When #Sikh Was Banned Worldwide

Social Media Censorship of the Punjab Farmers' Protest:
Analysis and Recommendations

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INTRODUCTION

For Sikhs—both in India and across the diaspora—physical, emotional, and media-based targeting is nothing new. Turbans, core articles of the Sikh faith, have been especially magnetic to the specter of hate.[1] In 2020, however, this community faced a new challenge—one that came at the intersection of globalization, our increasingly pervasive digital age, and the rampant spread of misinformation: #Sikh was banned and shadowbanned across social media platforms.[2]

Given that the Sikh identity, culture, and people have long been systematically erased from the history of India, this attempt at eradicating their community's online presence struck viscerally. As a highly diasporic community, Sikhs have maintained their sense of community through online communication platforms, social media, and instant messaging. As these platforms continued to shadowban #Sikh, many in the community and their allies began to question the extent to which this silencing would continue, and if any recourse was even available.

These concerns felt increasingly well-founded as major social media platforms, during and after the events described in this report, continued tightening their relationship with Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). When Meta Platforms opted to effectively suppress a Human Rights Impact Assessment (HRIA) for India in 2021, it was an unsurprising development for advocates.[3] The decision was a scale model of the tension faced by minority communities within the Indian diaspora: our small communities drowned out by the sophisticated narrative control of a tech-savvy government tolerant of only one version of history, and ignored by platforms to whom we could offer nothing on par with access to the world's largest market.

Note: *The work of the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF) focuses on the Sikh American community. While our analysis of these policy issues is conducted on a global scale to match the scope of the problem, the recommendations outlined in this report are specific to the United States.*

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Social Media From 2016-present: Authoritarians "Connecting People"

Social Media From 2016-present: Authoritarians "Connecting People"

"Facebook, Facebook, Facebook! WhatsApp, WhatsApp, WhatsApp!"

The 2010s were a period of meteoric ascent for social media platforms. In 2010, fewer than 1 billion people were using all social media platforms combined.[4] Today, the three largest subsidiaries of Meta Platforms, Inc. (Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp) each have over one billion daily active users.[5] While Facebook's user growth declined for the first time in 18 years in February 2022 due to a more crowded social media market, it remains the global standard for carrying out the business of "connecting people."

Since the mid-2010s, it has also become a notoriously fertile breeding ground for censorship and misinformation. At the inauguration of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro in early 2019, for example, his supporters chanted the names of social media platforms which they felt had keyed their candidate's victory.[6] Bolsonaro, and various backers, had aggressively leveraged dominant social media platforms to spread (often false) information about his left-wing opponent. Bolsonaro continued to leverage this tactic as an elected official, particularly in politicizing the science behind the COVID-19 pandemic and downplaying his government's role in Brazilian virus-related deaths.[7]

Reflecting upon the body of evidence that indicated the great extent to which nation-states and non-states exploited social media as a propaganda tool during both the 2016 US presidential election and UK Brexit referendum, political scientist Ronald Diebert concluded that "it seems undeniable now that social media must bear some of the blame for the descent into neo-facism." [8]

It is dizzying to trace Facebook's role as an engine of the pro-democracy Arab Spring to its role as an authoritarian weapon less than a decade later. In the same 2019 *Journal of Democracy* paper, Diebert outlines three structural hurdles preventing social media from becoming a pro-democracy force once again:

Social media is built around **personal-data surveillance**, using products that use our information to push advertising.

Social media platforms are built as **addiction machines**, programmed to drive engagement through emotion.

The fine-grained surveillance algorithms that powered social media's rise and profitable turn are **compatible with the needs of authoritarianism**.

Committed authoritarian regimes, even low-tech ones, can simultaneously mine social media and communications platforms to root out dissent while leveraging those same platforms to propagate untruths.

Case Study: Student Protests in Bangladesh

Authoritarian regimes have been able to exploit personal data surveillance several times throughout recent history. In July 2018, for example, a fatal road accident in Dhaka generated an organic protest movement. Enraged students considered the deaths of two classmates in a hit-and-run by a public bus driver the final straw in their poor treatment by government and government-aligned forces, and attempted to use Facebook to post videos and organize protests.[9]

The Bangladeshi government responded on two fronts: (1) leveraging social media to track, torture, and unjustly incarcerate people who posted or shared content about the protests,and (2) filing governmental takedown requests and requests for information with which Facebook complied at a rate of around 44%, per their own data, in the second half of 2018.[10,11]

> **Takeaways:**
> Social media's profit-driven approach to algorithmic newsfeeds requires granular data-gathering and stoking addiction through emotional response. These tactics fit neatly with authoritarian governments' need to keep their populations fractious and unsure of what is true. Many of these regimes have harnessed social media to tighten their grip on power.

