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Role of Public WhatsApp Groups Within the Hindutva Ecosystem of Hate and Narratives of "CoronaJihad"

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This article uses the context of the widespread circulation of accounts about "CoronaJihad" in India during the COVID-19 pandemic to examine how public WhatsApp groups that participate in disseminating such accounts function within the ecosystem of hate around Hindutva majoritarianism in the country. The manner in which the WhatsApp platform operates within this ecosystem is mapped through a granular study of three public Hindutva WhatsApp groups; the messages within these groups during the first phase of the COVID-19 lock-down in India were examined during the course of this study. The pattern of messaging within the three groups that contribute to the narrative of "CoronaJihad," which blames the minority Muslim community for the spread of the virus in India, were analyzed. The article focuses on factors including company policies and the specific sociopolitical situation in the country to understand the circumstances that make WhatsApp's deep entanglement with the divisive politics of Hindutva majoritarianism in India possible.

Keywords: WhatsApp groups, India, Hindutva, extreme speech, COVID-19, CoronaJihad

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of extreme speech and violence against Muslims in India drew international attention. The narrative of "CoronaJihad" that accuses the minority Muslim population in the country of being willful spreaders of the virus was circulated across India; robust communication networks of the right-wing Hindu majoritarian groups played a crucial role in this circulation. WhatsApp, which has more than 400 million users in India, functions as an important constituent in the communication networks of such groups. These groups are informed by the logic of Hindutva, which can be understood as a political ideology that is exclusivist (Kanungo, 2016); it imagines India as a Hindu *rashtra,* or nation. Such an imagination engenders an "ecosystem of hate" (Nizaruddin, 2020, p. 726) that places the Muslims in the country as a threat to the nation. With the election victories of 2014 and 2019 that gave the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which subscribes to the Hindutva ideology, an unprecedented majority, this ecosystem of hate has reached a stage where it has a significant impact on the fabric of everyday life in

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India. This article aims to provide an understanding of the role of WhatsApp within the Hindutva ecosystem of hate through a granular study that focuses on the workings of three public Hindutva WhatsApp groups. The links required for joining these groups are available publicly and can be accessed easily through a search engine query. The time period of the study is the first phase of COVID-19 lockdown in India that started from March 25, 2020.[2] What possible factors aid the circulation of narratives like the one about "CoronaJihad" via WhatsApp? How do the policies of big technology companies that determine the landscape of online and mobile platforms, including WhatsApp, shape this circulation? What is the specific role of WhatsApp within the larger communication strategies of Hindutva groups? The following sections explore these questions by using a framework that situates the construction of the narrative of "CoronaJihad" as a part of the wider history of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate; deployment of various modes of communication have played an important role in this history.

The Hindutva Ecosystem of Hate

Scholars like van der Veer (1994) have argued that Hindu and Muslim identities in the Indian subcontinent cannot be situated as "primordial attachments"; instead, they are a matter of constant construction in which communication practices and other sociocultural factors play a major role (p. x). The construction of an essentialist notion of difference between Hindus and Muslims that consolidated during the colonial period contributed to the partition of undivided India into the nation-states of India and Pakistan; both Hindu and Muslim nationalisms enabled this process. The articulation about the concept of Hindutva by Hindu nationalist leader Savarkar (1923/2003) that emerged out of this field of identity construction had a significant influence on the trajectory of Hindu majoritarian politics. This articulation defines India as a sacred Hindu homeland in which Muslims and Christians are outgroups because they follow religions that originated outside India (Savarkar, 1923/2003). In independent India, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliates—commonly referred to as Sangh Parivar, or Sangh family—have been the key proponents of the Hindutva ideology. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party of Prime Minister Modi, is the political wing of the Sangh Parivar.

Throughout their history, Hindutva groups have worked to sustain an ecosystem of hate that primarily targets the Muslim minority in India as a threat to the Indian nation. This can be viewed as part of a performative project to form a majoritarian Hindu India (Nizaruddin, 2020). Formation of a Hindutva identity that is shaped by a notion of an essentialist difference with a Muslim "other" is the mainstay of this project. Acts of violence and circulation of misinformation and extreme speech through various media forms, cultural materials as well as public performances contribute to the performative configuration of such an essentialist notion of sectarian differences. The use of the term *extreme speech* here is informed by Udupa and Pohjonen's (2019) recent article that uses extreme speech as a concept that is relatively less congested than hate speech. The social and cultural dimensions behind the production as well as circulation of such speech that they point to is especially relevant in the case of the Hindutva groups.

Both extreme speech and violence are among the key constituents within the Hindutva ecosystem of hate, and they enable each other. Brass's (2003) examination of the "institutionalized riot systems" (p.

[2] This lockdown lasted for 21 days and was followed by another lockdown.

