SALDEF Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund | EQUALITY LABS | Hindus for Human Rights | IAMC

VIRTUALLY VULNERABLE:

EXPOSING THE HUMAN COST OF DIGITAL HARASSMENT

Contents

1 Introduction: Online Harassment and the BJP IT Cell

The organizations contributing to this landscape report are community-based advocates for the Sikh-American, progressive Hindu-American, Indian-American Muslim, and Dalit-American communities across the highest levels of the public and private sectors. We have spent years and, in some cases, decades working to protect all diasporic Indians online when they attempt to exercise rights to free speech conferred by the constitutions of the United States and other democracies of which they are full citizens. In the global struggle against Hindutva, or Hindu supremacy, the high-tech world is among the numerous arenas in which we face long odds. As we find ourselves often working side-by-side and advocating for the same policy solutions to the silencing of our voices online, this landscape report serves as the beginning of our collective efforts.

The Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party has demonstrated aptitude and appreciation for the power of narrative control in an always-online, social media world.[1] 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.[2] Meta-analyses found that from 2010 onward, both of India's leading parties, BJP and Congress, built information

1 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/18/india-internet-blackouts/

2 https://www.cigionline.org/articles/how-bjp-used-technology-secure-modis-second-win/

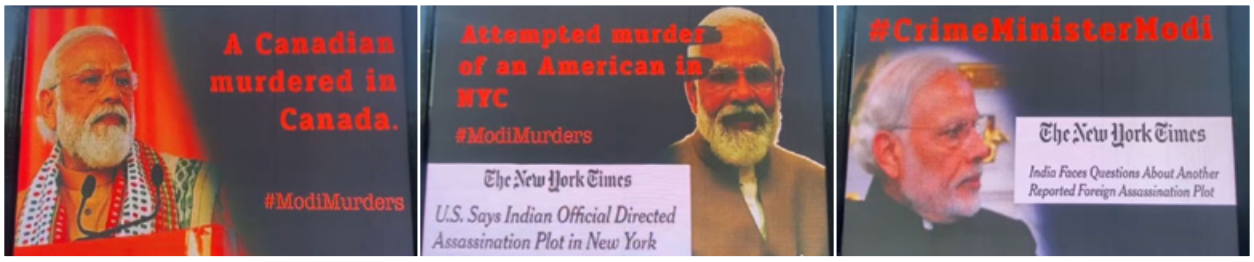
dissemination structures that involved a relatively small cluster of nodal, seed accounts producing political content that was amplified.[3]

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.[4] 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 2020-21 Punjab Farmers' Protest, became one of the first Indian politicians to have a Tweet flagged for using manipulated media with the intent to deceive.[5]

When we examine any of these incidents, or other incidents of tech censorship conducted by the Indian state against protesting minority groups covered by us or our partners in this report or elsewhere, we can see the BJP playbook for online narrative control.

1. State-level governments across India will implement internet blackouts to stymie organizers' ability to coordinate.[6,7]
2. Social media propaganda machines spring into action, widely disseminating content that over time pushes some followers from the realm of misinformation into the realm of radicalization.[8]
3. In parallel, BJP officials use their sovereign authority within India to exert maximum pressure to shape systems and compel employee compliance at social media platforms–bringing platforms' global reach into the BJP political arsenal.[9]

Perhaps most troubling to advocates is the reality that both American technology firms and the American government operate under a calculus that accepting the Indian government's historical discrimination against minorities is worth opportunities like accessing the Indian market or executing larger geopolitical strategies in Asia.



3 https://www.firstpost.com/india/massive-tweet-volumes-complex-hierarchies-coordinated-attacks-hacker-reveals-how-bjp-congress-it-cells-wage-war-on-social-media-7965121.html
4 https://www.vice.com/en/article/597mwk/modis-trolls-are-ready-to-wreak-havoc-on-indias-marathon-election
5 https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/twitter-flags-bjp-amit-malviya-tweet-as-manipulated-media-2332990
6 https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/01/asia/india-internet-cut-farmers-intl-hnk/index.html
7 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/21/punjab-internet-blackout-hunt-sikh-preacher-amritpal-singh-sandhu
8 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/26/hindu-nationalist-social-media-hate-campaign/
9 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/26/india-facebook-propaganda-hate-speech/

In December 2020, 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 to the other listed states.[10] Senator Lankford issued a similar request in 2022, signed by more than a dozen Senators. Some progress has been made in this regard: India was indeed listed by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) as a country of Particular Concern in 2021; and in the 2022 State Department-issued country report on Indian human rights practices, key tech issues like state-coordinated identity-based hateful trolling were among the many flagged.[11,12]

Against the Sikh diaspora, the claims underpinning tech-based censorship are rooted in the specter of "Khalistan", a Sikh state for which there is a violent global separatist movement hidden among adherents of the Sikh faith (per the Indian state's telling). Future work by SALDEF will dive deeper into the historical evolution of the Indian state's discrimination against the Sikh community, but for this landscape report, we will narrow our focus to the ways in which the 'Khalistani' label justifies the global censorship of Sikh voices. Our partners in their cases highlight how the same tactics are applied at both community and individual levels, whether it is coordinated disinformation campaigns against the executive directors of Hindus for Human Rights or Equality Labs, or the use of draconian internet laws to propagate the censorship of Indian Muslims and their advocates like the Indian-American Muslim Council.

The organizations who co-authored this report, in addition to telling our stories of technology being harnessed to silence our communities, offer a set of three key policy recommendations that will help mitigate the issues we outline regarding American companies performing international censorship of diasporic minority communities on behalf of foreign governments. In broad strokes, these recommendations are: developing international geofencing standards that prevent countries' domestic politics from affecting the online speech of far-flung citizens of other states; developing greater institutional competence to differentiate propaganda from fact; and working collaboratively with democracy- and community-oriented nonprofits to ensure balanced and fact-based decisions. Each case study will animate the need for these policy guardrails through the specific experiences of each community before we discuss the recommendations in more detail in section 6.

10 https://www.sikhpa.com/us-senator-joins-sikh-calls-to-designate-india-country-of-particular-concern/
11 https://www.uscirf.gov/countries/india
12 https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/india

2 Censorship of the Sikh Diaspora from the Farmers' Protest in 2020 to Assassinations in 2023 [Sikh American Legal Defense & Education Fund]

As far back as the Punjab Farmers' Protests of 2020, SALDEF has been documenting the issue of technological censorship of the Sikh community. 2022 and 2023 were, in some respects, banner years for the online 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 continued to receive notices from platforms' legal departments that their pages would be withheld in India.[13] Sources shared with SALDEF that no specific reasoning was ever provided other than a claim of "preservation of India's integrity". As SALDEF conducted in-person interviews across 2022 and 2023 with owners of Sikh-related accounts on social media and continued to build our database of censorship research and intakes, a few common themes emerged.

"Our Processes Fell Down": An Exploitable Lack of Transparent Institutional Competence at Tech Firms

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

13 https://wwwbaaznews.org/p/amaan-bali-twitter-withheld-sikh

spotlight during the Punjab Farmers' Protests, censorship in 2022 and 2023 was 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.[14]

Owners of Sikh-related pages consistently attempted to use the review process to understand why posts were taken down. Responses generally included 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 dominance around Sikh issues 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. 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.[15]

The persistence of these issues is tied directly to platforms' reluctance to implement our recommendation to **develop the institutional competence on minority communities and their issues** that would allow them to proactively identify content hateful against Sikhs as such, particularly when it is circulated on Sikh holy days or important observances. Dubbing all Sikh protesters 'Khalistanis', unreasonable violent separatists, allows media and state actors to neatly sidestep the issues driving protests, reduce protesters' anger to a single controversial issue, and position Sikhs as consistent antagonists.

