

# Architects of hate: who is fuelling discord in India's digital elections?

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## Architects of hate: who is fuelling discord in India's digital elections? Premium

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Cutouts of Prime Minister Narendra Modi adorn the BJP campaign vehicle during an election campaign for the Lok Sabha polls 2024, in Kolkata. | Photo Credit: ANI

In the current political landscape, the role of third-party advertisers has emerged as a formidable force, shaping narratives and influencing public opinion. Across diverse democracies, from the U.S., the U.K., and to India, the rise of third-party actors has raised profound questions about the integrity of electoral processes and the need for robust regulation.

Recently, the Election Commission issued a directive to platform X (formerly Twitter) to remove an animated video targeting Muslims (as reported by *The Hindu* on May 8). This directive, citing provisions of the Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951 stands in stark contrast to the unchecked proliferation of inflammatory content on platforms like Meta (Table 2). This glaring discrepancy highlights a fundamental flaw in the legal framework governing political advertising in India. Despite provisions aimed at ensuring

fairness and accountability, the current regulatory landscape falls short, allowing third parties to operate with impunity, free from scrutiny over the content they disseminate and the source of their financial backing.

Building on the discourse initiated in a recent article published in *The Hindu* dated May 6, which highlighted the issue of unregulated expenditure by third-party campaigners, this study conducted by Lokniti-CSDS delves deeper into the realm of online political advertising by third parties. The study examined a randomised selection of ads from all third-party campaigners who are among the top 50 spenders on Google and Meta from April 1 to April 30. The study revealed a significant presence of 27 advertisers on Meta and 24 on Google among the top 50 spenders.

## **Ad analysis**

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Out of the total 51 advertisers identified on both platforms, a striking trend emerged wherein pages were actively campaigning through political ads in support of various political parties. Pages endorsing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) while criticising the INDIA alliance were predominant, and were focused largely around the Hindi belt region. Conversely, pages supporting the Indian National Congress (INC) and criticising the BJP were fewer, yet they also targeted almost identical locations (Table 1).

Besides promoting national parties, a substantial number of third-party advertisers are actively engaged in advertising for State-level parties, underscoring their pervasive influence even at the local level of Indian politics. This phenomenon reflects the far-reaching impact of third-party advertisers, extending beyond national narratives to shape local dynamics.

For analysing content of third-party ads, we focused on three controversial themes to underscore the problematic content they promote. Seven prominent advertisers, heavily utilising these themes, were identified on Meta. Nearly all the seven advertisers were found to post Islamophobic content, misinformation, or derogatory remarks (Table 2).

Notably, among all the advertisers, some boasted intriguing names that warrant attention. For instance, 'Mahathugbandhan' (Maha Thug Bandhan) posted its content against the I.N.D.I.A alliance (Maha Gath Bandhan), while 'Hirak Rani Bye Bye' took its name from the movie *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, depicting Mamta Banerjee as a dictator.

Among the seven advertisers analysed on Meta, it was evident that a significant proportion of their ads reflected concerning trends. On an average, each of these seven advertisers shared approximately 11% content with Islamophobic undertones, and around 56% of their ads disseminated misinformation or propaganda against opposition parties. These ads

often included generalised criticism tainted with misinformation and propagandist language. Furthermore, an average of nearly 10% of these ads per advertiser, were found to contain derogatory comments or defamatory statements targeting political parties or candidates.

### **Who sees it and where?**

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The gravity of such content can only be truly understood by delving into its expenditure and reach, gauged through impressions, audience demographics, and geographical location.

Upon analysing a randomised sample of advertisements by third-party advertisers on Meta, it was revealed that each of the three identified themes had expenditures exceeding ₹100K. Remarkably, the analysed ads posted by third-party advertisers on Meta were found to have spent more than 100k on each of the three identified themes (Table 4). Further, the analysed ads on these themes collectively garnered more than one million impressions (Table 4).

However, the concerning revelation lies in the demographic breakdown — while Islamophobic content was predominantly consumed by the 18-34 age group, the most alarming fact is that the highest consumption occurred within the 18-24 age bracket, mostly in States like Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh (Table 4). This underscores the pressing need for heightened awareness and proactive measures to address the impact of such content on young minds.

### **Legal loopholes for advertisers**

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The Handbook on Media Matters for CEOs and DEOs, issued by the Election Commission in February 2024, presents contradictory regulations regarding political advertisements by third parties. On Page 19 of Chapter 2, it prohibits such advertisements, citing the potential for undue benefits to other parties or candidates, excluding contesting candidates or political parties. However, Page 32 of the same chapter mandates political parties, groups, organizations, associations, and individuals to seek prior clearance of political advertisements by the Media Certification and Monitoring Committee (MCMC) before telecasting them on electronic media. Interestingly, the inclusion of “group/organisation/association” in the pre-certification requirement suggests that third parties should adhere to these regulations, revealing how the two above-mentioned provisions are ambiguous and contradictory to each other.

Furthermore, the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) governs the content of political speeches and ads by political parties and candidates, and Section 123 of the RPA, 1951 prohibits the promotion of enmity between communities through political ads or speeches, deeming

it a corrupt practice. However there is no explicit provision for regulation of content posted by third parties. This legal gap is revealed by the fact that the Election Commission has recently directed social media platforms to remove inciting content posted by parties or candidates during the current election cycle, yet no such action has been taken against third-party advertisers, whose content garners millions of impressions and targets impressionable age groups.

These gaps and loopholes highlight the pervasiveness of dirty politics, facilitated by third-party supporters disseminating harmful, propagandist content against opposing parties. It also reveals a systemic failure to hold these actors accountable, perpetuating a climate of misinformation and divisiveness in electoral discourse. As political parties and candidates might employ third-party advertisers to engage in dirty campaigning and circumvent other expenditure and content-related regulations, urgent reforms are needed to enhance transparency, accountability, and integrity in political advertising, safeguarding the democratic process from undue influence and manipulation.

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