The Bangladeshi government is not alone in leveraging its power to bend the reality in which we live away from the truth. Facebook has come under pressure to remove posts critical of the Cambodian prime minister, agreed to coordinate with the government of Vietnam in monitoring and removing content, and been criticized for doing nothing to prevent the Myanmar military from using fake accounts to spread propaganda justifying the genocide of the Rohingya.[12,13,14]

There is enormous pressure on Meta and its platforms regarding election cycles in de jure democratic but de facto authoritarian countries. Some governments, like that of Jair Bolsonaro, are even using the enormous spread of fake news as justification to increase their own authority, even when those regimes themselves reaped political benefit from the spread of fake news in the past.[15]

One can argue that the Arab Spring occurred because the people were able to use social media to spread truths counteracting the longstanding falsehoods leveraged by their governments.[16] Twelve years later, however, it is clear from the depth and breadth of autocrats' social media playbooks that they have once again become the chief protagonists of the narratives in their countries.

Case Study: The BJP's Modern Playbook

It is hardly surprising that the world's largest democracy has struggled over the past few years with the issues brought on by the proliferation of social media. Re-elected to control a nation with an enormous population of different languages, religions, and sects that is online in vast numbers, India's authoritarian regime faces a multitude of intersecting tensions and rising nationalist sentiments.[17]

Neither is it surprising that the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party has demonstrated aptitude and appreciation for the power of narrative control in a social media world. While it is established practice the world over for political campaigns to lean on local volunteers to mine information and lower-level party operatives to amplify it, the Modi government has redefined their possible scale.[18] Meta-analyses found that from 2010 onward, both of India's leading parties, BJP and Congress, built information dissemination structures that involved a

relatively small cluster of nodal, seed accounts producing political content that was amplified.[19] The total reach of BJP support extends far beyond directly controlled government accounts into volunteer networks numbering in the millions, standing ready to broadcast political content.[20] The social media operations department of the BJP party structure, referred to as "the BJP IT cell", has been headed since 2009 by Amit Malviya: an individual who, during the Punjab Farmers' Protest, became one of the first Indian politicians to have a Tweet flagged for using manipulated media with the intent to deceive.[21]

While Malviya drew the attention of Twitter moderators during the Farmers' Protest, the playbook he and the BJP had refined was already in frequent use. Less than a year before the Farmers' Protest began, New Delhi was enveloped in riots that embodied the power of social media to ignite real-world violence. In mid-December of 2019, a group of Muslim women blocked a road in the Shaheen Bagh neighborhood in New Delhi. The peaceful protests were sparked by the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which offered amnesty and citizenship to certain religious groups of immigrants from nearby countries while pointedly excluding Muslims.[25]

As protests sprang up in cities around India, violence soon followed. In New Delhi, a BJP official named Kapil Mishra addressed a rally near a CAA protest in which he told police to clear the demonstrators from the road they were blocking, or his followers would do it. Within hours, gangs of Hindus and Muslims were conducting open warfare on the streets of India's capital, businesses were being looted, and individuals were being lynched.[26,27] In the years since, an independent fact-finding committee formed by the Delhi Minorities Commission conducted an investigation and found that the events met the definition of a pogrom–particularly because of how widely Indian authorities have been accused of standing by as Muslim property and lives were destroyed.[28]

The Indian government was quick to characterize the violent aftermath of the anti-CAA protests as spontaneous riots. However, Wall Street Journal reporting in 2021 shared that internal research within Meta found inflammatory content on the company's platforms in India spiked 300% above previous levels just before the protests, and riots, began.[29] The researchers suggested that inflammatory content primarily targeted Muslims, and people interviewed affirmed that they were inundated across social platforms with content designed to make them fear for their lives.