Amritpal Singh, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, and Tech Firms' Lack of Geofencing

While the fates of Amritpal Singh (incarcerated Indian Sikh movement leader), Hardeep Singh Nijjar (assassinated Canadian Sikh activist), and Gurpatwant Singh Pannun (American-Canadian Sikh activist and assassination survivor) were different, their stories in 2023 roiled the Sikh diaspora due to their common theme: retaliation by

14 https://qz.com/india/2184705/the-indian-government-banned-khalsa-aid-founder-on-twitter

15 https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/25/tech-ceo-hearing-recap-lawmakers-frustrated-with-social-media.html

the Indian state against individuals it deemed Khalistani separatists and terrorists.[16,17,18] Given this three-headed conflagration, the Indian government's success in presenting cherry-picked evidence of Sikh threats to its sovereignty was also demonstrated at the highest levels of Western governments in 2023. In March, a handful of protestors in western cities like San Francisco and London committed vandalism against Indian consulates shortly after the manhunt for Amritpal Singh began with 27 million Punjabi residents being cut off from 4G internet, and forceful reprimands of these individuals' "unacceptable" actions came swiftly from the White House and 16 Downing Street.[19] Unfortunately, there was never any comment from the highest levels on the reasons for the protests. We encourage those interested in a deeper analysis of the Indian IT Rules and their use in 2023 to read our report on Sikh censorship during the Amritpal Singh manhunt. The remainder of our case draws on our high-level findings to illustrate the structural issues faced by the Sikh community when discussing our issues online.

As a matter of course, the macro-level trends playing out at the highest levels of governments and major media publications are repeated in microcosms across social media platforms. Twitter, for example, complied with BJP demands to take down accounts of Sikhs not based in India for commenting on the Amritpal Singh manhunt– in keeping with the strategy of completely removing all narratives and discourse contrary to the state narrative from the internet.[20] The crackdowns went all the way up to blocking the BBC Punjabi-language Twitter account along with those of multiple accredited journalists.[21] Citing 'legal demands' without ever explaining what those demands are, Twitter has become complicit in the BJP's work of narrative control on issues ranging far beyond the manhunt.[22] In fact, during the Amritpal Singh manhunt, the Indian government amended its IT Rules yet again to require major social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and others to rely exclusively on internal government fact-checking when determining whether any information on their platforms about "any business" of the Indian government is false or misleading.[23] In other words, it is now a legal requirement for platforms operating in India to allow the Indian government to solely dictate whether information about its own policies and their consequences is true or false. Even as they protest via industry organizations, there is little indication that social media platforms will do anything other than comply in order to preserve their access to the world's largest market.[24]

Naturally, given the two-steps-forward-three-steps-back nature of advocating to

16 https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/amritpal-singh-and-his-association-with-separatist-leaders-round-the-world-2349734-2023-03-21
17 https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/nia-declares-cash-reward-khalistan-terrorist-hardeep-singh-nijjar-1978870-2022-07-22
18 https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/nia-case-against-khalistani-terrorist-gurpatwant-singh-pannun-over-air-india-threat-video-2465360-2023-11-20
19 https://indianexpress.com/article/world/us-condemns-attack-on-indian-consulate-insan-francisco-8509113/
20 https://scroll.in/latest/1046011/twitter-accounts-of-several-punjab-journalists-withheld-amid-amritpal-singh-manhunt
21 https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/
22 https://slate.com/technology/2023/04/twitterblocked-pakistan-india-modi-musk-khalistangandhi.html
23 https://techcrunch.com/2023/04/06/india-cracks-down-on-betting-games/
24 https://techcrunch.com/2023/04/17/us-tech-giants-voice-concern-over-india-s-fact-checking-rule/

platforms to make pro-democracy and possibly anti-profit decisions, movement has been slow. In fact, less than six months after the heavy censorship of the community during the Amritpal Singh manhunt, the Indian state deployed its familiar strategy of social media censorship in support of its claims of innocence in the death of Hardeep Singh Nijjar. Canadian Sikhs, attempting to discuss the death of Mr. Nijjar online once Canadian PM Trudeau surfaced his allegations, swiftly began receiving takedown notices from social media platforms for their pages in India, stating only that their posts were violative of Indian law.

As we have documented previously, rigorous censorship of advocates on one side of the issue was not applied to the other side, as state-aligned media outlets and social media pages engaged in frictionless spreading of coordinated disinformation campaigns about Mr. Nijjar's life and beliefs, as well as about the Canadian Sikh community writ large.[25] In a chilling example of the Indian state's IT Rules working as intended, Canadian news outlets and politicians–regardless of ethnic identity–had posts discussing suppression of civil liberties in Punjab taken down for posting illegal content "per Indian law".[26]

As Canadian Sikhs attempted to use social media to discuss the loss of their community leader, pages like BC Sikhs were globally unpublished by Meta Platforms as it capitulated to pressure from the Indian state, despite the BC Sikhs page being active for decades as a community news and events board. Sikh Canadian journalists underwent the same treatment–employees of Radio Punjab found themselves restricted globally and blocked in India under dangerous individuals/organizations policies for posting about and commemorating Hardeep Singh Nijjar's assassination.[27] We expect to see more of the same as Sikh activists online continue to speak out on the even more recent allegations that the Indian state attempted to assassinate a different Sikh activist and American citizen, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun.

These are just a few examples of how **platforms' continued refusal to geofence governments' requests,** like requests from the Indian state to take down Sikh accounts beyond the borders of India based on demonstrably false information, is extremely impactful in the continued censorship of Sikhs globally.

How Advocates Can Help Prevent the Closing of India's "Open" Internet

When considering the totality of the Indian government's approach to dissent–leaning on Western governments to decry protests without engaging with the root causes; exerting ever-tightening control over what social media platforms can allow to be said within India; presenting hate tropes as absolute fact to be amplified by Western media; cutting off internet access and suspending democratic rights for whole provinces on

25 https://pressprogress.ca/a-new-wave-of-online-harassment-and-misinformation-campaigns-are-targeting-sikhs-in-canada/
26 https://pressprogress.ca/twitter-censorship-canada-news-journalists-politicians-civil-liberties-india/
27 https://pressprogress.ca/facebook-is-blocking-canadians-posts-about-the-assassination-of-a-bc-sikh-leader-their-posts-were-targeted-by-indias-government/

a whim–it becomes painfully obvious that diasporic communities like the Sikh community are being boxed into a corner from which they feel they have no chance to advocate for themselves and their families back home. To wit: the Indian state's misinformation and censorship operation has become so sophisticated that Sikh citizens of Western democracies are being intimidated into believing they cannot exercise their constitutional rights to free speech.

Taken together, these developments speak volumes to the variety of fronts on which the Indian state is developing and refining tools to clamp down on open data and communication. In the broader Sikh community, there is an annoyance around Tweets getting shadowbanned or being drawn into online arguments with Hindutva trolls. Still, in some respects, this misses the forest for the trees. There is a degree of sophistication to the digital architecture of the Indian state that bodes ill for anyone who believes that the Internet should be a means of open and transparent connection the world over–and especially those who believe that free speech should exist online in the same ways it exists offline. Without the implementation of our recommendations, particularly **assertive collaboration with community advocates like SALDEF and our co-authors,** platforms will continue to serve as partisan political outlets contributing to highly effective silencing campaigns of minorities internationally at the whims of governments playing domestic political games. As social media platforms continue to lag in addressing these problems, autocratic and technologically savvy states like India are increasing the gap.

Hindus for Human Rights

3 Silencing Dissent: The Strategic Misinformation Campaign Against Hindus for Human Rights

This case study from Hindus for Human Rights delves into how disinformation and censorship were specifically deployed against the organization and its leadership, escalating a transnational campaign to silence an organization of progressive Hindus with a global audience. A Hindu nationalist propaganda farm, Disinfo Lab, is central to the campaign against HfHR.[28] Disinfo Lab is run by Lt Col Dibya Satpathy, who is reportedly associated with India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). The lab creates disinformation narratives to target international government officials, researchers, and Indian-origin rights activists, including Indian Americans. Despite accusations of government affiliation, Disinfo Lab operates as a 'separate legal entity' and has been influential in shaping narratives on social media and in Indian politics.

