

In April 2017, Odisha police arrested Mohammed Asif Khan for posting derogatory remarks on Hindu deities on Facebook which caused violence in the area. The violence started after derogatory comments about the deities Ram and Sita were posted on a Facebook page which produced severe damage in the area (Biswajeet, 2017).

In March 2017, police arrested Anuj Gupta from the Lohta area of Varanasi for inciting religious frenzy on WhatsApp. The accused had shared an objectionable post about Prophet Mohammad in several WhatsApp groups (Express News Service, 2017).

In March 2017, a police complaint was lodged against the eminent Bengali poet Srijato Bandyopadhyay for posting a 12 line poem on social media that allegedly hurt Hindu religious sentiments (IANS Feeds, 2017). The poem titled 'Abhishaap' ('Curse') was posted on Facebook on the day Yogi Adityanath was sworn in as Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister.

In October 2016, 12 police officers in Madhya Pradesh were facing investigation on charges of attempted murder of Suresh Yadav, a member of RSS arrested for writing defamatory comments about Islam on social media (Roy, 2016).

On 20 September 2016, a blogger from West Bengal named Tarak Biswas was arrested for criticising Islam after a complaint about hurting religious sentiments was lodged against him by Sanauallah Khan, a Trinamool Congress leader. Human rights activists, while disagreeing with the content of his post, demanded his release, citing the case to be a violation of the right to freedom of speech and expression. He was booked under Section 295A and 298, besides 66, 67 and 67A of the IT Act (Mehta, 2016).

In July 2016, Gujarat police used batons and fired 24 tear gas shells against Muslim demonstrators who sought immediate action against people responsible for a viral video accusing Muslims of 'Love Jihad', a term used to describe an alleged strategy by Muslim men of marrying women of other religion for the purpose of converting them to Islam (PTI, 2016).

In April 2016, six Muslims arrested on sedition charges were granted bail by the Madhya Pradesh High Court after their counsel argued that the police had added sedition charges following pressure from the Hindu nationalist group Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) (HT Correspondent, 2016).

In March 2015, Karnataka police arrested Sriram Yadapadithaya, former telecom company executive, for posting objectionable messages against Christianity on Facebook (Shenoy, 2015). The Mangaluru Catholic Diocese lodged a complaint to police, arguing that Yadapadithaya's comments questioned basic doctrines of Christianity. The case was registered under Section 66 of IT Act and Sections 153A, 153B and 295A of IPC.

In September 2014, a Muslim cleric, Imam Mehadi Hasan, was slapped by a man while being taken to court for allegedly hurting Hindu religious sentiments by making objectionable comments about the festival of Navratri. The cleric had sparked the controversy by calling the state's most popular festival, Navratri a "festival of demons". VHP had taken strong objection to the cleric's comment and sought his arrest. He was booked under IPC Section 295(A) (PTI, 2014).

In August 2013, Bangalore-based writer Yogesh Master was arrested over his derogatory remarks on the deity Ganesha in his Kannada novel Dhundi. The recently published novel had caused public outrage for depicting the goddess Parvati as involved in an illicit relationship. The complaint was lodged by various Hindu groups which accused the author of blasphemy and hurting religious sentiments (BP Staff, 2013).

In November 2012, Maharashtra Police arrested Shaheen Dhada for questioning the total shutdown in Mumbai for Bal Thackeray's funeral in a Facebook post. Her friend, Renu Srinivasan, was arrested for merely liking the post. The two were charged under Section 295 (A) for hurting religious sentiments, apart from Section 66 (a) of the Information Technology Act 2000, even though no religious issue was involved. The charges under Section 295 (A) were later dropped and the girls were charged with Section 505 (2) of the IPC, which pertains to statements that create or promote enmity, hatred or ill-will between classes (PTI, 2012).

MF Husain, one of India's best-known artists, is a notable case of public intolerance. Husain was forced into exile after Hindu right-wing groups targeted him, having accused him of painting nude pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses and thus

offending religious sentiments. Hindu extremist groups attacked his house and art galleries which exhibited his works. Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Delhi state governments failed at controlling them or protecting the artist and his work. Instead, Bal Thackeray, a senior leader from the ruling Shiv Sena party in Maharashtra, endorsed the attack on Husain's home in Mumbai in 1998, stating, "If Husain can enter Hindustan [India], why can't we enter his house?" Private individuals filed cases against him in different cities across the country under criminal hate speech and obscenity laws, forcing him to travel around the country to address the complaints (Bajoria and Lakhdhir, 2017).



