

Leaderboards & Prestige Points: How Homegrown Applications Gamify Muslim Hate

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ABSTRACT

At a time when online spaces, earlier perceived as free forums for digital publics to interact and socialize, are becoming increasingly corporatized, India has emerged as the biggest source of disinformation across the globe. In the last few years, scholars have argued how online hate speech and targeting have spilt into the offline, forcing platform accountability. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other prominent social media platforms have rolled out features that attempt to limit the virality of messages and reviewed moderation policies, even if their efficacy is debatable. Meanwhile, India slipped from being the largest, emergent democracy to an electoral autocracy and the digital repression tactics by formal and informal government agents have emerged as a prominent strain of discussions. In continuation of these deliberations, I argue that firstly, there is a rise of homegrown or ‘swadeshi’ applications – Koo, ShareChat, Kutumb, Chingari - in the current climate of hyper-nationalism in India. Secondly, having employed Netnography (Kozinets, 2010) and recorded my reflexive observations (Wilkinson & Patterson, 2014) for 18 months in three communities of the mobile phone application Kutumb, I argue how such applications, under the façade of social platforms, act as management tools for radicalizing and recruiting digital volunteers. These applications are hybrid, intermedial spaces where both formal and informal participants socialize. The moderation policies of these applications and the platform affordances legitimize and incentivize Islamophobia, collective action against minorities and strengthen surveillance and targeting of dissenters. And finally, grounding my research in game theory and principles, I argue how this different form of sociality and public interaction is ‘gamifying’ hate and violence against minorities. While principles of games have either been limited to either actual playing of games or to the domain of marketing and advertisements, it is now increasingly been used by social media platforms, emphasizing the already broken “magic circle” (Consalvo, 2009) and spread of misinformation attributed to the habit of sharing because of “repeated clicking” (Wohn, 2012). This organized and sophisticated management of collective action by Majoritarian Hindus captures the transition of digital repression strategy (Frantz et al., 2020) in autocracies from low intensity to high where a user is posed with a moral dilemma, like in games, to attack or diss a Muslim to become a “good” Hindu.

KEYWORDS: Alternate social media, Kutumb, Koo, ShareChat, Islamophobia, Gamification

Introduction

“U.S.-style polarization has arrived in India. Modi is at the heart of the divide,” reads the headline of an article¹ published by the Washington Post in 2019. I start my article with this headline because my article implores to shed the western lens through which all Indian (or South Asian, or even Global South issues) are viewed through. At the outset of my article, that makes a case for an alternate space, a sphere – public or private, public-yet-private, private, and still public, I would caution the scholars reading or hearing it that my tone will be non-conventional as an academician since my epistemology is guided by my practice, my duality and my many lives as a journalist, as a scholar, through several presences and copies of myself online and offline. Why the Washington Post article’s headline extracts such strong reactions is that Indian political polarity, both online and offline, has always been appropriated for the understanding of the western audience as much as it has been in several other streams of thought and scholarship (Than, 2021). Indian polarization is not U.S.-style. Donald Trump became the US president in 2017 while Narendra Modi became the Indian prime in 2014. The groundwork for political polarity in India had been laid in 2006 when Indian right-wing Silicon Valley techies donated labor to the ruling Bhartiya Janta Party’s right-wing religio-political ideologue – Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The infamous IT (Information Technology) cell of the ruling Bhartiya Janta Party played a significant role in influencing voters² before elections and deepening the differences that Indian society was anyway fraught with³.

¹ Masih, N., & Slater, J. (2019, May 20). U.S.-style polarization has arrived in India. Modi is at the heart of the divide. The Washington Post. Retrieved August 1, 2022, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/divided-families-and-tense-silences-us-style-polarization-arrives-in-india/2019/05/18/734bfdc6-5bb3-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2_story.html

² Dhara, T. (2019, January 29). Former BJP data analyst on how the party wins elections and influences people. The Caravan. Retrieved July 27, 2022, from <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/shivam-shankar-singh-as-told-to-bjp-data>

³ Nagarajan, K. (2017, January 5). "I am against any kind of hatred being spread": Sadhavi Khosla, a former BJP volunteer, discusses the party's social-media campaigns, online trolls, and why she left. The Caravan. Retrieved July 27, 2022, from <https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/sadhavi-khosla-bjp-social-media-trolls>

Indian political polarization is deeply embedded and arises from the cultural crevices, in conflicted colonial history and mostly from the sutures of the bloody religious communal violence and massacre that dates to 1947 when Pakistan was carved out from India (Pandey, 1992). Muslims and Hindus were forced to flee to what was designated by the rulers (political, revolutionary, or ideological) as their new homeland. Both the countries – India and Pakistan – still bear the burden of that violent past that define the geopolitics of the regions and the borders of the countries, of people who are Hindus and Muslims (Subramaniam, 1999). Just so the sutures never heal, Indian political parties have time and again used media devices to stoke the deep-seated insecurities and fears between Hindus and Muslims (Rajagopal, 2001; Saha et al., 2021; Udupa, 2015). Despite phenomenal increase in political and religious polarities in India, prime minister Narendra Modi instituted 14th August as the day of “Partition Horrors Remembrance Day”⁴.