When the events of the 2020 New Delhi riots are viewed through the lens of the BJP's focus on narrative control, the modern BJP playbook can be glimpsed. State-level governments across India implemented internet blackouts to stymie organizers' ability to coordinate.[30, 31] Social media propaganda machines sprang into action, widely disseminating content that over time pushed some followers from the realm of misinformation into the realm of radicalization.[32] All of this ultimately is enabled and affected by a BJP willing to exert maximum pressure to shape systems and compel employee compliance at social media platforms–bringing platforms' vast reach into the BJP political arsenal.[33]

Misinformation in India

There is perhaps nowhere in the world that fake news has become more of a conflagration than in India. Misinformation spread over Facebook and WhatsApp has led to significant violence, including dozens of mob lynchings.[22] In India, the platforms play host to a degree of hate speech, fake news, and celebration of violence and gore that is virtually unparalleled globally.[23] Even Narendra Modi's official NaMo app, a Twitter-like closed ecosystem for his followers and his Bharatiya Janata Party, is rife with widely circulated fake news and doctored images.[24]

Just a few months after the anti-CAA protests gathered momentum into a nationwide protest movement that in turn became violence in the streets of New Delhi, history repeated itself. This time, the legislation under protest was economic in nature, and the minorities being targeted by online misinformation, online censorship, and real-world violence were Sikhs.

Meta, India, and the Farmers

As context, Modi's India is, by and large, self-sufficient in grain production with much of its agricultural sector concentrated in the Punjab. Situated in the far northwest of India, Punjab is the ancestral home of Sikhism and the only region of India in which Sikhs constitute more than 50% of the population.[34] Given its productive, arable land, the region has come to be the bedrock supplier for a disproportionately large share of India's grain demands.[35] Therefore, Punjabi Sikhs have become a cornerstone of India's agricultural industry.

Outside of Punjab, Sikhs are a minority community in the nation, with a total number of 20-21 million representing less than 2% of India's population. Having been persecuted by the Indian government for centuries, Sikhs have a notably tumultuous history with the Indian state. For this reason, as well as shrinking economic opportunities for the Sikh people's historic dominance in the agricultural sector, Sikhs have achieved diasporic status with nearly 10% of the global Sikh population residing outside of India.[36] As with most diasporic communities, families keep in touch using Meta products; in particular, there is heavy usage of WhatsApp.[37]

Against this backdrop, the Indian Parliament passed a set of three laws to completely overhaul and privatize the agricultural sector with little parliamentary or public debate.[38] Farmers feared that, despite promises of deregulation and flexibility, they were going to be squeezed out of a corporatized sector and into penury by bills that had been passed in haste and without their input.[39, 40] Feeling cheated, farmers across the nation—with a majority of them being from the Sikh-majority state of Punjab—began to protest.[41]

The fallout from these Farmers Protests was a systematic removal of social media content about the protests, as well as the Sikh faith more broadly. The actions of the Indian government, in conjunction with corporations like Meta, Twitter, and Alphabet, played into a broader movement of unapologetic nationalism at the cost of religious minorities on the South Asian subcontinent.[42] While the farmers were ultimately successful in their stated goals, with the triggering laws taken off the books in late 2021, the retaliatory pain inflicted via social media during the protests targeted the larger Sikh community indiscriminately.[43]

The remainder of this report conducts a deep dive into the social media backlash of the Farmers' Protests, in an attempt to tease out recommendations for Meta and its subsidiaries to remain aligned and effective in their original mission to connect the world.

3 | Farmers' Protests, 2020-2021

Farmers' Protests, 2020-2021

The so-called Farm Bills passed by the Indian government were intended to allow farmers to sell produce directly to big buyers rather than the middlemen who historically purchased grain near farms and transported it to large cities. The laws were intended to reconfigure incentive structures for farmers that had led historically to huge grain surpluses and near-loss-making prices for crops as the middlemen were able to engage in grain arbitrage.[44]

In practice, these laws only made matters worse for farmers. For a nationwide agricultural community that constitutes nearly 60% of India's workforce but only accounts for 15% of its GDP, sweeping structural change with no input from the very people being impacted posed a significant existential threat. For this reason, the farmers mobilized from Punjab to New Delhi via their tractors.[45] The Punjabi farmers, joined by groups of other farmers from across India, snarled traffic into New Delhi for months, insisting that the government protect them from corporate profiteering. What started out as a peaceful protest soon turned into a powerful movement.

In response to these peaceful marches, the Modi government chose to respond with force along every possible axis. Through state-incited forms of physical violence, the Indian government and its respective law enforcement arms took a systematic approach to suppressing the movement. In some accounts, nearly 700 farmers died during the year of protest.[46] Human rights activists, including Disha Ravi, Nodeep Kaur, and Shiv Kumar, were kidnapped, imprisoned, sexually abused, and physically tortured.[47,48,49] Journalists, including Mandeep Punia from The Caravan, were targeted, illegally detained, and charged.[50] A Sikh American physician from New Jersey who had traveled to Delhi in order to provide free medical aid to other injured protestors was beaten by the Indian police.[51,52,53,54] A group of 25 women who refused to remove the *Nishaan Sahib* flag (i.e. a flag representing the Sikh faith) and the *morcha* flag (i.e. the flag representing the Farmers' Protests) were arrested; among those detained was a two-year-old toddler.[55] In addition to these traditional methods of suppression, the Modi government also went to work online.