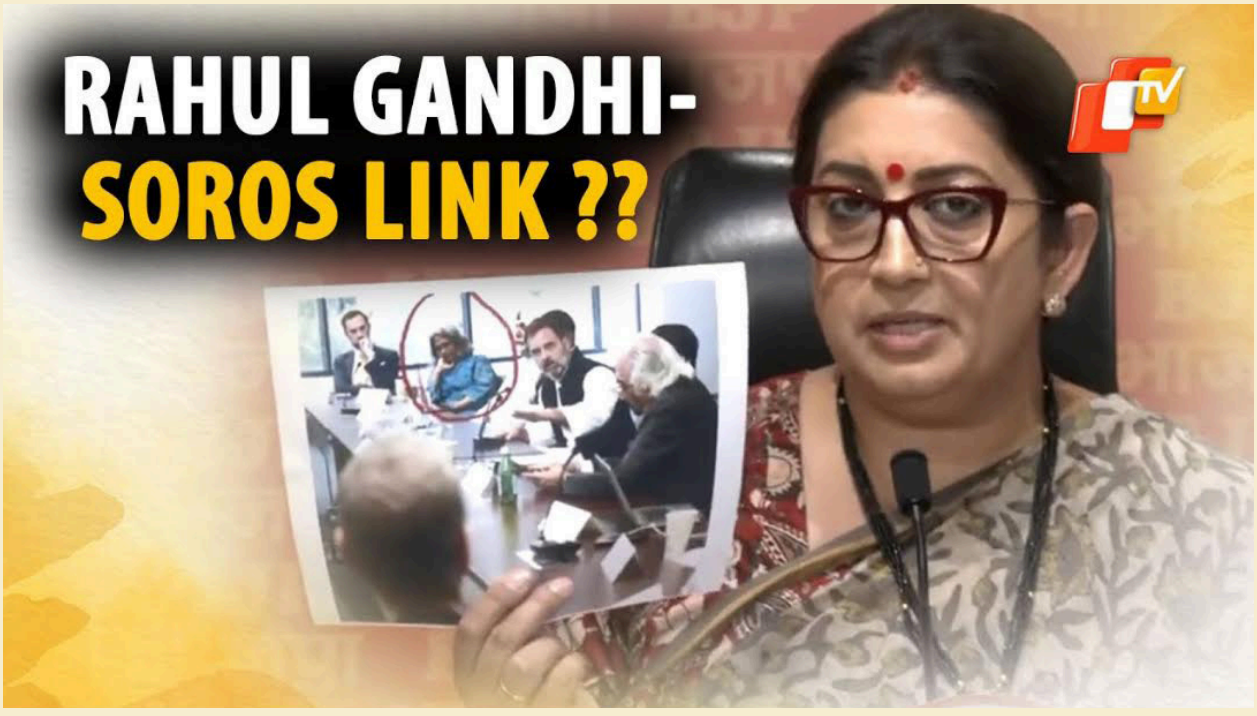
In April 2023, Disinfo Lab published a report titled "HfHR: Hindus For Hire - Heads They Win/Tails You Lose," targeting Hindus for Human Rights and denouncing our New York-based founder and Executive Director Sunita Viswanath. This report attempted to connect HfHR with various extremist groups, employing classic conspiracy tropes and unfounded accusations, as well as portraying Viswanath as a puppet of George Soros because his foundation supported a nonprofit she launched to help female Afghan refugees. The portrayal of HfHR in this report was a clear attempt to discredit the organization by distorting its legitimate activities.

28 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/10/india-the-disinfo-lab-discredit-critics/

Additionally, HfHR came under attack for attending an event and moderating another event with Indian opposition leader Rahul Gandhi as part of his visit to the United States. HfHR maintains its non-partisan stance and its commitment to multi-religious and multi-ethnic harmony in India. Gandhi's talks focused on his vision for Indian democracy. However, shortly after his trip, Viswanath came under attack on social media by Amit Malviya, the head of the BJP IT cell and one of the highest-ranking officials in the party. Malviya's tweet included a flow chart "connecting" HfHR and allies like IAMC to Soros, stamped with the Disinfo Lab logo.[29]

Lack of Institutional Competence: A Frictionless Disinfo Campaign Against Sunita Viswanath

On June 1st, BJP leader Amit Malviya shared a photograph of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi at a talk in Washington DC's Hudson Institute.[30] In the picture, someone circled Viswanath's face. Malviya shared the photograph alongside a graphic from Disinfo Lab, questioning Gandhi's association with individuals allegedly funded by George Soros. He implied that Gandhi's trip to the US was a scheme to meet Soros and destroy India based solely on Viswanath's presence at the event. This photograph and the associated allegations were further spread by Minority Affairs Minister Smriti Irani, who presented the photograph at a national press conference–disinformation that was swiftly amplified uncritically by news platforms, including legacy media outlets, and shared without friction across all social media platforms.[31]



29 https://twitter.com/amitmalviya/status/1664474354695176194/photo/2
30 https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/who-is-sunita-viswanath-whose-photo-with-rahul-gandhi-was-flagged-by-smriti-irani-101688009925849.html
31 https://twitter.com/amitmalviya/status/1674080829105135622?lang=en

While antisemitism may not have deep roots in Indian politics, the BJP's enthusiasm to tie HfHR and other anti-Modi voices to longstanding antisemitic tropes speaks volumes both to BJP's tendencies to engage in hateful misinformation and the lack of incentives for platforms to monitor hate speech and misinformation, like the meshing of repeatedly debunked Western conspiracy theories related to George Soros with Indian state propaganda.[32]

This incident is exemplary of the Indian government's harassment of journalists, activists, and politicians in the U.S. who challenge the Indian government's policies. For instance, Wall Street Journal reporter Sabrina Siddiqui experienced heavy backlash on social media for questioning Prime Minister Modi on human rights issues.[33] These smear campaigns form part of the broader strategy to silence political dissent by jailing critics, raiding media offices, and stifling dissent through online attacks and denial of entry to India–issues noted repeatedly and with increasing volume by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.[34]

In keeping with our joint recommendations and in light of Disinfo Lab's effortless use of social media to amplify their work to malign and misrepresent HfHR, we recommend that **social media platforms develop institutional competency to distinguish propaganda from fact.**

Lack of International Standards: Dividing and Conquering Our Community

On October 14th, 2023, HfHR became aware of the Twitter block through a screenshot shared on the platform, indicating the account was withheld in India. Twitter withheld the accounts of HfHR and the Indian American Muslim Council in response to a "legal demand" from the Government of India.[35] On October 16th, official communication from X, formerly known as Twitter, confirmed the suspension but failed to provide any rationale or opportunity for appeal. This is consistent with the experiences of other communities–for example, the Sikh diaspora experiencing India-specific censoring and takedowns in March 2023 when attempting to post about the manhunt

32 https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bjp-questions-rahul-gandhi-hobnobbing-with-associates-of-george-soros/article67019486.ece
33 https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/white-house-blasts-harassment-reporter-asked-modi-human-rights-record-rcna91251
34 https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-religious-freedom-watchdog-implores-biden-administration-designate-india-2023-12-16/
35 https://thewire.in/world/will-not-be-silenced-hindus-for-human-rights-x-account-withheld

for Amritpal Singh in clear attempts to disconnect Indian audiences from diaspora perspectives that critique the current regime. Therefore, we jointly recommend **geofencing government takedown requests, and clear international standards for international issues.**

HfHR has been in contact with both X and the Government of India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology to gather more information. We continue to seek clarification about the legal removal demand issued by the Government of India concerning our official X/Twitter account, which alleged potential violations of India's Information Technology Act, 2000. As of now, our account is still withheld in India, and we cannot continue advocating for human rights to a significant part of our global audience.