The rose-tinted glasses with which we saw social media (specifically Facebook) as a free space for public speech right are now shattered. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp and so many other apps when time again found themselves fumbling to answer questions about enablers of “digital repression” (Frantz et al., 2020). Starting from inciting Rohingya massacre in Myanmar to mobilizing crowds to lynch Muslims in India, these social media corporations are now scrambling to whitewash their involvement or complacency or even abetment with several projects and funding programmes to academia and newsrooms (including factcheck organizations) but as somebody who has embedded herself to various social media networks and closely monitored community formation and moderation on these social platforms, I can’t help but remember Lady Macbeth’s famous quote, “all the perfumes

⁴ The Hindu. (2021, August 14). 'Partition horrors remembrance day': Narendra Modi picks August 14 to recall partition trauma. The Hindu. Retrieved August 9, 2022, from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/partition-horrors-remembrance-day-narendra-modi-picks-august-14-to-recall-partition-trauma/article35907824.ece>

of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” (Shakespeare, 1992) . In this paper, I intend to first lay out the premise by explaining how the right-wing in India as used mainstream social media platforms to repress minorities – especially Muslims – in the country before arguing that there is now a rise of “alternate social media” which are not mere filters bubbles but a much more organized tool for gamifying hate speech. This sort of state-of-the-art, homegrown application that gamifies hate against Muslims in India is unprecedented and while scholars keep scratching the surface with various other clones of the mainstream social media applications, the unique multilingual application Kutumb is enabling targeted harassment of minorities in both online and consequently in offline spaces by incentivizing the criminal actions with “prestige points”.

A walk towards “digital sovereignty”

My article is not about the social media behemoths – the corporations that we already know have been promoting hate speech on their platforms (Manuvie, 2022) or giving leeway to ruling party’s elected members spreading disinformation or propaganda⁵. It is both amusing and sinister that the ruling and associated extremist groups have realized that they cannot depend on these platforms anymore. While the large social media corporations walk the tight rope between repressive governments’ censorship in emergent democracies, Indian Hindu extremists adopted “China-style” (if I were to refer to the Washington Post headline again) platformatisation of political polarization, hate and mobilization of majority Hindu population for Hindu majoritarianism. The BJP had realized the potential of social media in tapping the demographic dividend for elections way before any other political party in India (Basu, 2019).

⁵ Kumar, D. (2022, June 6). Facebook inaction: Whistleblower documents name BJP MP Vinod Sonkar in 'fake account' controversy. The Wire. Retrieved July 27, 2022, from <https://thewire.in/tech/facebook-inaction-whistleblower-documents-name-bjp-mp-vinod-sonkar-in-fake-account-controversy>

Beta-testing of various home-grown applications by the right-wing started way back even before large corporations such as Facebook were pulled up by the US Congress and human rights activists raised concerns over social platforms' culpability in repressing voices⁶ and influencing elections⁷. Baba Ramdev, a self-professed Godman and yoga guru with a line of "domestic products", introduced Kimbho, a WhatsApp clone, in 2018⁸. It has experienced numerous security issues and underwent a makeover to become the chat application Bolo Messenger, which experienced some of the same problems⁹. Because of the public backlash and mounting pressures, the social media corporations could not be as immune to the hate speech and Islamophobic content being churned by the BJP's IT cell and its thousands of followers (Basu, 2020b). For example, a popular Bombay cinema actress and vocal supporter of the ruling regime, Kangana Ranaut, was banned permanently¹⁰ from Twitter after she implored Prime Minister Narendra Modi to show his form from early 2000s to "tame" opposition leader and chief minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee¹¹. While Twitter acted against Ranaut's account after several reports of spreading disinformation and calling for violence against minority Muslims, supporters of the ruling party felt that their spaces for spreading right-wing messages were shrinking¹².

⁶ Binder, M. (2019, October 29). Facebook's sins haunt Mark Zuckerberg at Libra Congressional Hearing.

Mashable. Retrieved July 28, 2022, from <https://mashable.com/article/facebook-libra-hearing-mark-zuckerberg>

⁷ Perrigo, B. (2019, January 25). How whatsapp is fueling fake news ahead of India's elections. Time. Retrieved July 28, 2022, from <https://time.com/5512032/whatsapp-india-election-2019/>

⁸ Thomas, P. N. (2022, May 18). India's Rocky Road to social media independence. Eco-Business. Retrieved August 9, 2022, from <https://www.eco-business.com/opinion/indias-rocky-road-to-social-media-independence/>

⁹ ETtech. (2018, May 31). Kimbho app: French hacker claims Ramdev's new messaging app Kimbho a 'Security Disaster'. The Economic Times. Retrieved August 1, 2022, from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/internet/french-hacker-claims-ramdevs-new-messaging-app-kimbho-a-security-disaster/articleshow/64398170.cms>

¹⁰ ETtech. (2021, May 4). Twitter permanently bans Kangana Ranaut's account after 'hateful' video. The Economic Times. Retrieved August 1, 2022, from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/technology/twitter-suspends-kangana-ranauts-account-for-rule-violation/articleshow/82384473.cms>

¹¹ Actress Kangana Ranaut was referring to Narendra Modi's role in the deadly communal riots in the state of Gujarat where the leader served as a chief minister in 2000s.