The Social Media Pressure Cooker

While freezing the assets of non-governmental organizations like Amnesty International in order to prevent them from operating in the nation after publicly denouncing human rights violations in India, the Indian government also enforced internet blockages at and around the sites of protests.[56,57] At the same time, disinformation in the forms of fake news and manipulated content continued to circulate social media for the duration of the movement.[58] Common examples included content on Facebook and Twitter that misidentified protestors as known extremists; doctored videos from past protests that associated current protestors with separatist or terrorist movements; and manipulated graphics or photos used to foment anti-Sikh sentiment.[59,60,61,62] All of this information propagated by vigilante groups on Facebook and WhatsApp platforms to incite violence against minorities was then legitimized by Indian government Twitter accounts.[63,64]

Even more aggressively, over the course of the protests, the Indian government pressured Twitter to remove over 500 accounts—many of which were based in the United States—and more than 150 tweets related to Sikhism and the Farmers' Protests; a significant portion of which were also blocked in the United States.[65,66] Of the accounts successfully removed was @WorldSikhOrg, an account based outside of India. After being temporarily suspended from Twitter, they posted the letter they received from Twitter Legal, which outlined that the request to remove their account had come directly from Indian

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Your Story Goes Against Our Community Guidelines

We removed your story because it goes against our Community Guidelines on violence or dangerous organizations. If you learn and follow our guidelines, you can prevent your account from being deleted.

◌ Story removed for violence or dangerous organizations
Posted Jan 12, 2022 at 9:12:42 PM

Violence or dangerous organizations guidelines ⌃

We remove:
• Photos or videos of extreme graphic violence.
• Photos or videos that encourage violence or attacks on anyone based on their religious, ethnic or sexual background.
• Specific threats of physical harm, theft, vandalism or financial harm.

Blocked from Sharing Live Video

Posts from your account have recently been removed for going against our Community Guidelines, so live video sharing has been temporarily blocked.

Your Account May Be Deleted

Some of your previous posts didn't follow our Community Guidelines. If you learn and follow our guidelines, you can prevent your account from being deleted.

◌ Story removed for violence or dangerous organizations
Posted Jan 12, 2022 at 9:12:42 PM

▭ Post removed for violence or dangerous organizations
Posted Dec 24, 2021 at 5:49:28 PM

▭ Post removed for violence or dangerous organizations
Posted May 19, 2021 at 7:34:49 PM

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law enforcement.[67] Other accounts suspended include the Caravan, an unbiased news journal with a significant following in the United States; Kisan Ekta Morcha, one of the biggest accounts used to organize peaceful protests for farmers across the world; and activist, Hansraj Meena.[68] SALDEF also conducted its own qualitative study after the first round of Sikh censorship during the Farmers' Protests and found that the accounts temporarily or permanently blocked were largely accounts outside of India based in the US, UK, and Canada. They include, but are not limited to, @SherePunjabUK (Twitter), @DalKhalsaUK (Twitter), @22Sxngh (Twitter), @FreeJaggiNow (Instagram), @everythings_13 (Twitter), @savingpunjab (Instagram), and @ Dawinderpal (Facebook).