15) maintained by Hindutva groups can be used to elaborate this point further. According to Brass, fire tending is a key activity within this institutionalized system of violence that is termed as Hindu–Muslim riots[3]; the term refers to the activity of keeping communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims alive through extreme speech, misinformation, rumors, and other such tactics. Such fire tending maintains an atmosphere of hate and mistrust in which acts of violence become possible. BJP, a constituent of the Sangh Parivar group, often makes political gains from such violence (Brass, 2003). Though Brass's focus is on the riot system in riot-prone cities in India, the activity of fire tending can be seen as a broad trait of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate. Brass (2003) stresses how "maintaining communal tensions with time to time lethal rioting" is "essential for the maintenance of Hindu nationalism" (p. 9). In other words, fire tending, which constantly reaffirms the divisions between Hindus and Muslims, is a key activity that sustains the performative project of majoritarian Hindu nationalism. Mass mobilizations as well as forms of media including print (Mukul, 2017), video (Brosius, 2005), audio cassettes (Manuel, 1996), and online media (Udupa, 2019) have played a crucial role in forming sites of engagement that contribute to the solidification of a Hindutva identity that places the Muslim as the dangerous "other." Today, this process of fire tending has become quotidian and ubiquitous. To understand the manner in which the Hindutva actors' use of WhatsApp contributes to the quotidian nature of fire tending in contemporary India, we need to first map its place within the broader Hindutva ecosystem of hate.

WhatsApp Groups and the Hindutva Ecosystem of Hate

In India, Hindutva groups including BJP and the larger Sangh Parivar were early adopters of online social media platforms and mobile applications. Currently, India has more than 500 million smartphone users (ENS Economic Bureau, 2020). The smartphone market in India saw an expansion since 2013; this expansion increased manifold with the entry of Jio mobiles that employed market capturing tactics such as the introduction of very cheap data plans (Banaji, Bhat, Agarwal, Passanha, & Pravin, 2019). Among the smartphone applications that are widely used in the country, WhatsApp enjoys immense popularity; with more than 400 million users, India is WhatsApp's biggest market (Samuels, 2020). Typically, many users of the application would be part of a handful of WhatsApp groups. The kind of messages that are exchanged in these groups could vary from good-morning messages to medical reports. Because the use of WhatsApp is an integral part of daily life for a sizeable section of smartphone users, it is considered as a key tool for communication by political parties. In fact, the 2019 Indian election was termed by some news organizations as a "WhatsApp election" (Schipani, Findlay, & Murgia, 2019, para. 1); BJP has been particularly successful in forming an extensive WhatsApp network.

The argument that platforms such as WhatsApp are "constitutive of a kind of dwelling" (O'Hara, Massimi, Harper, Rubens, & Morris, 2014, p. 1133) is useful to understand the role of WhatsApp within the wider structures and networks of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate. This argument bases itself on Ingold's (2002) proposition that "apprehending the world is not a matter of construction but of engagement, not of building but of dwelling, not of making a view of the world but of taking up a view in it" (p. 42). For the rapidly increasing number of smartphone users in India and those around them, use of WhatsApp is part of the pattern of activity that shapes the way in which they dwell with others (O'Hara et al., 2014). In fact,

[3] In most of these instances, Muslims suffer greater losses.

the argument that WhatsApp can be situated as part of the "technologies of life" that shapes many aspects of everyday life in several parts of the Global South is relevant in the case of India (Cruz & Harindranath, 2020, para. 1). This embedded nature of the platform within everyday life and ways of being makes it an integral interface within the mobilizational efforts of Hindutva groups. Work on the use of online media in the field of Hindutva mobilizations have outlined some of the processes such as the use of the mode of "fun" that allow extreme speech to "descend to the ordinary" (Udupa, 2019, p. 3161). The manner in which WhatsApp functions within the Hindutva ecosystem of hate can be situated as another factor that contributes to the ordinariness as well as ubiquity of extreme speech and other constituents of fire tending in India under the prime ministership of Modi. When narratives such as the one around "CoronaJihad" discussed in this article that targets the Muslim community percolate to neighborhood, family, and other community WhatsApp groups, they become part of the felt life of everyday dwelling. Recent work has shown how in the case of vigilantism in the name of cow protection—a key activity within Hindutva mobilizations—WhatsApp becomes foundational to the creation of an atmosphere where a rumor or skirmish can gravitate toward violence that often leads to killings (Mukherjee, 2020).[4] The use of WhatsApp within the Hindutva ecosystem of hate is not limited to acts of fire tending; there are also WhatsApp groups that are used for the planning and execution of acts of violence (Lalwani & Daniyal, 2020). However, in this article, the focus will be on public Hindutva WhatsApp groups that work as key interfaces for engaging in fire tending. Such groups allow people to join them through publicly available links, and they aim to spread their messages to private WhatsApp groups like neighborhood, family, school/college, or work groups. Most members of a public WhatsApp group may not know each other, unlike in private WhatsApp groups, where group members are more likely to have off-line connections.