## Beef Ban-Related Hate Speech

In July 2017, a BJP leader heading a regional minority cell in Maharashtra was attacked by a group of eight people for allegedly carrying beef. A recorded video of the attack went viral on social media. The police stated that the man was accosted by a group of eight persons while returning home on his two-wheeler. The ground demanded to check what he was carrying and had attacked him when he resisted (Dahat, 2017).

Another incident of violence related to suspicion regarding beef possession occurred in Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh in July 2016. Two Muslim women were brutally beaten up by members of Bajrang Dal, a Hindu extremist group. A video of the incident shot by an onlooker revealed that the police did nothing to save the women, who were beaten for approximately half an hour. Investigation revealed that the women had been carrying buffalo meat, which was not illegal. Subsequently, the authorities filed a different case against the women for carrying the meat without a permit. The police also arrested four of the attackers, but did not take action against the inaction of the police personnel present during the attack.

In June 2017, a Hindu religious leader, Sadhvi Saraswati, said that beef eaters should be hanged during a meeting of Hindu religious outfits. The meeting, a four day long All India Hindu Convention, which had been held in Goa caused tension in the Legislative Assembly of Goa, with several politicians calling for the Sadhvi's arrest for hate speech (IANS, 2017).

In April 2017, Bonditha Acharya, a human rights activist from Assam, was threatened with rape, acid attacks, and death threats on social media for condemning the arrest of three people for possessing beef (The Wire Staff, 2017).

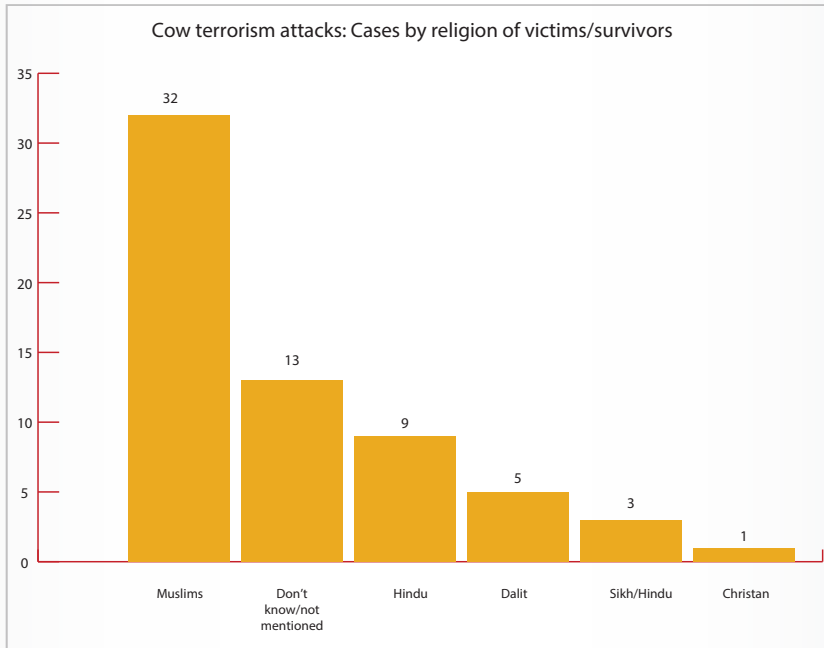


Figure 5: Cow terrorism attacks (IndiaSpend Analysis, 2016)

According to an analysis by IndiaSpend, there have been 63 cow or beef related attacks from 2010 to 2017. Of the 63 attacks over the eight year period, 61 of these, or 96.8 per cent of all attacks, occurred after the Narendra Modi-led BJP government came to power (2014-2017). Twenty five of these attacks were reported for 2016. In the first six months of 2017, 20 attacks have been reported, which is more than 75 per cent of the 2016 figure (Abraham and Rao, 2017). The data show that 51 per cent of the attacks were targeted towards Muslims, and confirm the trend of rising religious intolerance related to cow and beef issues in India.