As HfHR has repeatedly expressed both in public comment and in direct interaction with stakeholders, we advocate through our values of Hinduism for human rights and secular, liberal democracy in India. As such, we jointly recommend social media platforms to **collaborate productively with our organization** and rely on our subject matter expertise to defend freedom of expression online.

IAMC

4 Suppressing Muslim Voices: The Online Crackdown on India's Most Vulnerable Minority [Indian-American Muslim Council]

Muslims are by and large the most demonized minority group in India; the population of 200 million is routinely the target of hate speech, organized mob violence, punitive home and mosque demolitions, lynchings, discriminatory policies, and calls for genocide. India is also one of the main originators of online anti-Muslim content, with 55% of all anti-Muslim hate speech being posted by Indian social media users.[36] US-based social media companies, particularly Meta, Twitter/X, and Youtube, have played a significant role in this normalization of anti-Muslim hate speech, which in turn fuels real-world discrimination and violence.

Despite the fact that violently anti-Muslim content is widely shared among far-right Indian users - including calls for Muslims to be killed, videos of mob lynchings and other attacks, dehumanizing memes, and disinformation falsely accusing Muslims of crimes - those who engage with such content face little to no consequences. In fact, as the Washington Post reports, Facebook executives "shy away" from punishing the BJP and its supporters, resulting in what one Facebook employee called "a near constant barrage of polarizing nationalist content, misinformation, and violence and gore."[37] Meanwhile, Elon Musk's X routinely blocks content at the government's behest, including protests against the government's exclusionary Citizenship Amendment Act,

36 https://www.thequint.com/news/world/86-percent-of-anti-muslim-content-on-twitter-comes-from-us-uk-india-study
37 https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/25/facebook-india-hate-speech-misinformation-muslims-social-media

posts debunking Hindutva propaganda, and links to watch "India: the Modi Question," a BBC documentary that draws attention to Modi's role in the 2002 massacre of Muslims in the state of Gujarat.[38]

Conversely, individuals and groups that draw attention to the government's authoritarianism and human rights abuses are subjected to censorship. This case study by the Indian American Muslim Council (IAMC) delves into the way transnational repression and censorship of our staff and leadership is an extension of India's wide-reaching crackdown on Indian Muslims as a whole.

Censorship of IAMC & Targeting of Diaspora Muslims Far Beyond India

IAMC is the United States' oldest and largest advocacy organization representing Indian Muslims. On our Twitter/X account, which has 191.4k followers, we regularly post news about anti-minority human rights abuses in India, promote advocacy and awareness campaigns, and livestream educational events. On October 14, 2023, our account was abruptly withheld in India, in compliance with a request filed by the Indian government under the oft-abused Information Technology Act of 2000. IAMC was not given a specific reason by X as to why the account was withheld.

As with many targets of Indian government censorship, IAMC had long been labeled as a threat by the Indian government and law enforcement due to our criticism of the Modi regime and Hindutva. In the leadup to the X ban, IAMC was the frequent target of the Disinfo Lab, an Indian intelligence-linked propaganda group that runs extensive disinformation campaigns aimed at silencing and discrediting overseas critics of Modi and the BJP.[39] Several Disinfo Lab reports have falsely presented IAMC as a front organization of Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence agency, and labeled IAMC leadership and staff as being connected with Islamists and terrorist groups.

38 https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/elon-musks-twitter-india-censor-bbc-modi-doc-1235309257/
39 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/10/india-the-disinfo-lab-discredit-critics/

Notably, IAMC is deemed a threat by Disinfo Lab for raising awareness about rising anti-Muslim hatred and genocidal rhetoric in India. In its 2022 article "Saga Of The Longest Info-War Against India – Part I", Disinfo Lab claims, "While imposing the narrative of Islamophobia, these fronts also peddle the parallel narratives of fascism and impending genocide of minorities in India. While peddling such narratives, this ecosystem intends to launch boycott campaigns against India and run social media campaigns such as *#BoycottIndianProducts* with the help of the global Muslim Brotherhood."[40] Platforms' **lack of geofencing** and inability to contain takedowns motivated by domestic Indian politics to India ensures that this disinformation underpins global censorship of our community.

We believe that accusations in this vein played a role in the banning of our X account.

Platforms' Complicity in the Censorship of Indian Muslims

As previously mentioned, these incidents are transnational extensions of the Indian government's routine censorship of Muslims in India. Social media companies not only allow the unencumbered circulation of hateful content, but also allow for the Modi regime to abuse their platforms by deploying government-recruited citizen task forces to report "anti-national" content and troll the BJP's detractors.[41] Legacy media has also suffered: according to watchdog group Reporters Without Borders (RSF), India fell sharply in the Global Press Freedom index this year due to rising censorship of journalists and media outlets, dropping 11 positions to occupy 161st place in a list of 180 countries, behind outright authoritarian regimes in Afghanistan, Libya, and the United Arab Emirates.

This censorship most visibly affects journalists and activists, particularly those who are Muslim. In August 2023, the website and social media accounts of a prominent Kashmiri news portal, The Kashmir Walla, were all blocked following an order from India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.[42] In November, a freelance journalist and editor of a Muslim-friendly news publication, Maktoob Media, were interrogated by Kerala police over the publication of an article on anti-Muslim bias in the handling of a bombing case.[43] In 2022, Muslim journalist Mohammed Zubair, who runs the fact-checking website AltNews, was arrested after being accused of posting content that was offensive to Hindus.[44] Notably, his arrest came soon after he criticized a BJP spokesperson for making offensive comments about Prophet Muhammad.[45]

In Muslim-majority Kashmir, online censorship has become even more acute since the 2019 abrogation of Article 370 of India's constitution, revoking the region's special

40 https://thedisinfolab.org/saga-of-the-longest-info-war-against-india/
41 https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/29/india-cyber-volunteers-surveillance-censorship-internet-social-media
42 https://cpj.org/2023/08/india-blocks-the-kashmir-walla-website-and-social-media-accounts/
43 https://www.siasat.com/maktoob-media-editor-summoned-by-kerala-police-2888275/
44 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/06/28/mohammed-zubair-arrest-twitter-alt-news/
45 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/28/delhi-police-arrest-muslim-journalist-mohammed-zubair-india-bjp

semi-autonomous status. During the subsequent military crackdown, India became the internet blackout capital of the world in 2022 by imposing 49 blackouts on Kashmir to suppress dissent.[46] During these blackouts, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X routinely take down posts and ban accounts, including those of human rights groups and journalists, that shed light on atrocities committed by the Indian military.[47] In 2018, leaked Facebook documents revealed that the platform censors various phrases linked with Kashmir and deems other calls for liberation "illegal" in India.[48] Similarly, a report released in 2021 by the diaspora group Stand With Kashmir (SWK) revealed that the Indian government is "removing content, blocking important accounts that provide information, and restricting the reach of content."

Every day civilians are also punished for criticizing the Modi regime, as well as for expressing any views that do not align with the government's Hindu nationalist-centric worldview. In August 2023, a Muslim man was arrested for not "taking action" as a WhatsApp group admin against a member who criticized Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, a prominent BJP leader and close ally of Modi.[49] In a single week in 2017, at least seven people were also arrested for posting Facebook statuses critical of Adityanath.[50] Amid Israel's bombardment of Gaza this year, which the Hindu right has come out in strong support for, a Muslim cleric was arrested and two others booked for posting in support of Palestine.[51] In a number of instances, Muslims - particularly Kashmiris - have been arrested or booked for praising Pakistan's cricket team.[52] Young Muslims who post praises of Mughal emperors and India's period of Islamic rule, particularly as a response to the widespread demonization of Indian Muslim culture and history, are arrested for "hurting Hindu sentiments."[53] Platforms' continued refusal to develop institutional competence allowing them to distinguish propaganda from fact remains an essential piece in the efficacy of these anti-Muslim strategies.