¹² Kumar, A. (2021, December 8). Why are right-wing youths demanding digital sovereignty in India? Youth Ki Awaaz. Retrieved August 1, 2022, from <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2021/12/digital-sovereignty-social-media-facebook-twitter-personal-data/>

Sahana Udupa (Udupa, 2018) has described this creation of right-wing ecosystem on social media as “Enterprise Hindutva” which she proposes be positioned inside this growing global infrastructure for online influence management as well as widespread public engagement in “high politics”. For the supporters of the right-wing ideology, mainstream social media platforms were not enough to host this “Enterprise Hindutva” leading to a demand of “digital sovereignty”¹³ piggybacking on BJP’s business and corporate self-sufficiency campaigns called “Made in India” and “Atmanirbhar Bharat”¹⁴. Total 6,940 tech entrepreneurs and startups from all around the nation took part in the government floated “Aatma Nirbhar Bharat App Innovation Challenge” in July 2020. Nine categories — Business, eLearning, Entertainment, Games, Health, News, Office and Work from Home, Others, and Social — received entries for the mega challenge. An application called “Chingari” (trans. Spark of fire), an alternative of TikTok, won in the social category along with Twitter alternative, Koo¹⁵.

It would be good to mention that this point that the right-wing supporters were not the only one craving domination over digital spaces. When large-scale migration from Twitter to open-source alternative social app Mastodon started in mid-2019, it seemed like a de-corporatization movement¹⁶. The migration was triggered by suspension of Twitter account of an attorney for the Supreme Court of India, Sanjay Hedge, for a picture of a German worker by the name of August Landmesser who became popular in 1936 for refused to give

¹³ Kumar, A. (2021, December 8). Why are right-wing youths demanding digital sovereignty in India? Youth Ki Awaaz. Retrieved August 1, 2022, from <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2021/12/digital-sovereignty-social-media-facebook-twitter-personal-data/>

¹⁴ Thomson Reuters. (2022, February 15). India adds 54 more Chinese apps to ban list; Sea says it complies with laws. Reuters. Retrieved August 1, 2022, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/sea-owned-game-free-fire-unavailable-india-after-ban-chinese-apps-2022-02-15/>

¹⁵ Khatri, B. (2020, August 8). Meet the 24 companies which won Modi’s AATMANIRBHAR Bharat App Challenge. Inc42 Media. Retrieved August 1, 2022, from <https://inc42.com/buzz/chingari-wins-aatmanirbhar-bharat-app-challenge-in-social-media-category/>

¹⁶ Ranipeta, S. (2019, November 8). What is Mastodon and why scores of Twitter users are migrating to it. The News Minute. Retrieved August 3, 2022, from <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/what-mastodon-and-why-scores-twitter-users-are-migrating-it-111951>

the Nazi salute. Hedge's account was suspended again after he retweeted a revolutionary poem. For Twitter, Hegde's posts were "sensitive or offensive content". Hegde served a legal notice to Twitter and moved to Mastodon. Several other prominent personalities, including left-wing political activists, who dissented with the ruling regime's repressive tactics on social media switched the platforms. Within months, for Indian users, including me, Mastodon became yet another source of political propaganda but this time, from the left-wing ideologues. The hype soon fizzled because left parties never had the resources or the high-tech infrastructures that the ruling regime had (Basu, 2020b).

Rise of the alternate media in India

Techno-nationalism (Charland, 1986) in India carved a space for several home-grown applications which are alternatives of the social media giants. After an Indo-China border dispute, the Indian government banned a total 321 applications built in China and the Prime Minister called out to social media entrepreneurs to participate in the national campaign for self-reliance – Atmanirbhar Bharat campaign. While YouTube, Facebook (now Meta), Twitter and Instagram remain the largest market players with strong hold on advertisement from government and allies, homegrown applications such as ShareChat, Chingari, Koo, Tooter, Josh, Mitron, Verse, Roposo, Flik, Leher, Kutumb and many more have been gaining significant number of users. While these applications may appear as a copy of already existing non-Indian applications with the kind of broader features they offer, they also more intuitively built for the Indian users. Their interfaces are smoother and friendlier for a populace that are dependent on voice commands, that lack media or digital literacy, or belong to the semi-urban or rural areas in India. Starting from the aesthetics to the finer features of the applications, they are built keeping the linguistic, educational and spatial diversity in India. These applications make social media space accessible to the non-elites, empowering

them and offering them the platform affordances to participate in social and political discussions. All this reminds of the time when Facebook or Meta and other social media applications promised a fair ground for the voice of the masses, ushering a newer form of a digital “public sphere” (Habermas, 1992). Only that it wasn’t.

In January 2022, two independent security, intelligence and data analysts – Ayushman Kaul and Devesh Kumar, published their investigation spanning two years into a sophisticated application – TekFog - that the ruling party’s IT wing was using to penetrate social media applications and break encryptions to inject and amplify right-wing propaganda and Islamophobic content¹⁷. The two-part investigation was launched after IT cell whistleblower Aarthi Sharma tweeted:

“Dear BJP i was working for your IT cell since 2014, now i Quit. And understood, you made us Scapegoats only! Perhaps, You are giving us ₹2/tweet . But you promised us in 2k18 if BJP comes to power again you shall get government job. Now you are denying? Liers! Where is Job?”¹⁸

“There are many #BJPitCell softwares, i was suggested to use 'The tek fog', this is secret app only for #ItCellWorkers. It bypasses reCaptcha codes, is used for auto-upload texts and hashtag Trends. However, pro-players of #ItCellWorkers are using Tasker app too.”¹⁹