Framework of the Study

To study the functioning of public Hindutva WhatsApp groups, I joined WhatsApp groups that were categorized as Hindu groups from February 7, 2020, until February 14, 2020. I accessed the links of these group through a Google search and avoided groups that had an obvious electoral aim. Another criterion that I used was that the groups had to have more than 60 participants.[5] These groups were categorized as Hindutva groups because a consciousness about being followers of the Hindutva ideology was very much part of the general discourse within these groups. The term Hindutva was frequently used, and the groups contained lot of extreme speech that primarily targeted the Muslim community; other communities or groups who were perceived as the opponents of Hindutva were also attacked. Many of these groups were in a constant state of flux, and some were inundated with advertising or pornographic messages. This article, which is part of a larger ongoing study, focuses on three public Hindutva WhatsApp groups. These three groups were selected because they were relatively stable groups that primarily circulated Hindutva-related content.

The key method used for the study was nonparticipatory observation. Recently, large-scale studies have been conducted on public WhatsApp groups that are data driven (Bursztyn & Birnbaum, 2019). Unlike such studies, this article focuses on gaining a granular understanding of the manner in which public Hindutva

[4] Cow vigilantes lynch Muslims and lower caste Dalits in the name of protecting cows, which are considered as sacred animals by many Hindus; such vigilantes have murdered many people.

[5] This was to ensure that the groups that are part of the study were fairly large.

WhatsApp groups function; this approach draws from the broad range of research practices that uses digital ethnography to enquire about social worlds (Pink et al., 2016). However, research about right-wing groups has its own specific set of challenges and as a result this study mainly relies on "covert, invisible, non-participatory observation" (Pollock, 2009, p. 2). Pollock (2009), who developed this method, points out that obtaining informed consent may not be possible in the case of research on right-wing groups that are not easily accessible to outsiders. In terms of research ethics, I followed the principle of "do not harm" (Barbosa & Milan, 2019, p. 49); this principle is applicable for the researcher as well. As a woman and as a person with a Muslim name and background, revealing my identity on the Hindutva WhatsApp groups that were part of this study could have compromised my safety. So, I used a dedicated mobile number for research and did not reveal my identity to the group members. Since these groups were open to members of the public, group members are aware that their conversations are not private. Earlier studies on public WhatsApp groups have used approaches where the participants were not informed that their interactions are being studied (Garimella & Tyson, 2018). I have ensured that the study does not reveal any phone numbers or other identifiable information.

Structure of Communication Within the WhatsApp Groups

The three WhatsApp Groups analyzed here are classified as Group A, Group B, and Group θ. Group A was created in 2018, and Group B and Group θ were created in 2017. As mentioned earlier, the links of these groups can be obtained easily through a simple search engine query. Links to join other similar Hindutva WhatsApp groups are shared in these groups. As a result, once one enters a public Hindutva WhatsApp group, it is easy to gain access to countless similar groups. The role of the administrator is very important in these groups. Without moderation, it is possible for the groups to be inundated with advertising messages or links to pornographic sites. The level of moderation by administrator/s differs from group to group.

Group A belongs to a category of Hindutva WhatsApp groups that are more open to the presence of advertisements. A sizeable section of these advertisement messages was from users who participate in the commerce around mobile apps that gives monetary or shopping rewards to those who prompt others to download and use particular apps. This works through the use of referral codes; as a result, many users who aim to earn rewards by referring others join public WhatsApp groups, including Hindutva groups, to expand their referral networks. This does not mean that the participants in public Hindutva WhatsApp groups can be divided into Hindutva participants and advertisers/commercial participants. There are users who post Hindutva-related content as well as commercial content. It is also possible to link certain group members in Group A who post series of incendiary messages to small commercial setups that offer services related to Hindi blogging and social media marketing; most of such messages are forwarded content.

Some users also promote YouTube and TikTok accounts of people who indulge in extreme speech so as to gain the position of Hindutva "hate stars." The later sections of this article will expand about how this use of multiple online and mobile platforms by actors who are part of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate can be situated within the framework of remediation that "considers media as (being) continuously multiplied and reproduced across various forms and formats" (Zelenkauskaite, 2017, p. 515).

Among the three WhatsApp groups, Group B and Group θ have a tighter system of monitoring messages than Group A. The volume of messages is also considerably low in these groups when compared with Group A. While it is not unusual for Group A to receive around more than 65 messages per day, corresponding numbers for Group B and Group θ are around 11 and eight. While Group A tended to have one to two administrators, Group B and Group θ tended to have more than three administrators at one time. Content posted in Group B is overwhelmingly from a particular district in the state of Madhya Pradesh; news and other information from this town is shared frequently in this group. Group θ has a local leader of the BJP from a town in the state of Uttar Pradesh in its list of administrators, and he is among the most active participants in the group. This user often posts posters that show his designation in the local party unit. The main language for communication in all the three groups was Hindi.