Most chilling was how the Indian government received direct assistance from big-tech companies to target activists. Platforms like Facebook and Google provided private information to detain activists who were not explicitly violating the law. For example, Disha Ravi, a climate change activist and supporter of the Farmers' Protests, was tracked down based on metadata generated by her accessing and editing of a Google doc.[69] Ravi spent 10 days in jail on claims reliant on data collected by social media companies that were later ruled by an Indian judge to have no legitimate basis.[70] These actions were in stark contrast to those of other tech companies in similar situations, like when Apple on multiple occasions refused to hand over private information to law enforcement in the United States.[71]
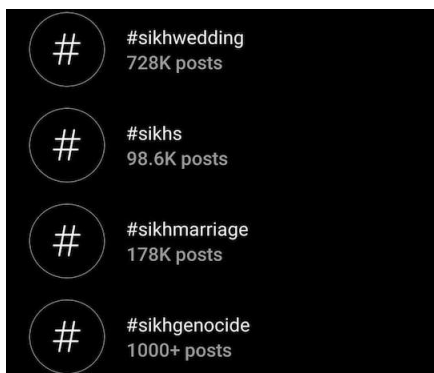
Beyond the social media censorship of the Farmers' Protests, algorithmic inconsistencies in these platforms seem to be biased against content by or about minority communities. For example, supporters of the Farmers' movement organized around hashtags including #KisaanMajdoorEktaZindabad, #KisaanEktaZindabad, #FarmersProtest, #Sikh, and #Sikhism, since Sikhs overwhelmingly occupy the agricultural sector in India. Many of these hashtags were blocked in the United States and abroad, including #Sikh for the second and third times in 2020.[72] Additionally, many popular US- and Canadian-based accounts that frequently posted using these hashtags were prevented from LiveStreaming.[73] Unfortunately, despite several attempts to gather more information from both Twitter and Facebook by SALDEF, little remains known about what procedures were used to justify the removal, blockage, or banning of the hashtags. Similarly, no information is yet available about when these policies were implemented or who was involved in creating these policies. SALDEF remains interested in reviewing these statistics from Meta, Alphabet, and Twitter.

> ### Takeaway:
> Social media companies' desire to operate in large overseas markets may create profit, but it also disadvantages diasporic minority communities if governments are willing to use their power to bend social media to their will. In the case of the Farmers' Protests, the Indian government attacked from every angle: social media companies were forced to remove pro-protest accounts and hashtags, even outside India, and hand over data that led to activists being incarcerated, all while pro-government actors used the same platforms to spread fake news about the protests with impunity.

When confronted with these specific incidents, technology leaders fall back on formulaic responses that plead ignorance, repeat information easily found online, and often fail to acknowledge the specific situation at all. On March 25, 2021, the House Energy & Commerce committee conducted a hearing on disinformation and social media's role in promoting extremism.[74] One of the questions submitted for the record asked explicitly about the systematic flagging of benign religious phrases and symbols associated with minority communities.

Sundar Pichai, CEO of both Alphabet and its subsidiary Google, responded with a laundry list of principles, toolkits, and initiatives that were already in place with no mention of the question's specific reference to YouTube banning Farmers' Protest content across its platform. Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter, responded to the same question with a one-sentence request for additional information that suggested his company keeps no record of its own actions. Facebook's written responses for the record also responded to this specific question by saying that human review is part of the process and that users can follow steps to appeal a decision. A second question specific to Facebook about banning #sikh and #sikhism was the only one met with a reply that had the word 'Sikh' somewhere in its text, but brought nothing besides an acknowledgment that Facebook's mix of algorithmic and human moderation "fell down".

#sikhwedding
728K posts

#sikhs
98.6K posts

#sikhmarriage
178K posts

#sikhgenocide
1000+ posts

The Indian Government's IT Rules

On February 25, 2021, the Indian government implemented secondary legislation that dramatically increased its oversight of social media platforms. The rules came under criticism shortly after announcement by UN officials for being in violation of current international human rights norms.[75] What is especially dangerous to individuals outside of India is the burden of high liability and quick turnaround time placed on social media platforms to present requested information on their users, particularly those who post content deemed inappropriate by the Indian government. This requirement perpetuates a culture of sharing personally identifiable information under the specter of legal threat that critics argue will have significant consequences on free expression.[76]

In particular, the IT Rules of 2021 put forth a series of problematic measures that include a requirement for each platform active in India to appoint a Chief Compliance Officer (CCO) who is legally responsible for their employer's actions. Specifically, if Facebook, Twitter, or Google do not present the Indian government requested user information in 36 hours, the CCO will face legal punishment.[77]

The CCO is also responsible for ensuring that their employer's platform resolves broader content grievances flagged by the Indian government within 15 days. Given the sheer amount of content regularly published on these platforms, this places an onerous burden on social media companies, calling into question whether these platforms will be able to accurately determine if content is worthy of being removed.[78] This policy is contributing to what some critics are calling a slippery slope: since social media companies and their respective employees do not have enough time to critically examine whether certain flagged content is verifiably problematic, this requirement has led to otherwise benign content getting censored both in India and abroad. The issue is further compounded by the fact that this legislation does not have a mechanism to prevent the lodging of frivolous and baseless grievances.[79]

Equally concerning is the first originator clause that demands platforms provide the Indian government with the information of the original poster for any flagged content that is deemed problematic by the Indian government. In order to obtain this information, platforms like WhatsApp would be required to break down end-to-end encryption that has historically served to protect users.[80] Of grave importance to Congress is the substantial threat this requirement poses to American users' privacy and safety: given the quick turnaround time legislated by the 2021 IT Rules, it is very plausible that social media platforms may overshare first originator information, which could ultimately be used against the originator or their family members within India.