The investigation also revealed that the application TekFog worked seamlessly with not just the mainstream social media applications but were also supported, directly or indirectly, by them. For example, the investigation establishes links that reveal the company – Mohalla Tech Pvt. Ltd. - that had a role in designing Tekfog had received funding from Twitter for another social media application, ShareChat, that they had built. ShareChat, with over 250 million monthly active users in 15 Indian languages, transcends the linguistic boundaries of

¹⁷ Kaul, A., Kumar, D. (2022, January 6). Tek fog: An app with BJP footprints for Cyber troops to automate hate, manipulate trends. The Wire. Retrieved August 3, 2022, from <https://thewire.in/tekfog/en/1.html>

¹⁸ Sharma’s Tweet on April 24, 2020 at 9:26am, <https://twitter.com/AarthiSharma8/status/1253570970545278977?>, archived here: <https://archive.ph/Y5Avv>

¹⁹ Sharma’s Tweet on April 28, 2020 at 12:33pm, <https://twitter.com/AarthiSharma8/status/1255067646581714945?>, archived here: <https://archive.ph/118KL>

mainstream social media applications as does other alternate social media applications discussed in the paper. According to several news reports²⁰, the platform has been rife with misinformation and political propaganda. A team of scientists (Agarwal et al., 2020) also found presence of misinformation on the platform while conducting a study ahead of the Indian general elections of 2019. The nature of content in different other homegrown social media applications that offer wider linguistic choices to users remain the same – posts with multimedia elements (image or videos) spread more and faster, the platforms are a host to political propaganda, misinformation and hate speech and there have been several instances of targeted harassment and bullying on the platforms (Basu, 2020a; Saha et al., 2021).

All the homegrown or “swadeshi” applications are quite similar to alternate applications popular in the west for amplifying right-wing propaganda and hate speech such as Gab (Jasser et al., 2021) or Parler (Aliapoulos et al., 2021) with contentious moderation policies. There have been several studies that show violence from online has a propensity to bleed into offline lives, causing real world consequences (Banaji et al., 2019; Zannettou et al., 2019). Following the incident on Capitol Hill, both the US Congress and security organizations focused on Alt Right networks. Such networks were seen as a threat to the US homeland by federal law enforcement agencies, and the Congress explored tactics to tackle "domestic terror" and hate crimes. However, despite concerns raised by journalists, civil society members and academicians, raising concern about hate speech, targeted harassment and even online auction of Indian Muslim women, government of India has espoused such applications in the name of digital sovereignty by not only funding them under the “Aatma

²⁰ Bansal, S., Poonam, S. (2018, November 14). Fake news and hate speech thrive on regional language social media. Hindustan Times. Retrieved August 8, 2022, from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/how-regional-social-media-platforms-spew-fake-news-and-get-away-with-it/story-s8Kc2s4TKfnc0ZRlXNuLuM.html>

Nirbhar Bharat App Innovation Challenge” but also promoting them²¹. Several elected members of the ruling party, including the former minister of information and broadcasting, promoted Koo on Twitter²².

These right-wing social media platforms claim to foster “free speech” which is inclusive of “hate speech”²³. While Koo users have the option of “reporting” posts that do not adhere to the community guidelines, the platform fails to remove posts that are misleading. Ray (2021) claims that she was not informed about the procedure or anticipated timing for a decision on posts that she reported on the platform. She also argues that none of the staples of social media platforms—algorithms that automatically flag postings and restrict accounts—have made it to Koo, this is probably because the app's content moderation is purely community-driven and manual. All other homegrown or alternate social media applications in India have manual moderation. Manual moderation is effective in weeding out problematic content on multi-lingual applications since AI-driven moderations mechanisms fail when it comes to understanding cultural contexts and linguistic politics. However, it is not enough with the sheer number of users and posts on the sites. The co-founder and chief executive officer of Chingari, Sumit Ghosh, told a reporter, “We also have issues with moderation. While currently manual moderation is going on, it (moderation) should be a community-driven thing”²⁴. Several journalists cited in this paper have time and again noted that most of the users on these platforms belong to the right-wing and, same as offline world,

²¹ Iyer, A. (2022, May 13). Why trades, India's alt right, remain untouched online despite hate crimes. Scroll.in. Retrieved August 9, 2022, from <https://scroll.in/article/1023789/why-trads-indias-alt-right-remain-untouched-online-despite-hate-crimes>

²² The link shows the list of people who used the line “I am now on Koo” - https://twitter.com/search?q=%22I%20am%20now%20on%20Koo%22&src=typed_query&f=top. The list includes several members of the ruling Bhartiya Janta Party and other right-wing influencers.

²³ Christopher, N. (2021, February 19). How Koo became India's Hindu nationalist-approved Twitter alternative. Rest of World. Retrieved August 9, 2022, from <https://restofworld.org/2021/how-koo-became-a-right-wing-darling-in-india/>

²⁴ Moorthy, S. (2022, January 5). What Indian social audio apps are getting right on content moderation. Moneycontrol. Retrieved August 9, 2022, from <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/what-indian-social-audio-apps-are-getting-right-on-content-moderation-7894591.html>

in an online community where majority is Hindu, hate speech against minority Muslims, disinformation targeting them and even attempts to mobilise any kind of action against them have gone unpunished. Keeping all these applications aside, I will now focus on the application Kutumb that not just creates an environment of impunity for people who engage in hate speech against Muslims but also incentivizes such actions by through gamification.