The Hindutva content in these groups primarily include extreme speech and misinformation that target the Muslim community, praise for Modi and Sangh Parivar group of organizations, as well as the need for Hindu unity against Muslims. Along with Muslims other sections who were targeted for attack include opposition parties, secular Hindus, lower caste Dalit leaders, communists, and Christians. While it is possible to trace the BJP affiliation of some users in Group A and one of the administrators of Group θ, the nature of messaging in these groups should be placed as part of the broader Hindutva ecosystem of hate. Though Sangh Parivar networks are central to this ecosystem, the actors within it are not limited to such networks; many fringe groups as well as paid trolls maintained by BJP work to sustain and expand it.[6] Online volunteers who come from diverse backgrounds and differing levels of ideological commitment are another set of actors who contribute to this ecosystem (Udupa, 2019). After the 2014 and 2019 election victories which gave BJP a more than comfortable majority in the parliament, the phenomenon of "aspirational hatred" (Appadurai, 2019, para. 13) has helped in the further expansion and consolidation of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate.[7] Aspirational hatred refers to the situation in contemporary India where those who aspire to gain power or social capital use extreme speech and violence to achieve their aims. Such people draw inspiration from the example of leaders within the Hindutva networks who rose to prominence through similar means. A wide range of organizations and collectives as well as those who aspire to become Hindutva "hate stars" participate in the cycle of messaging within the three public WhatsApp groups that are the focus of this study.

Pandemic-Related Hate and the WhatsApp Groups

Initial posts in the three groups during the first phase of COVID-19 lockdown that promoted polarization included messages about lack of social distancing by Muslims and videos of police beating up Muslim men inside mosques for violating the lockdown. Posts about attacks against police and health workers in Muslim majority areas was another major thread. The scale of messages that targeted the Muslim community and their incendiary nature increased with the national media coverage about the emergence of

[6] Some analysts question the claim that the so-called fringe groups are outside the sphere of influence of Sangh Parivar (Jha, 2017).

[7] BJP led coalitions have been in power before. However, such governments were bound by the compulsions of coalition politics; these compulsions often served as a hinderance to the pursuit of an all-out Hindutva agenda. Post 2014 and 2019 victories, BJP, which is the leading partner in the ruling coalition NDA (National Democratic Alliance), is less reliant on its allies.

a COVID-19 hotspot at a congregation of the Muslim religious group Tablighi Jamaat, at its headquarters at Nizamuddin, Delhi. The congregation consisted of several foreigners and people from different parts of India; COVID-19 cases related to it began to emerge in many Indian states. This led to the creation and circulation of a narrative across the country that blamed the minority Muslim population for the spread of the virus in India. Both mainstream media and social media played a role in aiding the circulation of this narrative that accused the Muslims in India of waging "CoronaJihad" by spreading the virus. The messages around "CoronaJihad" within the WhatsApp Groups A, B, and θ should be understood against this broader context.

By the time a 36-hour operation by the authorities cleared the Tablighi Jamaat headquarters on April 1, 2020, removing approximately 2,361 people who were sent to either hospitals or quarantine, accounts about "CoronaJihad" had spread across the country. Several mainstream media outlets, especially news channels, reported the incident in a manner that was visibly sectarian. The central government's health ministry briefing blamed the Tablighi Jamaat gathering for increasing the overall cases of the pandemic in India.[8] Altogether, "the Tablighi Jamaat functioned as a high-profile symbol of Indian Muslims broadly" (Desai & Amarasingam, 2020, p. 5). The range of messages in the three WhatsApp groups that contributed to accounts of "CoronaJihad" can be divided into the following main categories: posts about the Tablighi Jamaat incident and other messages that link the Muslims with the spread of the virus; videos that show the police beating Muslim men who were accused of violating social distancing norms, followed by posts that laud such actions; messages about the so-called parasitic behavior of Muslims and the need to boycott them; as well as posts about how Muslims are attacking police personnel and health workers. Apart from these, the groups also contained messages that talk about actions by opposition parties and leftists that were framed as treacherous acts that adversely affect the Modi government's efforts to contain the pandemic. Table 1 provides a broad categorization of messages in the three WhatsApp groups that target the Muslim community.

[8] Some reports contested the veracity of this claim because of the sampling bias of testing more people who had links with the Tablighi Jamaat incident (Daniyal, 2020).

Table 1. COVID-19-Related Extreme Speech and Misinformation That Targets Muslims in the Three WhatsApp Groups.