With the Indian ministry gaining full authority to block any content it deems offensive, it has entrenched its control of the online content narrative.[81] While platforms operating in India have been embroiled in legal fights over the IT Rules, including one that has reached the Indian Supreme Court, the Modi government has demonstrated little to suggest it will not continue to craft and pass legislation in the pursuit of control over social media discourse within India in the name of counterterrorism and domestic stability.

Ongoing Censorship After the Protests

The Indian government acceded to the demands of the protestors in late November of 2021, repealing the farm laws. However, it has not paused its weaponization of social media platforms to carry out ongoing speech suppression and disinformation.

As the IT Rules were implemented and ramped up social media censorship to new heights, most major firms, like Amazon and Google, opted to preserve their access to one of the world's largest markets by cooperating, allowing the Indian government to examine encrypted messages and demand identifying information of anonymous users as they did during the Farmers' Protest. While the firms expressed discomfort and stated that these policies were inconsistent with democratic principles, they largely fell in line—especially after repeated incidents of being investigated or threatened by the Indian government for attempting to carry out policies meant to mark altered and manipulated media as such.[82] By the end of 2021, the outlook for tech firms in India was bleaker than it had ever been: employees were frightened for their well-being, rules were being bent to push pro-government misinformation, and even caste discrimination was spreading globally in these firms' workforces via Indian-origin immigrants on sponsored work visas.[83,84]

In mid-2022, months after the BJP had bent social media platforms to its will, amendments to the IT Rules were proposed.[85] Experts quickly raised concerns that the amendments went further in their antidemocratic tendencies, specifically by broadening the Indian government's power to deem speech illegal, establishing more government-controlled oversight bodies with authority over platforms in India, and creating deeper obligations to police content unilaterally rather than working

through a review process.[86] In sum, the amendments shift the paradigm from one in which users can file complaints to the platform to one in which political entities have deeper control over what platforms are allowed to do within India, including problematic rules around keeping personal data in India and allowing the Indian government backdoor access to end-to-end encrypted messages.

Given this operating environment, it is unsurprising that 2022 was in some respects a banner year for censorship of Sikhs globally. Historic trends were maintained, particularly around the spread of misinformation on significant dates in the Sikh calendar, like holy days and the anniversary of Operation Blue Star (the Indian army's 1984 raid of the holiest site in Sikhism). In particular, social media pages for leaders and advocates referring to Khalistan as a symbol of Sikh sovereignty amidst religious persecution continue to receive notices from platforms' legal departments that their pages will be withheld in India.[87] Sources shared with SALDEF that no specific reasoning has been provided other than a claim of "preservation of India's integrity".

As SALDEF conducted in-person interviews across 2022 with owners of Sikh-related accounts on social media, a few common themes emerged. First, **censorship is dynamic and evolving**. It is experienced across content platforms, including Twitter, the Meta family of products, YouTube, and TikTok (despite TikTok being banned within India's borders). Second, perhaps due to the international spotlight during the Protests, censorship in 2022 has been more subtle; several interviewees described it as "softer". It continues to be a feedback loop in which algorithmic bias is reinforced and expanded upon by human reviewers; our interviewees shared with us that reporting algorithmic bias for human review often led to more entrenchment. Accounts found to violate the guidelines thus had to choose between accepting that their pages would be shadowbanned and harder to find via search or risk outright deletion of their content. Third, the **uneven application of discipline and takedowns persisted**—being banned was not a question of posting misinformation and disinformation, but rather which side was posting.[88]

Owners of Sikh-related pages would consistently attempt to use the review process to understand why posts were taken down. Responses would generally include some indication that they had violated the community guidelines against inciting violence and/or promoting dangerous organizations with no further detail. The "inciting violence" reasoning was most often applied to posts urging followers to attend peaceful in-person rallies, posts accurately describing historical state-sponsored violence against minorities in

India, posts depicting peaceful protests in Punjab, and posts sharing accurate information around key holidays and remembrance of tragedies like the Indian Army storming the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab in 1984. In sum: social platforms continue to aid and abet the Indian state's narrative on a global scale, censoring Sikhs around the world who attempt to exercise their right to free speech to speak out about discrimination against their community.