Community-driven Kutumb's coterie

Kutumb, the application developed by Abhishek Kejriwal and Mohit Sharma, in Hindi translates in English to family, kingship or community. Instead of a unified platform, the application can host innumerable communities – run by organizations like political parties, sub-parties or sangathans, non-profits, and associations of all types – and users can take membership of any three organizations or groups. Since its launch in July 2020, the app has given community moderators the ability to sell memberships, collect donations, and issue ID cards to users. Currently, there are more than 30 million Kutumb users, divided across more than 20,000 active groups. The nature of communities on Kutumb is diverse – there are not just major political parties on the group but also small civil rights organization. The Kutumb website homepage²⁵ showcases videos by representatives of several such grassroots communities who advertise the application in form of testimonies. The right-wing party members have not been seen endorsing the application as explicitly as they have been doing with Koo. However, the desktop version of the app homepage also shows how Zee Media and other pro-government mainstream news organizations have been writing advertorials promoting the applications. Kutumb created expanded its market during the second wave of Covid-19 when several non-profit organizations were able to raise funds to aid the pandemic affected people and their families as the health infrastructure in India crumbled and thousands

²⁵ Desktop version of the Kutumb application - <https://kutumb.app/>

of dead bodies washed up the shores of the arterial Ganga River²⁶. Kutumb raised \$26 million in a Series A round that was co-founded by Tiger Global in June 2021. Other investors in the round included Quiet Capital, Rocketship VC, Nirman Investments, AL Trust, and Better Capital²⁷. Of the 17 funders listed on various public platforms, several were found to have deep connection with the ruling right-wing party. For instance, one of the funders, Gaurav Munjal is also the founder of an education technology company, Unacademy. Munjal, who has several tie-ups with Government of India programmes, has been a controversial figure²⁸.

“Munjal also often takes entrepreneurs through the list of contacts on his phone, highlighting names and numbers of Sequoia India’s Shailendra Singh and cricketer Sachin Tendulkar, showcasing his access and proximity to power. If the charm offensive doesn’t work, he sometimes resorts to threats, telling them that no other investor will fund their company and it will be forced to close.” (Sriram & Srikanth, 2022)

The founder and managing director of Sequoia Capital India, Shailendra Singh, describes himself on Twitter as, “IT Professional. Proud Bharatiya, No abuse policy. Be wise in word selection. Followed by PradhanSewak [@NarendraModi](#) ji; Co-founder - PMO India Report Card”²⁹. The PMO (Prime Minister’s Office) India Report Card³⁰ is a propaganda Twitter account that routinely tweets promotional messages in favour of the ruling party and disinformation against opposition party members and critics of it (Pal & Grover, 2021). Sequoia Capital India is one of the biggest funders of Kutumb as is Tiger Global that funds

²⁶ Gupta, S. (2021, May 11). Dozens of bodies wash up on the banks of Ganges River in India. CNN. Retrieved August 16, 2022, from <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/10/asia/india-ganges-river-bodies-intl/index.html>

²⁷ Link to Crunchbase page on Kutumb, https://www.crunchbase.com/organization/kutumb/company_financials, retrieved on Aug 17, 2022.

²⁸ Sriram, M., Srikanth, C. R. (2022, July 17). Pure aggression: Inside Gaurav Munjal and Unacademy's quest for Growth. Moneycontrol. Retrieved August 17, 2022, from <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/startup/pure-aggression-inside-gaurav-munjal-and-unacademys-quest-for-growth-8211161.html>

²⁹ Twitter handle of Shailendra Singh, <https://twitter.com/shaksingh>, bio and link retrieved on Aug 17, 2022.

³⁰ Sidharth, A. (2018, July 11). Viral: Fake news about Inc K'taka candidate threatening 'unending bloodshed of Hindus' if voted to power. Alt News. Retrieved August 17, 2022, from <https://www.altnews.in/did-inc-ktaka-candidate-promise-unending-bloodshed-of-hindus-if-voted-to-power/>

the application Koo. The list of funders also includes angel investors from Tier-2 cities who only venture into firms that either have connections to the right-wing or to Gaurav Munjal of Unacademy. While discussing the background of the funders to the organization is beyond the scope of the paper, a glimpse of the overall launchpad for applications that enable right-wing agenda of a Hindu majoritarian India undermining democracy in the country, government surveillance, and mobilizing collective action against minorities and even giving calls for a genocide of Muslims in the country needs further journalistic and academic inquiry.

Moreover, the pro-government leaning of the application founders and funders raises data security concerns. India is one of the countries from which Twitter Inc. and Meta Platforms Inc. receive the most removal requests from governments worldwide. The government is making changes to the Information Technology Act to accommodate rules that mandate social media content moderation be overseen by a government panel. This is especially worrying since the government had asked Twitter to take down accounts and posts by members of opposition parties, unions, civil right activists that tweeted in favour of Indian farmers who protested new government policy that favored large corporations and demanded their roll back³¹. The government was forced to scrap the laws after a yearlong protest, leading to a death of over 700 farmers³². Twitter had also taken down the account of India's minister of electronics and information technology, Ravi Shankar Prasad, for violating US Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) when he posted a video with famous singer AR Rahman's song as a background score³³. In an interview, when a journalist Nilesh