Our Call to Action

The Modi government is increasingly using transnational methods of repression to silence its critics. As an advocacy group, we are concerned by the assassination of Sikh leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada, the recently uncovered plot to assassinate another Sikh leader in the US, and the countless reports of social media companies giving free reign to the BJP to censor its overseas critics through smear campaigns and intimidation.

This climate of fear is only exacerbated by the flooding of social media with hate speech, violent content, and calls for a genocide of Muslims in India. In order to protect

46 https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/28/in-2022-the-world-saw-187-internet-shutdowns-84-by-india-alone
47 https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/3/27/why-is-twitter-silencing-kashmiri-voices
48 https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/27/world/facebook-moderators.html
49 https://maktoobmedia.com/india/muslim-man-arrested-for-not-taking-action-against-whatsapp-group-member-who-made-remarks-against-cm-adityanath/
50 https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/arrested-over-a-facebook-status-7-times-people-landed-in-jail-for-posts-against-politicians/story-ON1jukoStfV6T8aYcJEVGJ.html
51 https://scroll.in/latest/1057618/uttar-pradesh-one-arrested-two-more-booked-for-social-media-posts-on-israel-hamas-war
52 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-59059494
53 https://www.wired.com/story/instagram-posts-about-aurangzeb-are-getting-people-arrested/

minorities in both India as well as the diaspora, US-based social media companies must stop their cooperation with the far-right Modi regime, ensure that all forms of hateful content are taken down, and reinstate the accounts and reach of those who have been censored. **Proactive collaboration with organizations like IAMC and our co-authors** is an effective and straightforward means of protecting the communities we represent and advocate for.

EQUALITY LABS

5 Big Tech's Failure to Protect Caste Equity [Equality Labs]

Equality Labs is the leading Dalit civil rights organization, working on the issue of caste equity in the United States for nearly a decade. They have helped to helm a movement that both sheds light on this pernicious issue and galvanizes caste equity as one of the key pillars redefining Asian American organizing. As one of the nation's most prominent caste equity advocacy organizations, the leadership and staff of Equality Labs have first-hand experience with most of the tactics described in this landscape report.

Background: What is Caste & Caste Discrimination?

Caste apartheid is a structure of oppression that affects more than 260 million people worldwide, including 5.77 million Americans. Caste is a system of exclusion where each position is characterized by hereditary status, endogamy, and social exclusion. At birth, every child inherits his or her ancestors' caste, which determines their social status, assigns a fixed level of "spiritual purity", and determines their opportunities and vulnerability to violence and social exclusion. Caste is not restricted to South Asia, and indeed has been transplanted into the global South Asian diaspora. The caste-oppressed diaspora often originate from South Asia, including India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan, Maldives, and indentured communities like Indo-Fijian and Indo Caribbean communities. Caste systems similarly known to discriminate based on birth, work, and descent are found around the world. While caste is strongly associated with South Asia, similar systems exist in South America, Japan, parts of Africa, and elsewhere.

While caste discrimination can occur across all castes, the castes at the bottom face the most exclusion. This includes the castes condemned as "untouchable": any interaction with them is spiritually defiling for those belonging to higher castes, and they are thus shunned and subjected to violence, abuse, and backbreaking labor. These castes are now known by the self-chosen identity of "Dalits," which means "those who have been broken but are resilient."

Caste discrimination is now found across industries, including technology, education, construction, food service and hospitality restaurants, domestic work, and medicine. It can not only hinder access to employment, education, healthcare, housing, and other opportunities, but also lead to social exclusion, economic marginalization, and physical violence. Caste-oppressed Americans have also complained about wage theft, trafficking, discrimination in workplaces and educational institutions, sexual harassment, and gender- based violence—where caste has operated as part of coercive control amongst domestic violence survivors.

There is a well-documented history of caste discrimination spanning over twenty years in the labor and employment sectors in the United States. The issue of caste is a workplace safety issue and legal remedies are necessary given the grave discrimination workers across many industries have faced due to caste. Consider the Laki Bali Reddy case in California, where a slumlord and restaurateur trafficked 300 workers and forced over 20 young Dalit girls to work as his sex slaves.[54] More recently, the State of California sued Cisco corporation for contributing to a casteist hostile workplace after the complainant reported harassment, bullying, disparate pay, and termination.[55] In another case, hundreds of workers alleged that the BAPS temple society trafficked workers from India to build over five temples in the U.S., including one in Los Angeles.[56] In the wake of these cases, Dalit workers in countless industries have spoken out. Tech has been especially impacted with more than 250 workers complaining about several companies.[57]

In a 2016 report by Equality Labs, caste discrimination in the United states was found to be rampant with 1 in 4 caste oppressed people facing physical and verbal assault, 1 in 3 education discrimination, and 2 in 3 workplace discrimination.[58] This data is further supported by a forthcoming report from the National Academic Coalition for Caste Equity and Equality Labs, with the preliminary analysis of a new survey revealing that within U.S. higher education, 4 in 5 caste-oppressed students, staff, and faculty reported experiencing caste discrimination at the hands of their dominant-caste peers and institutions.

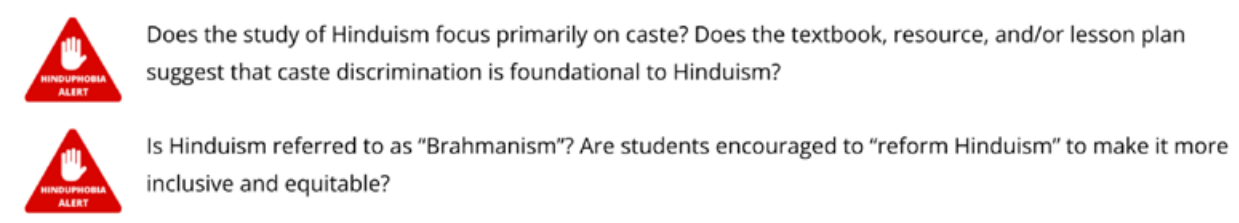
54 https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-nov-25-tm-7947-story.html
55 https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/calif-scraps-caste-bias-case-cisco-engineers-company-still-sued-rcna79434
56 https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/10/nyregion/baps-hindu-forced-labor.html
57 https://www.vice.com/en/article/3azjp5/silicon-valley-has-a-caste-discrimination-problem
58 https://equalitylabs.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Caste_in_the_United_States_Report2018.pdf

Hindu Nationalist Manipulation of Tech & the Bogeyman of Hinduphobia

The primary opposition to caste equity in the United States comes from explicitly Hindu nationalist organizations, including the Hindu American Foundation, Coalition of North American Hindus, Hindu Pact, and many others. Many of the biggest dominant caste discriminators come from Hindu nationalist networks, and they are concerned about the rule of law exposing their discriminatory practices. These groups are threatened by the call for global caste equity. As a result, they are part of a multi-pronged campaign of media- and social media-based disinformation and coordinated "grassroots" advocacy positing that caste equity, or even the mere mention of caste, constitutes Hinduphobia. It is already well-documented that "central to the success of the BJP, a party with 180 million members, is a massive messaging machine built on top of U.S. social media platforms."[59]

These groups insist that caste divides Hindu communities, leveraging the underlying assumption being that all Indian Americans are Hindu, and thus caste equity is a direct attack on Hinduism. This argument serves two functions: 1) it attempts to define caste equity as a religious attack against Hindus, in hopes to then stop any attempts to address caste discrimination, and 2) intimidates those outside of the South Asian American community into not even entering this conversation.

The argument is most evident in a manual titled Navigating Hinduphobia, which targets anti-caste and anti-Hindu nationalist frameworks.[60] As seen below, merely teaching about the existence of caste discrimination in K-12 schools and discussing inclusion and equity concerns related to the marginalization of over 260 million people across the world are two practices deemed Hinduphobic.



Source: "Hinduphobia Checklist for K-12 Schools". Navigating Hinduphobia - A Manual for Students, Parents, and Educators.