As the BJP continues to successfully suppress non-state narratives online both in India and across the diaspora, it is inevitable that the consequences will be far-reaching even offline. Here in the United States, in 2022 alone, numerous incidents showed that spillover. In Edison, New Jersey, a parade celebrating India's independence day was marred by the inclusion of a bulldozer—a symbol of BJP razing of Muslim neighborhoods and a thinly veiled threat to the non-BJP-aligned diasporic Indians present.[89] In Norwich, Connecticut, home to a large Sikh American community, a truck with digital message boards displaying common hate tropes against Sikhs—describing the whole faith as a terrorist sect funded by Pakistan—was spotted driving through the city.[90] The discrimination has gone in the other direction as well, as some Hindu Americans have reported being harassed by non-Hindu Indian expatriates. Many, if not most, of these incidents can be traced back to the ongoing misinformation and us-versus-them politics of Modi's BJP. They represent a tragic turn for a diaspora that used to find more common ground than separation.

Perhaps most troubling to advocates is the reality that American technology firms diverge sharply from the American government in their treatment of the Indian government's historical discrimination against minorities. In December 2022, U.S. Senator James Lankford (R-OK) released an open letter to the Department of State demanding an explanation for India being omitted from a list of countries of concern, despite its similar weaponization of social media to silence minority narratives for political gain.[91] Senator Lankford issued a similar request in 2020, signed by more than a dozen of his fellow Senators; and in 2021, India was indeed listed by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom as a country of Particular Concern (albeit without mention of the antidemocratic behaviors during the Farmers' Protest). We anticipate continued conversations with members of Congress that may portend sanctions and other levers to change the behavior of the Indian state, but we also hope that attention is paid by Congressional oversight bodies to American social media companies' ongoing abandonment of democratic principles in the pursuit of profit in India.

4 | Policy Recommendations: Inverting the Paradigm

Policy Recommendations: Inverting the Paradigm

SALDEF hopes that companies like Meta, Twitter, and Alphabet recognize that these policy recommendations, while protecting users' civil rights, will ultimately work to their benefit as well because of increasing customer unrest and shifting consumer needs. As Diebert observes in his paper, the world "is crying out for technological innovations that will open up other means of distributed communication beyond the highly centralized, intensely surveilled, and too easily abused platforms of the social-media giants."[92] As consumers' expectations shift with regard to protecting their data and wishing to exist beyond the reach of autocrats, platforms that cannot adapt to create this experience will ultimately be displaced by platforms that can.

To that end, we offer a set of four policy recommendations that will help mitigate the issues we outlined, particularly regarding the issues of international companies performing international censorship on behalf of national governments.

1 Developing International Standards for International Issues.

India, throughout the Modi administration, has been scored by Freedom House as being only 'Partly Free'. When such a government passes a law to give itself more control over the operations of social media in its country, it is exploiting a loophole. Because social media companies negotiate terms of operation in each country with each government, there is no international standard clearly and transparently informing how data and information is handled in the face of government pressure.

We strongly endorse the development of policies to curtail the ability of domestic political demands to adversely impact users outside those countries' borders. This will be particularly helpful in protecting the social graphs of users from becoming exploitable maps for governments like the Modi BJP. If a government is attempting to restrict religious expression globally because of agitation within its borders, social media companies should have policies in place that at least require consulting advocates of the same community before a decision is made on whether to comply. In the case of social media platforms banning #sikh, any number of advocacy organizations in the US, UK, Canada, or other free countries in which Meta operates could have brought clarity about the reasons behind and motivation for the Farmers' Protest.

2 Developing Greater Institutional Competence.

It would be a difficult ask for Meta, Google, or Twitter to employ multiple members of every global minority community. Regardless, when companies have achieved the scale and significance of social media firms, it is no longer viable for the firm to simply accept the word of a government as to what is happening within its borders or why it is demanding a specific set of data and/or takedowns. Fact-checking is becoming increasingly common across all platforms, which is a wonderful trend, but part of due diligence must be a detailed understanding of how a given platform may be abused within the context of historical friction between communities.

Given the plethora of advocacy organizations in the United States, it would be plausible for social media platforms to build a deep roster of consultants on issues impacting diasporic communities. These consultants should be leveraged not just in moments of duress or crisis, but on a steady and recurring basis so that social media companies can operate with maximal clarity.