Group A	Group B	Group θ
1.Material related to the Tablighi Jamaat incident that blames Muslims for the increase in COVID-19 cases in India	1. General messages that link Muslims with the spread of the virus	1. General messages that link Muslims with the spread of the virus
2.General messages that link Muslims with the spread of the virus	2. Material related to the Tablighi Jamaat incident that blames Muslims for the increase in COVID-19 cases in India &	2. Material related to the Tablighi Jamaat incident that blames Muslims for the increase in COVID-19 cases in India
3. Videos of police attacking Muslim men who were accused of violating social distancing norms followed by posts that laud such attacks	Posts about the so called threatening behavior of Muslims toward health workers and police	3. Posts about the alleged parasitic behavior of Muslims
4. Posts about the so called threatening behavior of Muslims toward health workers and police	3. Videos of police attacking Muslim men who were accused of violating social distancing norms followed by posts that laud such attacks	4. Calls for boycott of Muslims
5. Posts about the alleged parasitic behavior of Muslims	4. Posts about the alleged parasitic behavior of Muslims	5. Videos of police attacking Muslim men who were accused of violating social distancing norms followed by posts that laud such attacks
6.Calls for boycott of Muslims	5. Calls for boycott of Muslims	

Note. The table provides broad themes. The theme that appears most frequently in a particular group is placed at the top

A message shared in Group A can be used to provide an idea about the nature of extreme speech within these groups around COVID-19.

> Everyone please be alert. All Hindus and members of other religions should not meet any Muslims even by mistake for at least one month. Even if the Muslim concerned is your good friend. Human corona bombs are being made at Delhi's Nizamuddin. From there at least 1,500 people have been arrested; however, several Muslims have escaped from there and they are now spread across different states. Don't meet a Muslim for a month. Please spread this message as wide as you can. (personal communication, April 6, 2020)

This is an English translation of the original Hindi message. This call for the boycott of Muslims in the context of the pandemic and the Tablighi Jamaat incident should be placed within the broader pattern of extreme speech and misinformation within the three WhatsApp groups. Call for boycott of Muslim businesses, especially vegetable and fruit sellers, have been part of such patterns even before the pandemic became a major concern in India. With the advent of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, messages calling for such boycotts coalesced into pandemic-related narratives about "CoronaJihad." In fact, this

narrative is part of a continuum where, after the 2014 victory of the BJP under Modi, specific incidents within the news cycle tend to become the locus for the spread of extreme speech, misinformation, as well as violence (Desai & Amarasingam, 2020)

In the case of pandemic-related narratives of hate, mainstream news channels also played a role in furthering it. Mainstream Hindi news channels, such as Zee News and India TV, compared those who attended the Tablighi Jamaat congregation at Nizamuddin in Delhi with suicide bombers; both channels show a visible bias toward the Modi government (Chatterji, 2020). Clips from Zee News and India TV were shared in Groups A and B. One roughly two-minute and 20-second video excerpt from Zee News show Taal Thok Ke on April 3, 2020 (Zee News, 2020) was shared in Group A through a Facebook link on April 4, 2020. In this Hindi clip, the anchor Aman Chopra accuses the Tablighi Jamaat chief Maulana Saad of being an "atom bomb" who created 9,000 COVID-19 "time bombs." The anchor mentions about how "these people" are spreading COVID-19 and are creating trouble for health workers by spitting and throwing stones at them (Zee News, 2020). The accusation of throwing stones refers to an incident in the state of Madhya Pradesh where health workers were attacked in a Muslim majority area on April 2, 2020 (Pandey, 2020). The anchors' sweeping use of "these people" allows a reading of "these people" as "Muslims." This instance of an obviously sectarian approach by a mainstream news channel can be compared with a YouTube link that was shared in Group θ on April 2, 2020. It also mentions "these people," but this video spells out that "these people" are Muslims and stresses the need to name and shame Muslims for their supposed role in attacking health workers and spreading COVID-19 in the country (OpIndia Hindi, 2020). This video was posted on YouTube by one of the popular Indian right-wing websites OpIndia, which has been accused of spreading extreme speech and misinformation (Goel, 2020). OpIndia positions itself as a news and current affairs website. In this video, Ajeet Bharti who is credited as OpIndia editor, speaks about how Muslims are trying to turn India into a hell; their apparent lack of concern for their own safety in the face of the pandemic is attributed to their fascination with the idea of martyrdom. The 14:59 minute video claims to use "facts" to show how the attitude of the Muslim community allegedly helps to increase the spread of the virus in India. The video stresses that naming the Muslim community is not islamophobia, because any "disease" like headaches or cancer needs to be named to treat it (OpIndia Hindi, 2020).

These two instances where a mainstream news channel and a right-wing website that supports the ruling party contribute to the "CoronaJihad" narratives within the Hindutva WhatsApp groups shows the transmedial nature of extreme speech that circulates through WhatsApp. Apart from text messages and audio-visual content, a range of material from YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Helo, and other similar platforms were used to define the so-called Muslim problem within these WhatsApp groups. A recent study (Banaji et al., 2019) that examines the links between vigilante violence and the spread of misinformation through WhatsApp in India points to the need to pay attention to the intertextual and transmedial dimension of such circulations. Transmediality refers to the manner in which a narrative is constructed across diverse media platforms and intertextuality to the way in which texts are interlinked with each other. The report also mentions how users cross verify the information that they receive through social media with mainstream media reports.