Part of this disinformation campaign entails messaging around the institutional additions of caste as a protected category. The claim is that anti-casteist language could harm Hindus by unfairly discriminating against them. In reality, protected categories only offer additional layers of protection for those experiencing multiple axes of discrimination. Caste protections solely offer recourse for the caste-oppressed and demand accountability only from those actively practicing caste discrimination.

59 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/26/hindu-nationalist-social-media-hate-campaign/

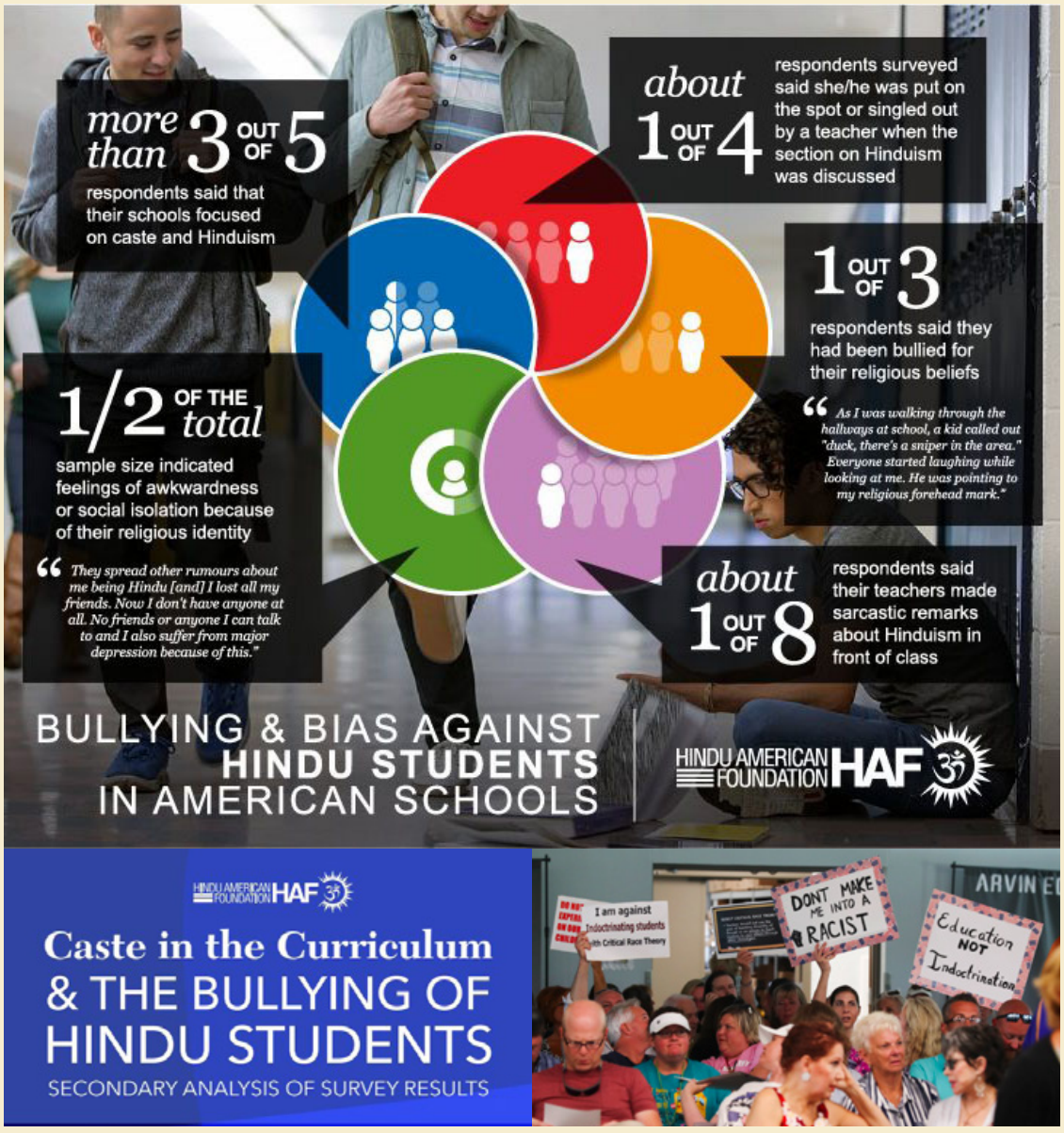
60 Viswanathan, I. Navigating Hinduphobia: A manual for students, parents, and educators. Understanding Hinduphobia. https://manual.understandinghinduphobia.org/about/. Published 2021.

In the face of a growing body of evidence that caste discrimination is rampant in the diaspora, Hindu nationalist organizations in the United States have released graphics like the following.

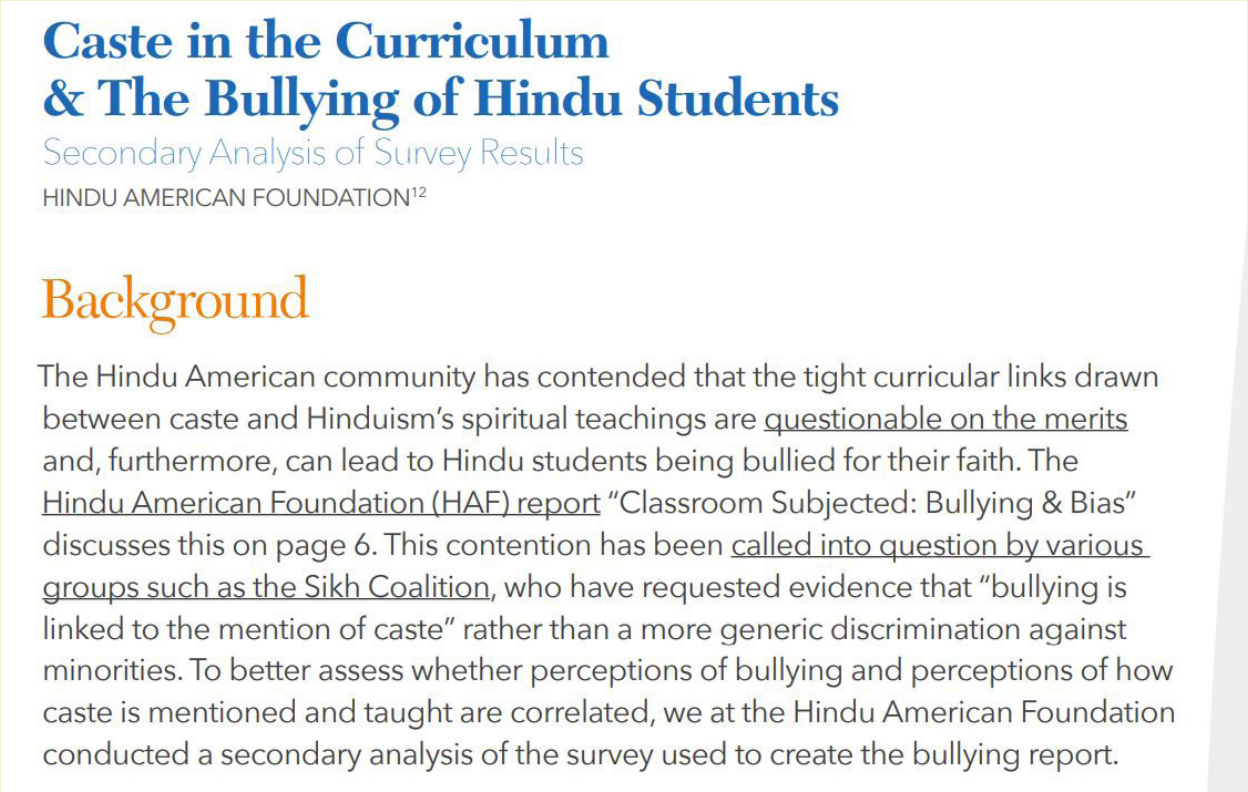
These arguments echo the others:

1. Adding caste as a protected category in anti-discrimination policies unfairly targets Hindus and promotes Hinduphobia.
2. Existing laws protect against caste discrimination, even if it were to exist.
3. Adding caste propagates colonial stereotypes because "caste" is not indigenous to the subcontinent. (This is an obvious wordplay made in bad faith because concepts like jaati and varna which exist in Brahmanical texts allude to these hierarchies of social segregation and exclusion.)