³¹ Srivas, A. (2021, February 11). Here are some farmers' protest tweets that Twitter blocked in response to a govt order. The Wire. Retrieved August 17, 2022, from <https://thewire.in/tech/farmers-that-twitter-blocked-government-order-list>

³² Jaswal, S. (2021, November 30). The human cost of India's yearlong farmers' protest. Al Jazeera. Retrieved August 17, 2022, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/30/human-cost-india-farmer-protest-agriculture#:~:text=Farmers%20unions%20say%20at%20least,families%20distracted%20and%20in%20debt>

³³ Ravi Shankar Prasad's twitter account was blocked over an AR Rahman song. The News Minute. (2021, June 26). Retrieved August 17, 2022, from <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/ravi-shankar-prasad-s-twitter-account-was-blocked-over-ar-rahman-song-151298>

Christopher (NC) asked Koo's founder Aprameya Radhakrishna (AR) got baffled when asked whether his platform will restrict posts and accounts if the government demanded –

NC: Okay. In terms of no-go topics on your platform—

AR: There are people who harass women online, right? It leads to arrests offline, agree?

NC: Right.

AR: So if somebody harasses another person and says, "These people should be killed," or whatever it is, that's also a problem, right?

NC: So you will take that down if someone—

AR: Not take down. I will follow the law. It will be applied, no matter where your behavior is, online or offline.

NC: So there will be government-regulated laws that would govern the speech on Koo?

AR: No, you're randomly putting words in my mouth. I'm not enjoying this conversation. I'm an independent person; I'm apolitical. We want to unify India. Do you have a problem with me saying that? We're not a government mouthpiece. We're not a mouthpiece for any political party. We are apolitical.

(Excerpts from Niles Christopher's interview of Koo's founder Aprameya Radhakrishna, 'How Koo became India's Hindu nationalist-approved Twitter alternative', published by Rest of World on February 19, 2021)³⁴.

These alternate social media applications play an information role by providing platform affordance for political or religious campaigning and mobilizing collective action against minorities in India. Through the community-driven moderation, they also form an environment of impunity where abusing and targeting minority and dissenters get normalized, playful and gamified.

Kutumb replaces the mainstream messaging apps

³⁴ Christopher, N. (2021, February 19). How Koo became India's Hindu nationalist-approved Twitter alternative. Rest of World. Retrieved August 9, 2022, from <https://restofworld.org/2021/how-koo-became-a-right-wing-darling-in-india/>

It was around two years ago when an elderly gentleman, now retired from a high-profile corporate position, posted an invitation in an alumni WhatsApp group to join a Kutumb community called 'Rastriya Hindu Sangathan'. There are WhatsApp group has around 240 members from diverse age groups and professions. All of them have graduated from an elite college in Kolkata, India, in different years. The purpose of the WhatsApp group is to help each other so messages where members do not offer or ask any kind of assistance is not allowed. That's the general rule which is enforced time to time by the group administrator. The link to join the Kutumb community called 'Rastriya Hindu Sangathan' was posted by the administrator himself for joining Kutumb is only possible if you are invited by an existing member. I did not know much about the application at that point of time and since my professional and academic endeavors demand I keep abreast of newer platforms, I joined. The joining process was very easy. I just had to click on the invitation link, fill in information about the residential address, my contact number and was asked to upload a selfie to verify I was a real person. Once added to the community, you can change your profile picture which may or may not show your face. For example, several accounts have photos of gods and goddesses. After my account to set up was ready, I came across features that no other platform offered in India. My primary language on the application is Hindi – a language that is spoken by five billion people in the country. With just a few clicks, I could post a comment, generate an identity card with a membership number and start adding people to my network.

Messaging platforms integrate into daily life, making it a regular habit to share messages, whether they are political or personal. These multimodal platforms, which make it simple to communicate texts, audios, videos, images, and links, foster the development of communities and the reshaping of social norms. However, the political environment frequently affects the kind of content posted on these sites (Valenzuela et al., 2019). On these

sites, a political message may be disseminated as a joke or a link to spectacular news. The affective economy powers these platforms and the communities that are created there, and in such interactions, the "attention cascade" (Caetano et al., 2019) starts when a user promotes a certain point of view and other users react to it. As a result, the message spreads and eventually becomes viral. Therefore, daily, frequently "non-serious," social interactions on online platforms are deeply ingrained with the spread of misinformation and disinformation. These messages' veracity is frequently determined by their sender and at face value (Wason et al., 2019). Seventy nations, including India, engaged in organized social media manipulation campaigns between 2017 and 2018 (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). At least one political party or government organization uses social media in each of these nations to sway the public's perceptions on domestic issues. Several of these nations employed computational propaganda to censor information, stifle fundamental human rights, delegitimize political rivals, and silence dissenting voices. One of the seven nations that manipulates social media both domestically and globally to affect a global audience is India. WhatsApp had emerged as one of the major channels for the production and dissemination of false news in India (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017). Political parties in India have primarily exploited WhatsApp and similar social media platforms to spread fake news in order to boost the number of their supporters and further their own ideologies and goals. However, now with mainstream applications becoming a target of public criticism, the ruling regime supporters are opting for newer platforms as a move towards digital sovereignty. Kutumb is one of the very understated applications in India that is not only providing platform affordance for the multilingual and less literate population to participate in religious and political discourses online but also legitimizing their participation by issuing identity cards and making efforts to turn India into a Hindu majoritarianism more organized. Media in India has always been hegemonic with English-speaking elites dominating the national public sphere (Neyazi,

2014). Multilingual alternate social media, just like the vernacular traditional media, challenges this hegemony by easing participation of people non-English speakers with minimal digital skills into the political discourse – which primarily is the clamor for a Hindu nation.