## Role of Social Media in Amplifying Hate Speech

Social media is a communication channel that can potentially play a significant role both in combating hate speech and amplifying it. India, with around 35 per cent Internet penetration, already has 153 million active social media users (Velayanikal, 2016). Social media platforms, including services like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, are now equally if not more influential than television ads. Nearly 100 million Indians access the Internet each day. This huge numbers make social media a key and powerful player in everyday life in India. Its role in hate speech and communal polarisation, therefore, has also emerged as significant. Badri Narayan from the GB Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, has opined that, "From word of mouth, communal polarisation, especially by Hindutva organisations, is now moving online. This is a dangerous trend since the Internet is very potent." (as quoted in Haq, 2013).

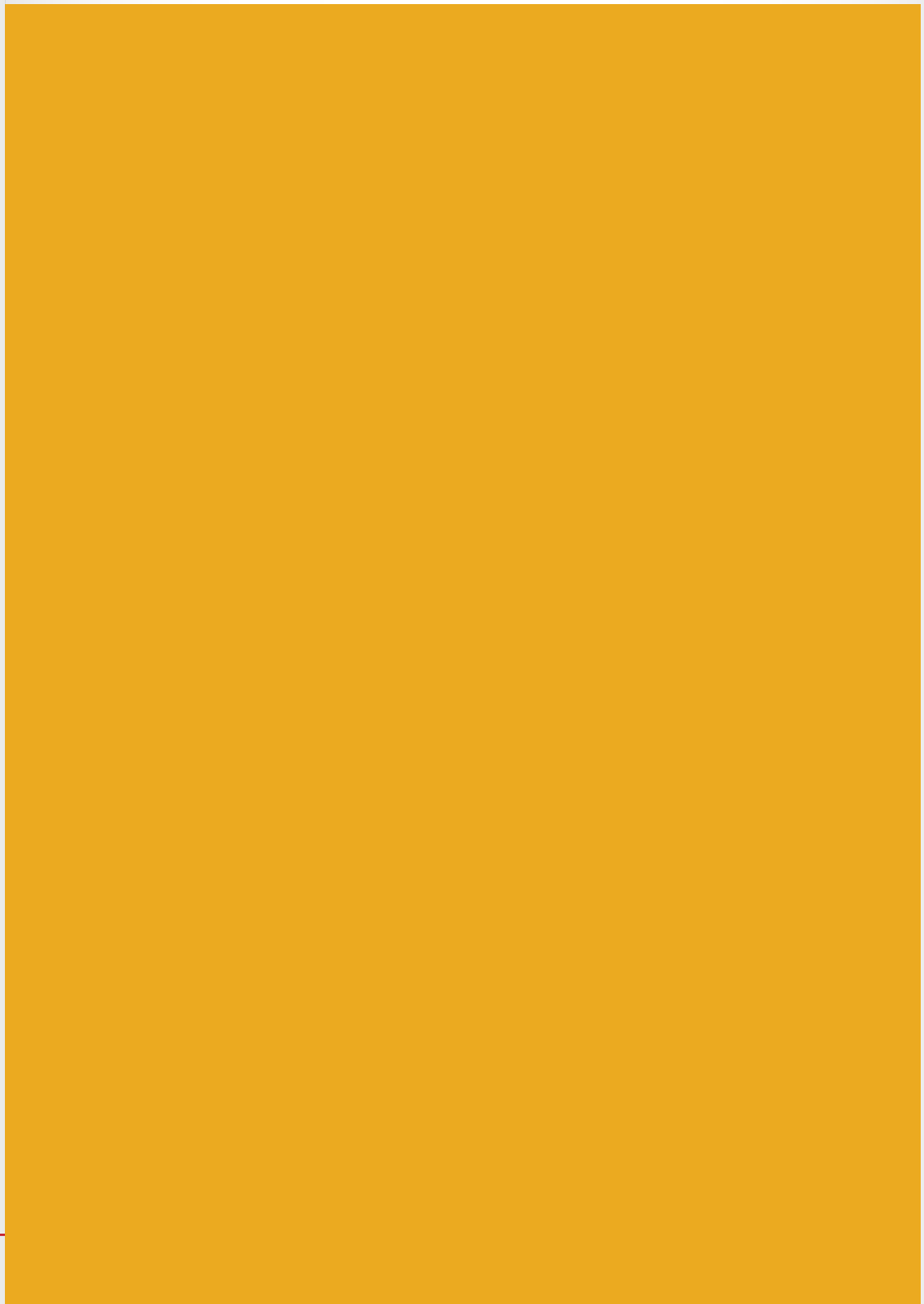
In August 2016, Saran District in Bihar witnessed a communal clash after a video of the desecration Hindu deities went viral on social media. Such communal clashes and conflicts are often accompanied by suspension of Internet services. In October 2016, mobile broadband internet was suspended due to prolonged communal clashes in Bihar. Internet suspension may also be used as a preventive measure in other cases. In August 2015, mobile internet was suspended in Godhra district of Gujarat after a derogatory message against Islam made rounds on the social media (Express News Service, 2015). Such suspensions are often justified as precautionary measures to pre-empt communal violence.