The Hindu American Foundation, one of the first organizations to attack Dalit civil rights leaders and movements in their attempts to stall caste protections, has for years falsely equated the teaching of caste with the bullying of Hindu children by issuing graphics like this that are widely Circulated on Social Media Platforms:



Top, bottom left: Caste in the Curriculum & The Bullying of Hindu Students; Bottom right: Critical race theory dominates Oldham County school board meeting as discord continues. Source: Courier-Journal



Caste in the Curriculum & The Bullying of Hindu Students

Secondary Analysis of Survey Results

HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION[12]

Background

The Hindu American community has contended that the tight curricular links drawn between caste and Hinduism's spiritual teachings are questionable on the merits and, furthermore, can lead to Hindu students being bullied for their faith. The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) report "Classroom Subjected: Bullying & Bias" discusses this on page 6. This contention has been called into question by various groups such as the Sikh Coalition, who have requested evidence that "bullying is linked to the mention of caste" rather than a more generic discrimination against minorities. To better assess whether perceptions of bullying and perceptions of how caste is mentioned and taught are correlated, we at the Hindu American Foundation conducted a secondary analysis of the survey used to create the bullying report.

In their 2019 report "Caste in the Curriculum & The Bullying of Hindu Students," the Hindu American Foundation claimed to find a correlation among their survey respondents between the "intensity with which a school's Hinduism unit focused on caste" and "the likelihood both that the child will perceive that Hinduism has been taught negatively and that she/he will be bullied for her/his faith."[61] Irresponsibly running with this correlation, HAF concluded that "the teaching of caste in classrooms may thus be a potentially powerful cause of faith-based bullying for Hindu children," a claim aping those of many parent groups opposing discussion and the institutionalization of Critical Race Theory curricula across the nation.[62]

Caste Equity Civil Rights & Foreign Repression: The Case of SB-403

Similarly to the Sikh diaspora during the Farmers' Protest, the constituents whom Equality Labs serves found themselves immersed in a misinformation campaign emanating from a political flashpoint–specifically the pitched battle in 2023 in California around passage of state-level anti-caste discrimination bill SB 403 that Equality Labs led alongside SALDEF. The campaign faced tremendous amounts of disinformation targeted at Equality Labs, their director Thenmozhi Soundararajan, State Senator Aisha Wahab, and South Asian minority leaders, often facing calls for violence for their work around caste equity. The disinformation had two major strands:

61 https://www.hinduamerican.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/HAFN.16.018-CasteInCurriculumReport.r2.0.pdf

62 https://medium.com/@shaylargriffin/the-critical-race-theory-panic-reveals-why-white-students-must-be-included-in-our-equity-efforts-3902071c4a59

1. Youtube videos that equated leaders of SB 403 with Khalistani and "terror" groups

For example, a segment on an Indian news channel frames numerous caste equity civil rights activities in the US as a part of a "Break India [terrorist] Plot" (around 0:50/24:45).[63] Activities identified as tied to this so-called "terrorist plot" include the recent successful organizing, by a wide coalition of civil rights organizations (including Equality Labs), to pass an amendment to Seattle human rights law that includes caste as a protected class. Troublingly, the video names several people—including American citizens—as terrorists who are part of a "Break India Plot" claiming they spread "anti-Gandhi rhetoric," portray India as a fascist state, and support India's 2021 Farmers' protest. Included in the list of so-called terrorists is Amar Singh Shergill, Chair Emeritus of the California Democratic Caucus (around 1:10/24:45).[64]

Former Indian Ambassador Pradeep Kapur (who was also a visiting clinical professor at the University of Maryland) affirmed the anchor's thesis: "It is seemingly a very global plot," he claimed, expanding the group of so called "terrorists" to include extremist left forces and separatist forces driving what he calls a "Woke Army." Kapur extends this so-called terrorist plot and the "problem of wokeness" to the activities of Equality Labs. According to Kapur, Equality Labs acts as a terrorist organization by bringing the question of caste into the so-called "Woke Movement." He argues that Equality Labs does this by "trying to make out that there is a big caste problem in the United States" (around 8:10/24:45).[65]

63 NewsX, Khalistan-California Anti-Caste Bill Link Exposed, YouTube (March 27, 2023), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSyVMyvWUJ4.
64 NewsX, Khalistan-California Anti-Caste Bill Link Exposed, YouTube (March 27, 2023), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSyVMyvWUJ4.
65 NewsX, Khalistan-California Anti-Caste Bill Link Exposed, YouTube (March 27, 2023), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSyVMyvWUJ4.

In this series of videos on Youtube, current and former official representatives of the Indian State have called for expansion of Indian laws that, similar to the US Patriot Act,[66] **would grant the authority to conduct extraterritorial covert lethal actions against those whom the Indian State defines as terrorists.**[67] Initially, these laws were designed with India's conflicts with neighboring Pakistan in mind; however, especially through the rise of the BJP, these laws are increasingly being discussed in the context of targeting civil rights activities taking place in the United States. **Despite attempts to report such videos and content, Youtube, Facebook, and X took no action.**

In yet another interview with NewsX, Ambassador Kapur calls efforts at alleviating discrimination on the basis of caste "reverse discrimination" and asserts that this organic, domestic grassroots civil rights movement "must be stopped" because it raises concerns that dominant caste people who apply for a job might be questioned about their views on caste.[68] Another former Indian representative, Ambassador Bhaswati Mukherjee, takes a similar line, asserting that laws prohibiting caste discrimination are part of a global Hinduphobic plot.[69]

---

66 Uniting and Strengthening America By Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001 ("Patriot Act," Pub. L. No. 107-56, 115 Stat. 272 (2001)

67 India already has pre-existing laws governing so-called terrorist activities. In March 2002, passed the Prevention of Terrorism Act, 89 A.I.R. 2002 ACTS [hereinafter POTA], to enhance India's ability to crack down on possible terrorist threats. Some fifteen years prior to its enactment, the Indian Parliament passed the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, or TADA, 74 A.I.R. 1987 ACTS. See Krishnan, Jayanth K., "India's "Patriot Act": POTA and the Impact on Civil Liberties in the World's Largest Democracy" (2004). Articles by Maurer Faculty. 379. https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/facpub/379.

68 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7XjQrLvjt8.

69 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7XjQrLvjt8.

2. Covert Foreign Operation, Disinfo Lab: "The Cost of Caste"

Equality Labs, like IAMC and HfHR, has had the "honor" of being the subject of a Disinfo Lab publication: a report called "The Cost of Caste" that maligned our research on caste discrimination in the United States and nonsensically accused Equality Labs of being a Pakistan-funded outfit conceived by white American missionaries to orchestrate caste-related protests in diasporic communities. A recent Washington Post expose revealed "the Disinfo Lab was set up and is run by an Indian intelligence officer to research and discredit foreign critics of the Modi government, according to three people who worked in the organization or were familiar with its establishment. While claiming that it aimed to uncover anti-India disinformation, the Disinfo Lab itself is running a covert influence operation, they said."[70] The Executive Director of Equality Labs, Thenmozhi Soundarajan, has been the target of a prolonged global disinformation campaign maligning her values and suggesting her commitment to human rights masks a more sinister anti-India agenda–similar to Sunita Viswanath of HfHR.[71]

These Disinfo Lab reports have been used in city, county, and state advocacy attempting to equate Equality Labs with terrorist groups and with anti-semitic conspiracy theories targeting George Soros. These reports were amplified and disseminated globally on platforms like X, Youtube, and Facebook with minimal friction. We have serious concerns that none of the platforms sufficiently addressed their inability to moderate the threats of violence accompanying such easily debunked disinformation.