When narratives of "CoronaJihad" reaches members in private WhatsApp groups who are not part of public Hindutva WhatsApp groups, they will be able to cross-verify such content by referring to mainstream news outlets. The manner in which individual users who encounter Hindutva messages in private

WhatsApp groups respond to such messages will depend on a range of complex factors, and it is simplistic to assume a mode of reception that supposes a linear model of media effects on users. At the same time, there is a need to acknowledge the speed with which narratives from the Hindutva ecosystem of hate are able to become ubiquitous in contemporary India. While WhatsApp functions as a major interface to circulate such narratives, it is certainly not the only one. The frame of remediation can be used to understand how in the case of narratives around "CoronaJihad," newer forms of communication like WhatsApp work together with more traditional forms of media, such as television channels. The concept of remediation acknowledges that cultural work is never done in isolation and both new and old media forms refashion themselves in relation to each other (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). Thus, while the posts within the public Hindutva WhatsApp groups use stylistic devices as well as excerpts from news reports, a section of mainstream news media adopt a way of functioning that ensures that the discourse that emerges from them has much in common with sectarian WhatsApp groups.[9]

The case of the three WhatsApp groups analyzed here can be used to understand the way in which the diverse strands of pandemic-related misinformation and extreme speech produces a coherent narrative about how Muslims in India are actively trying to sabotage the efforts to contain the pandemic. Posts about the Tablighi Jamaat congregation and other alleged efforts by Muslims to spread the virus constitute one strand of the accounts about what the group members perceive as the Muslim problem. Another strand consists of messages about the so called parasitic behavior of Muslims who are accused of cornering benefits from social security schemes including the COVID-19 related assistance from the state. A different set of posts in the groups provided what can be viewed as solutions to this so-called Muslim problem, especially in the context of the pandemic. The call for boycott of Muslims in general and Muslim businesses in particular can be classified as a part of such solutions. Viral videos that were eventually debunked by fact-checking websites were shared in all the groups as proof of supposed attempts by Muslims to spread the COVID-19 virus (Chaudhuri, 2020; Patel & Zubair, 2020). For example, video of a Muslim sect's religious ritual in which spoons and vessels are licked to avoid wastage of food was shared in all the three groups with a call to widely circulate the video (Chaudhuri, 2020). Such videos that were used to spread misinformation about Muslims as the alleged spreaders of COVID-19 virus worked together with messages that called for a social boycott of Muslims. The videos of police beating Muslim men is another category of messages that form the solution strand of the pandemic related hate narratives in the three WhatsApp groups. Through the course of the first phase of the lockdown, many such videos were shared in all the groups analyzed here. During one of the harshest COVID-19 lockdowns in the world (Ratcliffe, 2020), police brutality against ordinary people who were perceived as violating the norms of social distancing became commonplace across India. Several videos of police caning people surfaced in social media as well as mainstream news media. The messages in all the three WhatsApp groups broadly held the notion that such violence by the police was necessary. Videos of Muslim men being beaten up by the police were shared in these groups, and many group members posted responses that lauded such action of the police. These videos included police action outside a mosque in the state of Karnataka, visuals of police chasing and caning a Muslim man at Bareilly, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, as well as a clip of a Muslim man running away in fear when the police target

[9] Sections of mainstream media used to engage in fire tending even before the arrival of online and mobile platforms (Brass, 2003).

him. Within the Hindutva ecosystem of hate, such videos can be placed as part of the broad range of visual material, including lynching videos that celebrates violence against outgroups, especially Muslims.

Overall, the range of messages within the three WhatsApp groups that contributes to the narrative of "CoronaJihad" work in tandem with the broader strands of this narrative across various online and mobile platforms as well as mainstream media. In the case of the spread of extreme speech and misinformation via WhatsApp, there is a general tendency to place end-to-end encryption as a primary reason behind such spread. However, while the encrypted nature of the platform certainly plays a part in shaping the role of WhatsApp within the larger structures of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate, a large section of the photos and videos that was part of the extreme speech and misinformation around COVID-19 in all the three groups were available through YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and other more "open" platforms. In fact, due to the limited availability of space in low-cost phones, WhatsApp users in India often share videos as YouTube links.[10] While Group A contained material that would have been difficult to share widely without end-to-end encryption, such as graphic rape imagery in the form of stickers that used the names of religious figures, such material was not part of the COVID-19-related content that is the focus here. So, if a sizeable section of the material in the three WhatsApp groups are available through more open platforms, then how can we map the specific role of these WhatsApp groups in the construction and circulation of narratives like that of "CoronaJihad?"