Attention has always been a currency on social media, but Kutumb application's currency is "*prathista* points" or "prestige points". If you say, Jai Shree Ram (a religious slogan hailing Hindu deity Ram now turned political and claimed by the supporters of the Hindu majority nation), you gain prestige points. Every time you open the application, you have a template message, typically a motivational thought of the day, ready to be shared cross-platform from Kutumb to WhatsApp with just a click. Sharing a message every day gains the users prestige points which is displayed right under their profile picture. The number of points also determine a user's level in the group – an ordinary member, a *pracharak* (or a publicist), a moderator or an administrator. This very feature encourages the practice of uncritical sharing, something that the media literacy trainers have been struggling to stop to curb the rapid spread of misinformation. Social networking sites have been an extremely effective vehicles for the spread of misinformation because most of the posts with false claims are disseminated wider by regular social media users. While bots and for-profit propaganda sites play a crucial role in the production and dissemination of false information, regular users are the real wheels through which misinformation travels because they all act as a very effective distribution channel which is driven by a very well-intentioned motive to act like a responsible citizen by making friends and family aware of something that they think is worth knowing (Jang et al., 2018; Marin, 2021). While earlier, the act of sharing a post was driven by a voluntary intention of making others aware, Kutumb's feature incentivizes it by adding remuneration to the act with points.

There are a series of other features such as greeting all 64,651 members of the community - 'Rastriya Hindu Sangathan'. The application also has a feature which asks users to add other people to the community, a lot like chain marketing. A new user can become a "star promoter" by adding 10 people to the community. The star promoters are often featured on the home page as a "highest scorer". If the users make it to the top three positions, they are awarded not just by points but also a digital certificate that states their contribution to the community. Though the nature of the posts depends on the specific day, whether it is a religious occasion or a political one, most of the posts on the community are either hailing a Hindu majoritarian nation or political propaganda. The platform also allows for communities to raise funds, collect subscription fees and even subscribe to "premium content" to see certain hidden posts. I paid Rs 500 (around 6.19 euros) to see these posts and most of them were about the activities and the action taken offline by the group – such as disrupting movie screenings in starring Muslim actor or namaaz (prayers) by Muslims³⁵.

Discussing online memes and satire pages by the right-wing supporters, Udupa (Udupa, 2019) argues, 'fun' as a meta-practice of channelizing aggression or even determining one's identity that is empowered by the "new media ecology of playfulness and outrage". While I follow Udupa's footsteps to explore the fun aspect and argue how it is not merely hilarity that enable collective action, I also contest her argument that this fun bears any similarity to "objectivity" in journalism that ensures distance and deniability and I do so from my positionality as a journalist whose idea of objectivity (western or non-western) is shaped by years of on-field experience. "Objectivity" (Tuchman, 1972) has been understood in academia very differently from what it is as practice on field and 'undeniability' or 'accountability' is one of its sole purposes in newsrooms. My paper argues that how this

³⁵ Chadha, P. S. (2021, December 18). Meetings, cars, videos and invoking Khattar: How a group Disrupts Namaz in Gurgaon. The Indian Express. Retrieved August 18, 2022, from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/invoking-khattar-group-disrupts-namaz-gurgaon-7678480/>

formation of Hindu identity and targeted collective action against Muslims is now being gamified wherein I also distinguish gamification from fun. I observe or rather ‘lurk’ in the Kutumb application for two years as a non-participatory member with zero “prathistha points” to observe the content shared and the nature of the platform rather than the users who post them. For this, I employ the adaptable Netnography (Kozinets, 2010) as I record my own experiences and emotions as reflexive field notes (Wilkinson & Patterson, 2014) as I analyse archival data qualitatively.

Gamification of Islamophobia

We often synonymize games with play which according to a consensus is fun. However, play is also ambiguous, elusive, and difficult to define and distinguish from non-play – it is a ‘way of being’ rather than an activity as cultures bud and mature, they lose their playfulness (Huizinga, 2014). Johan Huizinga, one of the first proponents of play as practice and cultural formations in early 90s, as summarized by Tanghe (2016), also defines play as something that one engages in willingly, that follows certain rules predetermined, and those who are engaging in the activity, and that takes place in a kind of separate space and time, is distinguished from everyday life, and doesn’t necessarily have an instrumental purpose. So, according to Huizinga, play is often defined in opposition to work. Post-human scholarship though differs and argue that digital play, or playing a game, can be a form of work in terms of economic realm of games. Play includes objects in innumerable variety and same events may mean different things for different people or to the same individual at different moments of their involvement (Henricks, 2006). Henricks’ argument helps understand the efficacy of online memes, for instance, and how they have emerged as vehicles of a variety of meanings and motivations where “political, social, and playful purposes exist simultaneously in these images” (Milner, 2018). While earlier scholarship prescribes a “magic circle” within which

games play out, Consalvo (2009) argues contests the spatiality of games when she argues games are processual, dynamic, and contextual, shaped by social, physical, and psychological conditions. She believes play experiences are structural play experiences and we need to pay more attention to embodied nature of games in which along with the ordinary rules of life, and in competition with, other rules, also apply that are in relation and in multiple contexts vary cultures into different groups, legal situations, and harms. Consalvo argues that we are bodies playing games in affective or psychological way.