70 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/10/india-the-disinfo-lab-discredit-critics/
71 https://pen.org/press-release/pen-america-condemns-online-abuse-campaign-to-silence-dalit-author-thenmozhi-soundarara/

These examples showcase the escalating and grave risks to American citizens of India's interference in civil rights and social justice movements in the US. Such activities in the United States require urgent and comprehensive investigation, at the very least, to prevent further violence targeting US citizens. Global coalitions coordinated by the Indian state are already in place and are already successfully undermining, chilling, or interfering with civil rights activities in the United States, especially those seeking to protect American citizens from caste-based discrimination or religious discrimination like the other communities served by our co-authors and other South Asian movement colleagues.

In EL's report on hate speech on Facebook India, one of the key findings and recommendations revolved around **the lack of institutional cultural competency in-house** at Facebook and how readily exploitable this vulnerability is by bad actors–finding plentiful examples of widespread doxxing, threats against activists and journalists, and other clearly violative content spreading without friction. Through specific examples including casteist tropes in advertising, insufficiently nuanced reporting workflows, the restoration of violative content, and the allowing of overtly casteist hate speech, we found repeatedly that Facebook staff in India lacked the cultural competency needed to recognize, respect, and serve caste, religious, gender, and queer minorities.

Similarly, in EL's 2020 report Coronajihad: An Analysis of Islamophobic COVID-19 Hate Speech, one of the key findings of the research into how islamophobic COVID-19 hate speech and disinformation proliferated globally was that social media staff and moderators should acquire and exercise greater cultural competency, particularly concerning issues of caste and religious minorities of South Asia. The report recommends that platforms should empower independent audit teams that could demonstrate clear competencies in caste, religious, gender and queer issues with expertise in both Indian and U.S. markets as well as including members of Indian minorities. The calls for independent audit were crucial to FB conducting its first Human Rights Impact Audit Assessment for India, however to date the company has refused to release that report–likely because of its damning findings. The time has come to release that report, for that data will be critical to co-designing around the many problems impacting US and Indian users arising from dangerous speech from extremist networks in South Asia.

Unfortunately, this guidance remains largely ignored by platforms–as we saw in the summer of 2022, when a scheduled talk at Google by Soundarajan on caste equity in newsrooms was canceled.[72] Far from building structures and modular trainings to help employees understand how caste discrimination continues to manifest across the global Indian diaspora, as Equality Labs has advised for years, Google management

72 https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/big-techs-big-problem-also-best-kept-secret-caste-discrimination-rcna33692

instead swiftly caved to caste-dominant Hindu employees spreading easily-debunked misinformation about Equality Labs, including calling EL a hate group, drawing language from foreign influence disinfo sites that have previously targeted North American academics who are critical of Hindu nationalism, and specifically labeling Soundarajan Hindu-phobic and anti-Hindu.[73] Most disappointing was the choice by Google CEO Sundar Pichai, an expatriate Hindu Indian of high-caste birth, to disengage completely on this issue, ignore a direct request from Soundarajan, and instead delegate decision-making on this to deputies with no familiarity with the issue.[74]

This false equivocation, both-sides-ism, and reluctance to even accept that caste discrimination is a problem were also readily apparent in California Governor Gavin Newsom's decision to veto SB 403 a year
later in defiance of its passage by large majorities in both of California's legislative chambers. Equality Labs
was on the front lines of the effort, launching the Californians for Caste Equity Coalition to bring together an interfaith, intercaste, multi-racial group of organizations that fought to enshrine caste as a protected characteristic alongside race, gender, and the other components of one's identity that are too often the basis for discriminatory targeting. All of the co-authors in this report were part of the coalition as we fought a tidal wave of misinformation and disinformation about who we are, what we stand for, and why we wanted to create legal penalties for those in the United States wishing to discriminate on the basis of caste.

Across social media and a series of op-eds, opponents of SB 403 were able to develop a consistent set of messaging lines that were categorically false but repeated with little challenge or friction in mainstream Indian and fringe US media (via op-eds) and on social media, echoing the common lines of anti-caste education argument we traced earlier in this case study. Additionally, there have been continuous attempts to link Equality Labs and other Caste Equity Leaders, as well as State Senator Aisha Wahab, directly with terrorist organizations and frameworks.[75,76]

What Can Be Done:
Build Institutional Competence and List Dangerous Groups and Individuals

An implementation of the joint recommendations in this landscape report is urgently needed. Civil Society has advocated for years for platforms to build cultural competence in-house to be able to distinguish hate speech and propaganda targeting minorities on the basis of characteristics like caste. This competency must include collaboration with caste-oppressed partners to understand the landscape of violence. Further, the platforms must include Hindu nationalist groups as part of the dangerous

73 https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/06/02/google-caste-equality-labs-tanuja-gupta/
74 https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/22049957-letter-to-sundar-pichai?responsive=1&title=0
75 https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2023/09/california-anti-caste-discrimination-bill-hindu-nationalism-hindutva.html
76 https://akscusa.org/misrepresentation-of-sb403-explained/

groups listing for each platform. Civil society is concerned about the failure to add Hindu nationalist organizations and individuals to the dangerous groups listing as it prevents accountability and removal of the repeat offenders who most loudly and repeatedly call for violence.

Caste oppressed Americans' civil rights and personal safety is personally impacted by the **platforms' repeated refusal to geofence these requests.** Platforms must ensure that dissenters abroad are not the targets of foreign influence campaigns, and correct for the fact that they have allowed their platforms to be weaponized. Civil society is willing to collaborate positively with platforms to ensure that our communities can continue to use these tools to stay connected without facing discrimination and extremism when they practice free speech online.

While the media's continued uncritical platforming of these extreme ideas is problematic, the larger issue is the ability and willingness of coordinated social media campaigns to spread this caliber of misinformation like wildfire. It is unsurprising that platforms, even those led by Indian expats whose lived privilege is at least partly a function of their family's caste, continue to avoid the issue. However, until caste protection is written into moderation policies, Hindu nationalists are listed as part of dangerous groups and individuals, and competency built in the company regarding awareness of those individuals and organizations, we will continue to see opponents of progress weaponize the language of equity and make calls for violence that endanger Americans. Big Tech must take these issues seriously and stop failing their duty of care and their own policies to protect all of their users.

6 Policy Recommendations

1. Developing International Standards for International Issues

India, throughout the Modi administration, has been scored by Freedom House as being only 'Partly Free' in addition to the routine coverage of religious and political violence that are increasingly surfaced in reports like those prepared by US CIRF, the US State Department, and other nonprofit watchdogs like Access Now. The Indian government is able to control the online narrative and use it in turn to define media coverage that overstates the presence of "radical" elements while failing to question the appropriateness of the Indian government's draconian crackdowns, as it did during the manhunt for Amritpal Singh, the antisemitic disinformation campaign against Sunita Viswanath, the blanket global censorship of Indian Muslim journalists, or the coordinated campaigns to prevent the outlawing of caste discrimination outside India. The root cause of all of this is social media companies' inability to restrict policies enacted at the request of one state to just that state's geographic borders.

We strongly endorse the development of geofencing protocols 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. Similarly, social media platforms' failure to slow the enmeshing of antisemitic Western conspiracy theories with disinformation about Hindus for Human Rights is an example of the same strategic vulnerability again exploited by the BJP.

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 very 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. The authors of this report are a good group of candidates to help root out and prevent bias against targeted communities.

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

Organizations like Freedom House and Access Now 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.

We call 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, progressive Hindu Americans, Dalit Americans, and Indian-American Muslims 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 helped create bias in algorithmic moderation systems which leads to the automatic censorship of 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, we continue to call 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 weaponized for political gain.