

Mass Media as Weapon: Legal Gaps in Digital Media Ecosystems and Normalisation of Hate in Contemporary India

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Mass media, in all forms, has been used as a tool of propaganda by institutions of power. Such a claim is not baseless as there are historical precedents wherein the normalisation and mobilisation of hate through mass media have been precursors to atrocities, from Rwanda to Bosnia to Sri Lanka.¹ Scientific theories that expose us to and consumption of violence and hate through mass media (such as television, movies, video games, and social media) increase the risk of violent behaviour, a phenomenon termed ‘media violence’.² Widely renowned theories conceptualise the effect of mass media as a tool of political propaganda on normalising violence, manufacturing consent for atrocities and hate in societies. For instance, Herman and Chomsky argue that mass media systematically manufacture public consent for elite power and state violence,³ while Gerbner and Gross contend that prolonged media exposure cultivates social realities that normalise violence and shape public perceptions and behaviour.⁴

Indian mass media has historically embodied our composite cultural identity, serving as a vibrant canvas for secular pluralism and interfaith harmony. Films such as *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) portrayed Hindu, Muslim, and Christian protagonists as brothers united by shared humanity, reflecting the Nehruvian vision of a syncretic nation.⁵ However, an unmissable ideological shift in the Indian mass media can be undeniably detected. While not exclusively, but such shift is also accompanied with a rise in, and normalisation of anti-Muslim sentiments.

More recently, the production of mainstream, high-budget, and highly sensationalised movies in Bollywood have created a lasting effect on the Indian society. Notable characteristics of such works include exaggerated negative stereotypes about Muslims often blurring the lines between reality and fiction, revisioning and rewriting historical memory and, covert and overt conditioning.⁶ While the authors do not contest the underlying truth in such contents but critique the hyper-depiction and over-generalisation of the same. This includes continued villainisation and vilification of Muslims, especially Muslim men, by portraying them as inherently violent and beast-like, sexually insatiable and depraved, terrorist sympathisers.⁷

Additionally, refuelling and sustaining communal polarisation through factually contested and over-dramatised narratives of history through Bollywood movies like *The Kashmir Files* (2022), *The Taj Story* (2025) etc., has been observed lately.⁸ A report by the Centre for the Study of Organized Hate (CSOH) details how AI-generated imagery and content have emerged as a powerful new tool for advancing anti-Muslim and Islamophobic narratives within India's vast and highly active digital ecosystem.⁹ The casualisation of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments through Bollywood and Indian pop-culture has resulted in not just explicitly and physically violent incidents but also soft violence in the form of social, economic, political, and civil exclusion, and the 'othering' and dehumanisation of Muslims.¹⁰ The authors attempt at discussing how the existing legal framework in India is ineffective in curbing such rapidly spreading phenomena.

Role of Mass Media

With the ever-increasing use of digital platforms such sentiments only amplify uncontrollably. In this regard, X (formerly Twitter) operates as a substantial vector for amplifying anti-Muslim propaganda. The official BJP Assam handle (@BJP4Assam) is one such example. AI-generated videos such as Assam Without BJP portray a dystopian future of Muslim demographic takeover, streets filled with skullcaps, burqas, public beef slaughter, racking up millions of views before deletion amid backlash.¹¹ Doctored clips depict Congress leaders in Islamic attire conspiring with Pakistani flags, while explicit "No Mercy" imagery shows CM Himanta Biswa Sarma shooting Muslim figures, normalising violence as electoral strategy.¹² In fact, even the Supreme Court highlighted X's failure to moderate such content violating platform policies against hate speech.¹³ WhatsApp also functions as a closed-network multiplier, turbocharging these narratives. Viral forwards peddle fabricated love jihad clips, morphed stills from films like *The Kerala Story*, and pseudo-historical memes linking Muslim practices (e.g., prayers, attire) to existential threats. These untraceable chains evade moderation, flooding family groups and preceding documented mob lynchings, embedding Islamophobia in intimate digital spaces.