Play is also a form of interaction; it is a way of both distancing and detaching ourselves from other people which is about protecting ourselves and creating that screen between ourselves and the other person that also allows us to interact with them, also affords an intimacy with other people (Simmel, 1950). Henricks also contextualizes Goffman (2021) to propose the idea of “keying” for which he argues play can change frames and situations. Play isn't just performance in this kind of scripted sense. But importantly, player's performance and player social interaction is a way of changing, challenging recontextualizing and reframing situations as well. Digital devices are always on, they're always with us and we have the kind of intimacy with these devices, we generally care for them as fragile objects, we carry them on our bodies. And you know, we kind of stare longingly into the screen. So, these kinds of changes have even further contributed to this kind of breaking down of distinctions between the private and the public, and the growing intrusion of media technologies into our interactions in public space. There is no fixed definition of play or game, and it is a form of fluid social interaction which can give pleasure or be fun to the users but may also have entirely opposite effects. Going by the traditional understanding of game play, Kutumb application's interface is a perfect channel of interaction which helps people build a collective identity of Hindu and express it too. The platform also eases inculcating the habit of ‘sharing’, of repetitiveness, of reiteration, but each repetition and reiteration may

appeal to different temporal sensibilities of the users. Kutumb app users are motivated by “prestige points” to carry out political activity using the application that is cross-medial, cross-textual. When one greets ‘Jai Shree Ram’, the other person is obligated to certain extent reply and the effort of typing the letters is replaced by a single click. The motto of the app is not to circulate content within its own dimensions but also share it on WhatsApp, still mostly used personal messaging application in India. Messages carrying theme of Islamophobia are promoted by group administrators and moderators and again, with points and likes, promoting hate speech is not just rewarded but normalized and formed into a habit. There’s been studies that indicate that repetitive clicking during a game play strengthen habits (Wohn, 2012).

Gamification of interaction on applications became imperative for the ruling regime so the digital labor contributed by the large army of online supporters of the right-wing agenda of building a Hindu majoritarian nation becomes more organized, the sense of collective Hindu identity becomes more consolidated. There have been studies that suggest, playing games or gamification can aid players in understanding other people's perspectives, relating more with each other. For instance, studies have investigated the relationship between general altruism, defined as “a motivational state with the ultimate goal of boosting another's welfare,” and playing pro-social games, which encourage cooperation and assisting others (Batson, 2010). Gamification of social media interaction and political campaigning have the potential to, as studied in the case of video games, increase empathy (Vieira, 2014) and trust among users (Ratan et al., 2010). Dalisay et al (2015) in their study of video games explored the possibility of certain types of player motivation that can promote “social capital and civic and political engagement”. While they build their study on previous scholarship that games can increase social interaction or particular form of social interaction, they find such immersive interaction can both promote social-capital and civic vibrancy but being too

immersed can even lead to unrealistic expectations and ideas and they encourage investigation of this phenomena. (Prescott et al., 2018) studied 17,000 participants aged 9-19 from various nationalities and ethnicities to conclude that violent games have a close relation to overt physical aggression and how racial or caste privilege accentuates it, as we see in the case of majoritarian Hindu users of Kutumb.

Lauwaert et al. (2007) propose two more game characteristics – *repens* and *repositio* - to what Caillois (2001) had initially propounded - competition, chance, simulation, and vertigo – along with the two modes of playing - *paidia* and *ludus*. *Repens* is a unique feature of games that appeals to the player's desire to investigate, learn about, and prepare for the surprises that are in store, as well as to advance by taking advantage of these surprises. India's mobile-first generation is intrigued and dazzled by newer applications that their low-cost data enabled handsets which are still more like a magic box. These users, with minimal or no media literacy, have no means of recognizing these phantasmic machines and the constant flow of information with transfixing abilities as “crisis machines” (Sundaram, 2020) of Hindu nationalistic agenda. *Repositio* refers to complimentary experiences, such as needing to repeat an action repeatedly while gaining better at it with each attempt. *Repositio* is better understood when we see Kutumb users sharing the same content repeatedly or appropriating it with newer meanings. *Repositio* in game dimension is also employed in Kutumb when we see factchecked misinformation being shared repeatedly completely disregarding that the news could be false. Also, repetition of religio-political slogans and even Islamophobic hate speech is another instance because the user is always rewarded for it, with attention, with ‘prestige points’ or just the gratification of the play that is now immersed in. While gamification has been increasingly adopted by AI-powered corporations in understanding and mimicking human intelligence, it is also being employed in advertising and commercial services. In its March 2023 report, Genocide Watch, an American NGO,

classified the Indian government's activities against Muslims and Dalits as falling into stages 6, 7, and 8 on their scale, only one step short of genocide. Notably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's words were rated as stage 10, denial, the highest degree in Genocide Watch's preventive approach. The article has attempted to highlight a troubling trend in India, where coordinated efforts supported by the current regime and right-wing forces are gamifying political engagement in favour of Hindu-majority ideals. As a result, there is widespread Islamophobia, hate speech, and prejudice against minorities. These sentiments are permeating routine life, both online and offline, and are propelling the country into a democratic crisis.

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