3 Working Closely with Democracy- and Community-Oriented Nonprofits.

Organizations like Freedom House are already engaged in documenting situations on the ground all over the world. Bringing some of the significant technical and/or monetary capacity of social media firms to these endeavors will facilitate a re-commitment to the vision toward which social media companies were building a decade-and-a-half ago. This support can take many forms: boosting reports released by these organizations and citing them in policy decisions, helping these organizations build technical tools for reporting and analysis, or funding research conducted by academics and facilitated by nonprofits that centers on different communities' experiences with social media.

We ask for an explicit commitment to roll out new content moderation standards that prevent violence against marginalized groups while protecting the safety of users' rights to speech and congregation. A prerequisite for such standards should be prioritizing working with community-based organizations to ensure they have access to the appropriate datasets and algorithmic inputs that would allow for efficient monitoring of discourse across their platforms. Simultaneously, these platforms should work with minority communities to ensure they have a proper path of recourse to revive fully appropriate content after misrepresentation by hostile government actors.

4 Collaborating Offensively, Rather than Retreating Defensively

SALDEF calls for transparency in both the decision-making behind and implementation of social media content moderation standards and policies. As outlined throughout this document, Sikh Americans are especially concerned with how the standards mandated by foreign governments have and will continue to impact their ability to communicate, organize, and post online. In particular, it has become clear that the censorship of content in India has biased algorithmic content to automatically censor the same content in other regions of the world, including the United States. Moving forward, we hope these platforms will share their plans to prevent the 'spillover' of content moderation outside of the borders of specific countries. Moreover, SALDEF joins other community organizations in calling for Facebook, Google, and Twitter to specifically outline how they will ensure those in power are not favored at the expense of minority communities.

In keeping with the adage that the best defense is a good offense, social media companies should endeavor to be proactive against abuses of their platforms with the help of advocates. We hope to see social media companies adopt a position of trust and a realization that we all share a goal of distilling the positives of social media––like the ability to reconnect with people all over the world, including our loved ones oceans away––without the toxicity, confusion, and resentment that has been thus far weaponized for political gain.
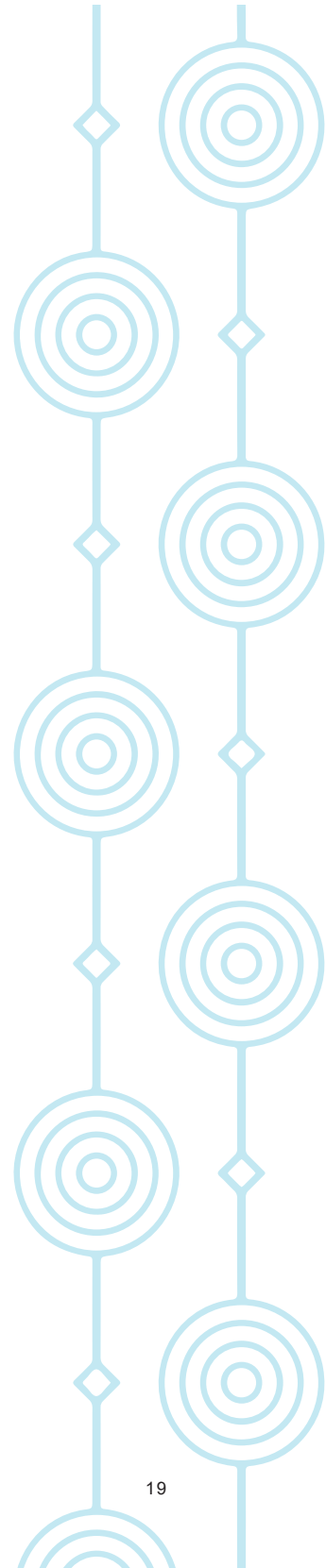
5 | Future Work

Future Work

This report on censorship during the Punjab Farmers' Protest does not represent the end of the road. As SALDEF endeavors to support global technology platforms in developing policy guardrails so they may carry out the mission of connecting people without complying in erasure of minority voices, we know our community is our power.

Together with fellow advocates for other marginalized South Asian communities, we are developing a landscape report on the BJP's leverage of social media platforms' global reach to push Hindutva into American life. This report will underpin our shared efforts to advocate for South Asian Americans, as well as speaking with the voices of all of those communities. It is our hope that in doing this work together we can celebrate the pluralism that is India's greatest blessing, even as we work to protect the rights of all members of the Indian diaspora in the United States.

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