Moreover, YouTube's recommendation algorithms exacerbate this. Pseudo-historical channels echoing Sudarshan News style push temple reclamation and Mughal atrocities, often tied to trailers for *Chhaava* or *The Taj Story*. Viewers starting with film clips are algorithmically funnelled to extremist content. Studies confirm sharp Islamophobic amplification in India-specific feeds.¹⁴ OTT platforms enable complicity through selective curation. They host and boost Islamophobic shorts from these films while suppressing counter-narratives, fostering echo chambers. Government blocks for obscenity underscore inconsistent enforcement, allowing propaganda to permeate daily consumption.¹⁵ The legitimacy granted by endorsements and acknowledgements to these movies further expands the extent to which propaganda films have an effect on negative mass mobilisation. Consistently granting state or central tax exemptions on movies, while may not be making any significant impact economically, grants an official legitimacy, moral authorisation and validation.¹⁶

In the Indian context, significant legal gaps also persist in the regulation of third-party service providers, enabling the unchecked amplification of hateful cinema-related content on social media platforms. While the Information Technology Act, 2000 classifies social media companies, content hosts, recommendation engines, and cloud-based AI tools as ‘intermediaries’, the safe-harbour regime under Section 79 does not adequately differentiate between passive hosts and active third-party service providers that curate, recommend, monetise, or algorithmically amplify content. The due-diligence requirements under the IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 largely focus on post-facto takedowns and user complaints, rather than imposing a clear statutory obligation on platforms, content delivery networks, ad-tech services, or AI-based content generators to prevent the proactive circulation of communal or hateful cinematic narratives. As a result, third-party actors involved in editing, clipping, subtitling, synthetic media creation, and targeted distribution often fall into a grey regulatory zone, escaping both content certification norms under the Cinematograph Act, 1952 and direct criminal liability under the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023.

The illiberal emergence and rise of self-censorship by writers, creators, and filmmakers due to the many precedent-setting instances of direct state censorship, legal harassment, weaponisation of anti-Muslim sentiments and the ‘cancel culture’¹⁷ by prominent figures as well as the hyper-mobilisation, pledges for boycott and state-backed vigilante violence has caused mainstream media to be dominated by the divisive and communal movies.¹⁸ Major OTT and streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime have increasingly sidelined, shelved, or outright rejected projects perceived as diverging from prevailing dominant narratives. This is evident in the stagnation of films like Anurag Kashyap’s *Maximum City* (shelved) and Dibakar Banerjee’s *Tees* (2024), as well as in earlier instances of direct state intervention, such as the 2008 ban imposed by the Gujarat state government on Nandita Das’s *Firaaq* (2008), which explored the aftermath of the 2002 Godhra riots.¹⁹ The latest, most prominent incident of direct state censorship being the blocking of the Indian release of *The Voice of Hind Rajab* (2005), the Oscar-nominated film about the murder of a five-year old girl Hind in Gaza, by the Central Board of Film Certification due to potential negative effect on diplomatic relations.²⁰

Sahyog is a centralised content-takedown portal launched by India’s Ministry of Home Affairs that allows government and law-enforcement agencies to directly issue notices to online intermediaries for the removal of ‘unlawful’ content under Section 79(3)(b) of the Information Technology Act, 2000. Legal commentators and digital rights groups have criticised Sahyog as a parallel censorship mechanism, arguing that it enables large-scale content removals without the transparency, procedural safeguards, or judicial oversight mandated under Section 69A of the IT Act.²¹ Taken together, these instances point to a sustained pattern of institutional control and pressure on cinematic expression, shaping what themes are permitted to reach the public through mass media.

Conclusion

Dissent and counter-narratives are essential, especially in times of rising illiberalism, as they become vital archives of facts and reliable collective memory, when the society is being flooded with propaganda. The critically essential acknowledgement of the intense struggle between hegemonic forces in the media industry attempt to dominate and capture cultural narratives and production and the counter-hegemonic voices that persist remains significant consequentially. Despite their critical flaws, *Mulk* (2018) and *The Great Shamsuddin Family* (2025) remain important as imperfect yet sincere attempts by artists to affirm India's pluralistic ethos, even while operating within problematic tropes of Muslim patriotism and casual Islamophobia. More importantly, there needs to be a significant development in the legal framework to plug in the existing gaps, thus ensuring the spirit of dissent and inclusion in the democratic society we live in.

Endnotes

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