Fire Tending, Company Policies, and Role of the State

WhatsApp's website mentions that it "is a private messaging platform" (WhatsApp, n.d.-c, para. 1). This claim is reiterated in the white paper on stopping abuse released by the company in 2019; this white paper adds that "our service is not a broadcast platform" (WhatsApp, 2019, p. 4). However, despite such claims by the company, the case of the public Hindutva WhatsApp groups discussed here shows that the application is often used as a public platform to reach a wide audience. The white paper mentions that around 90% of the WhatsApp messages are between two people, and most groups on the platform have less than 10 people. This claim by the company about the overwhelmingly "private nature" (WhatsApp, 2019, p. 3) of the messages within the platform does not reveal the actual scale of communication through WhatsApp groups. A release of country-wise data of total number of WhatsApp groups and the number of users within them in the public domain by the company is required to examine such claims. In fact, the statement by Indian home minister and BJP leader Amit Shah that his party can reach 3.2 million people through WhatsApp in the state of Uttar Pradesh alone shows that the platform can be used for public broadcast (Basu, 2019). Shah also reiterated that through its WhatsApp network, the party has the ability to make any message viral including misinformation. Though the platform tries to restrict automated behavior and spam messages by letting users choose who can add them to specific groups, the option of joining through links helps public WhatsApp groups to thrive. Academic researchers (Barbosa & Milan, 2019; Garimella & Tyson, 2018) frequently distinguish between private and public WhatsApp groups. The company needs to acknowledge the scale of the use of the platform for public broadcast.

Acknowledging that WhatsApp functions as an encrypted public broadcast platform in several contexts including that of India will be an important step in the direction of framing suitable measures for

[10] The situation is also similar in countries like Brazil.

restricting the use of the platform for spreading extreme speech and misinformation, as in the case of the public Hindutva WhatsApp groups. Here, Gillespie's (2018) argument that moderating content is foundational to the functioning of social media platforms becomes relevant. He stresses that despite their efforts to portray themselves as just conduits, platforms play a major role in structuring the shape of public discourse; the processes of moderation and the framework set by specific platforms for communication have a significant impact on this act of structuring. However, Gillespie (2018) does not include WhatsApp and other similar messaging services within his definition of platforms because according to him they sidestep many of the issues faced by platforms because communication within these messaging services is "overwhelmingly between known contacts" (p. 21). This argument does not take into account the situation in many parts of the Global South, including India, where WhatsApp shapes many quotidian activities and political mobilizations (Cruz & Harindranath, 2020). Extending Gillespie's definition of platforms to include WhatsApp will help to situate how company policies shape the structure of communication within WhatsApp groups. Moderation within WhatsApp is tacit; it is possible to report a particular user or group and the company reserves the right to ban users who violate the platform's terms and services. According to the company website, once reporting happens, "WhatsApp receives the most recent messages sent to you by a reported user or group, as well as information on your recent interactions with the reported user" (WhatsApp, n.d.-b, para. 16). However, at present when one reports a group, WhatsApp does not ask for the reason behind such an action. The processes that take place after the step of reporting also remains largely opaque to individual users.

In effect, the framing of WhatsApp as a platform for private communication that does not provide possibilities for public broadcast allows it to be a stable interface for spreading extreme speech and misinformation in many parts of the world, including India. For example, in the case of the public Hindutva WhatsApp groups discussed here, they help Hindutva pages and accounts that get blocked or removed from other platforms, including Facebook and YouTube, to regroup. For instance, Group A contained many videos of a Hindutva influencer who was trying to rebuild his network after Facebook removed his page following an incendiary post. The videos urge people to circulate information about the new Facebook page of the user so that he can rebuild his audience.[11]

Overall, it can be argued that within the Hindutva ecosystem of hate, WhatsApp functions as a key constituent that enables fire tending. The use of WhatsApp within Hindutva mobilizations involves remediation of earlier forms of Hindutva communication that used various media forms including print and video (Mukherjee, 2020). At the same time, in contemporary India, the platform's entanglement with the way in which people dwell with each other shapes the specific function of the platform within the Hindutva ecosystem of hate. The manner in which the public Hindutva WhatsApp groups operate to spread narratives like that of "CoronaJihad" shows how the platform becomes a stable interface to increase the scale and reach of fire tending. While the WhatsApp platform cannot be held responsible for the creation of content such as the one around "CoronaJihad" or the act of fire tending per se, the manner in which the platform shapes such acts of fire tending can be understood within the framework of the argument that platforms play a role in structuring the shape of public discourse (Gillespie, 2018).

[11] The phone number that shared these videos can be linked to mobile commerce networks that use rereferral codes to earn money and shopping rewards.