In June 2014, there was communal violence in areas of Maharashtra which led to large scale vandalism and a spate of hate crimes which led to a Muslim man's death. The violence started with a Facebook post. A photograph of two Hindu medieval India and recently departed demagogue of Hindu right wing political party were morphed in a derogatory manner.

All these incidents confirm that social media plays a critical role in creating and spreading hate speech, and has been used numerous times in India for communal and religious hate speech with a clear agenda of provoking violence.

Social media service providers have adopted several measures to combat hate speech on their platforms. According to Facebook's community standards, "content that attacks people based on their actual or perceived race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender or gender identity, sexual orientation, disability or disease" is considered hate speech. Facebook has several mechanisms in place to block such content such as the feature of 'Reporting'; however its policy allows for "clear attempts at humour or satire" that may otherwise be considered a potential threat. Twitter, too, has a policy which applies to promoted tweets and prohibits the promotion of "hated content, sensitive topics and violence globally" (Agarwal, 2017).





## Conclusion

The media reports and analyses surveyed in this paper affirm an increased trend for hate speech, both in online and offline spaces. Although taking a comprehensive measurement of hate speech runs up against several complications—one limitation being the reliance on reported incidents, hate speech online is certainly amplified. While the concept of hate speech is subject to debate, with its contours and limits not clearly defined, we must not lose sight of the direct and indirect harmful effects of hate speech on the emotional and psychological wellbeing of individuals and communities.

The threats to well-being and dignity are also social and political in nature. In India, many religious minority communities have expressed their concerns over the attacks directed at them. There is a sense of vulnerability among such groups especially under the present central government, under which violence targeting minority faith groups by emboldened Hindu nationalist groups has increased. Apart from direct verbal and physical violence, another concerning trend is that of educational reforms aiming to incorporate Hindu practices and teachings into the secular public and private schools. Several such communities have expressed concern over the undermining of their faith and practices under the present regime. For instance, the present central government declared December 25th as 'Good Governance Day', eliciting concern from Christian communities which viewed it as an effort to diminish the significance of Christmas. The government also denied the renewal of FCRA for some NGOs, based on the claim that they were involved in religious conversion.

On 14th October 2016, the Minister of Home Affairs Rajnath Singh, in his addresses to the National Christian Leaders Conference, said, "Tolerance is essential for peaceful existence. People from all religions live peacefully in India and practice their religion without any fear of discrimination. I would like to say that religious persecution will never be allowed in India." (as quoted in *The Hindu*, 2016). While addressing UNESCO on 10th April, 2015, Prime Minister Modi reiterated that, "every citizen of every faith, culture and creed has an equal place in the society" (Krishnan, 2015). Despite such political rhetoric, actual policy practices have alarmed rather than reassured minorities in India.

However, speech restrictions have been a common feature of governments with different ideologies. Online and offline hate speech - through social or print media - are mutually reinforcing, and have a wider effect in society. Though we have frameworks and strategies to regulate hate speech, society is still facing the consequences of these issues. To prevent incidents of hate speech and violence over online as well as offline spaces, a massive awareness drive which will enable the public to differentiate between free speech and hate speech needs to be initiated on both platforms.

Hate speech is still a subject for extensive research. For instance, are these incidents - on both online and offline spaces - spontaneous, or are they part of ideological or political strategies with tangible outcomes, such as electoral gains? These incidents of religion based hate speech are not only dividing the communities, but also diverting public focus away from concrete issues like employment, education, and health.

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