Much of the exchanges within the public Hindutva WhatsApp groups, including those around "CoronaJihad," violate WhatsApp's terms of service, which states that users cannot use the platform to publish content that is "hateful, racially or ethnically offensive" (WhatsApp, n.d.-b, para. 2). The proliferation of public Hindutva WhatsApp groups that play a key role in making the process of fire tending quotidian and ubiquitous shows that there are serious lapses in ensuring that users follow such terms of service. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, though the platform positions itself as a private messaging application, it allows the emergence of numerous public groups through shareable links that permit new users to join a group. In fact, studies from other countries have termed the use of partisan public WhatsApp groups for political mobilization as small rallies (Bursztyn & Birnbaum, 2019).

WhatsApp has taken a few measures to address the spread of misinformation through the platform in India and elsewhere (WhatsApp, n.d.-a). However, these measures remain severely inadequate (Banaji et al., 2019). Such measures taken by WhatsApp include limiting the number of messages that can be forwarded at a time and adding labels that denote that a particular message is forwarded or much forwarded. In the context of the public Hindutva WhatsApp groups, limiting the number of messages that can be shared at a time is a useful measure because the patterns of activity in these groups indicate that posting across multiple groups is a way through which users aim to gain a wide circulation for their posts. As far as the label that indicates that a message is forwarded is concerned, though it might have value in many circumstances, in the case of public Hindutva WhatsApp groups, this measure does not hold much significance. This is because in these groups, forwarded content is essential to maintain a steady flow of messages to keep the group active.

While the architecture of the WhatsApp platform and certain company policies aid the act of fire tending in public Hindutva WhatsApp groups, placing the sole responsibility of such acts on the platform will mean turning a blind eye to the long history of sociopolitical mobilizational efforts by the Hindutva groups. In their study of social-media-related lynchings in India, Vasudeva and Barkdull (2020) caution against such an approach; they show how the state machinery in India attempts to frame such violence as a problem that is caused by technology. Such a framing is extremely problematic; in fact, the ability of public Hindutva WhatsApp groups to spread hateful accounts such as the one around "CoronaJihad" is also a result of the state machinery's lack of interest in intervening within the fire-tending process done by Hindutva actors. The fact that the electoral fortunes of Prime Minister Modi's party BJP is closely tied to the effective functioning of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate that produces various kind of iterations that assert the need for Hindu unity against the Muslim "other" can be situated as the chief reason behind this. Recently, the United Nations (2020) issued a Guidance Note on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 Related Hate Speech, and this note lists individual states as key stakeholders who should contain the circulation of divisive narratives around the pandemic. However, the situation in India shows that, as in the case of Myanmar (Lee, 2019), there is a need to acknowledge that state machinery and ruling parties could be complicit in aiding the spread of extreme speech and misinformation.

So, WhatsApp's deep entanglement with the divisive politics of hate and violence in India shows that encrypted platforms play an important role in shaping public discourses. Once such platforms become part of the fabric of dwelling, as in the case of WhatsApp in India, they need to be brought within the ambit of discussions about the need to make the moderation process in social media platforms more visible and

accountable (Gillespie, 2018). A platform's claim about it being essentially "a private messaging platform" (WhatsApp, n.d.-c, para.1) need to be evaluated against its actual functioning process within specific contexts. The case of the spread of narratives about "CoronaJihad" in India, discussed in this article, shows how the existence of private and public WhatsApp groups allow actors within the Hindutva ecosystem of hate to coordinate the fire-tending activity that attempts to increase the tension between Hindus and Muslims. More transparent measures are required to build a robust mechanism to identify and remove those who use the platform to spread hatred against particular communities. This will require cooperation from users; claims about "sophisticated machine learning systems" that can "detect abusive behavior" (WhatsApp, 2019, p. 3) will not be sufficient to address the issue of the use of WhatsApp for the circulation of divisive narratives.

Conclusion

Altogether, the case of COVID-19 related extreme speech and misinformation in the three public Hindutva WhatsApp groups that were analyzed in this article shows that the manner in which the platform is entrenched within ways of dwelling in India makes it an important constituent of the Hindutva ecosystem of hate. A range of factors including certain company policies, a mostly opaque moderation process, state apathy, as well as specific sociopolitical circumstances contribute to the platform's role in sustaining and expanding fire tending by Hindutva actors that target the Muslim community. At the same time, the primary responsibility for the prevalence of hate in the life world of a sizeable section of Indians today cannot be attributed to the presence of online and mobile platforms, including WhatsApp. The long history of mobilizational efforts by Hindutva groups has contributed to the evolution of such a life world. The case of how Hindutva WhatsApp groups help to circulate polarizing narratives like that of "CoronaJihad" shows how the quick adoption of new and emerging forms of communication has allowed the Hindutva ecosystem of hate to widen its sphere of influence. This, in turn, has helped to increase the scale and reach of fire tending by the constituents within this ecosystem. Such fire tending is an essential ingredient in the electoral strategies of BJP, the party of the current Prime Minister Modi. As a result, in the current sociopolitical atmosphere in India, addressing the spread of extreme speech and misinformation through WhatsApp, is never going to be as simple as listing a few technical fixes or similar superficial solutions.

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