

# 'IN TIMES OF CRISIS, FOLLOWERS OF ONE TRUE GOD UNITE': SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE FORMATION OF ONLINE RELIGIOUS SILOS

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ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER / DOI: 10.20901/ms.10.19.7 / SUBMITTED: 11.04.2019.

**ABSTRACT** *This paper is based on a research study designed to explore how adolescents, in situations of political polarization, deploy online networks to articulate, negotiate, and enact their political and religious identities. Based on social media ethnography tracing the online engagements of 44 high school students over a period of eighteen months, and supplemented with in-depth interviews conducted in their village communities, this study explores why social media networks emerge as ideological niches frequented by students to enact their participation as members of their respective religious communities. It suggests that in situation of experienced political polarization and discrimination, students use social media affordances to replicate their offline socio-political and religious engagements onto their virtual spaces and in the process reinforce their radical religious identities.*

## KEYWORDS

SOCIAL MEDIA ETHNOGRAPHY, ONLINE RELIGIOUS SILOS, RADICAL RELIGIOSITY, ADOLESCENT STUDIES, INDIA, POLITICAL POLARIZATION

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## INTRODUCTION

Various countries in the world are witnessing a surge in the articulation of radical religious ideas through digital networks and online communication. In India, we are witnessing a ritual of discursive, audio-visual, and real time violence, practiced in and through the social media networks (Chaturvedi, 2016). Social media have emerged as an active vector for socializing individuals in an extremist ideology and/or radical religious ideas, through the creation of online religious silos (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). Young people are being socialized through various social institutions such as schools, communities, media, and local systems of governance (Banaji, 2016; Bhatia, 2017, 2018; Bhatia and Pathak-Shelat, 2019) to practice religious discrimination in their everyday interactions with people from a different religious community. Media engagements play a crucial role in enabling young individuals to negotiate with discourses and practices of discrimination thus shaping their everyday interactions in accordance with the dominant narratives prevalent in their societies (Bhatia and Pathak-Shelat, 2017).

Though there are studies which argue that social media allow individuals to transcend their ideological niches and explore alternate truth regimes (Mihailidis, 2014), in this paper, I argue that young individuals, in the absence of critical engagement skills, isolate themselves in one ideological niche and consume information which reinforce their religious prejudice (Mohamed, 2007). They create online communities and networks based on and limited to their offline socializing practices, consequently self-identifying with individuals who reinforce their ideology and perspectives about the religious other.

There is a significant body of literature arguing that young people are at a risk of operating in online echo chambers (Banaji, 2016; Livingstone, 2012) and how this online behaviour influences issues related to the securitization of the youth at the global level. In this study, I expand this theoretical argument based on my empirical findings to emphasize how the online interactions of young individuals are influenced by their offline lived experiences. Given this context, the article answers an overarching question: How do young individuals use social media as performative sites to enact their religious subjectivities?

To address this question, I conducted a social media ethnography and analyzed the lived realities of young individuals who are socialized in a discriminatory religious ideology. Conducting the social media ethnography allowed me to unpack the linkages between young people's online interactions and their offline commitments to their religious communities. Many studies of young people's use of the internet are restricted to a methodology which captures a snapshot of their online activities, *i.e.* what gets posted, tweeted, shared, and so on. This study, therefore, is an important way forward in the area of internet and youth studies because it proposes a methodological framework designed to understand how young people's online engagements share a mutually constitutive relation with their offline activities and experiences. The empirical evidence gathered helps explain why and how young people use their social media to articulate and enact their religious identities. The study also explains why young people fail to transcend the

ideological limitations imposed by their everyday politico-religious experiences. In the following sections, I argue that it is an absence of safe inter-faith dialogic spaces where young individuals can interact with members from different religious communities which compels them to use their social media networks to seek support of people who share views consistent with their opinions (Conway, 2006).

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND RADICAL RELIGIOSITY

In the recent times, a discriminatory religio-political discourse has gained momentum and propelled various political parties in India to use social networking sites to facilitate new and radical forms of political proselytization. Religion is used as the dominant modality to engender, articulate, and enact political participation with regard to electoral activities as well as everyday engagements in public life (Christiane, 2005). Communal violence and discrimination are, thus, mediated via online networks and operate under multiple logics of politics, education, and religion (Bhatia, 2017). The dominant political discourse circulated in and through social media uses religious discrimination as the *modus operandi* and initiates masses into a culture of silence where any argument against the hegemonic project of reinforcing the communal divide is crushed with online abuse and in some cases offline aggression (Cherian, 2016).

Many studies conducted in similar situations of political polarization in other countries (Weimann, 2015) indicate that adolescents are more susceptible and vulnerable to extremist content. In studies conducted on Islamic radicalization (Salem *et al.*, 2008; Yamaguchi, 2013), it was revealed that social networking platforms allow radical voices to engender "hypermedia seduction" via visual motifs and content rich with themes of graphic violence. When young individuals who have experienced situations of polarization participate in this hypermedia reality, the blatancy of the visual cues and vivid images invokes in them strong emotional and psychological responses as well as violent reactions. Also, the affordances of social networking platforms such as anonymity, unparalleled reach, unmonitored exchange and consumption of information, and intractability, among other things allow young individuals to freely articulate and express the radical ideas which are considered unacceptable in offline spaces inhabited by multiple and diverse voices (Weimann, 2010).

In these closed online communities, when young individuals are continuously exposed to a single narrative of religious discrimination, they start identifying themselves as religious monoliths. Also, in these online social networking communities, young people experience strong affective affiliations with others because, oftentimes, members draw from the same repertoire of interpretations and support each other (Postmes and Brunsting, 2002). Young people who participate in and through these online networks and communities operate within highly emotional environments and so are vulnerable. An expanding literature (Lea and Spears, 2003; Malthaner and Lindekilde, 2015) shows that online social networks that are constituted in and of a single dominant interpretive

frame and feed on discourse of religious prejudice exploit youth vulnerability. This phenomenon of influencing young individuals through online social networks is more pronounced among "lone actors" or young individuals who are struggling with the needs for belongingness and acceptance (Gill *et al.*, 2014).

Chaturvedi (2016) conducted a study to understand how social media networks are being used by political groups to promote the ideology of religious discrimination in India. Based on her findings, she argues that the materiality of online networking sites allows prejudiced voices, which are otherwise challenged by critical individuals in offline public spaces, to create closed communication enclaves and circulate information befitting their agenda unquestionably. This gives rise to online silos. Studies undertaken by scholars such as Mohamed (2007) and Warner (2010) in countries of the Global North such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Finland, and Australia, argue that social media advance engagement with and the circulation of extremist content. Online networking sites facilitate information circulation in bigger volumes and at larger speed, and in diverse formats especially the visual narratives compelling individuals to be invested emotionally. Due to this, it becomes easier for prejudiced or radical individuals to promote extremist ideas as the dominant discourse and mobilize public opinion (Tsfati and Weimann, 2002). They argue that various extremist groups use social media networks to publish hateful comments, propagating their discriminatory agenda to communities and individuals beyond their geographical reach (Pollock, 2006). These hateful comments constitute what is often theorized as "discursive violence" enacted in online spaces. Discursive violence is defined as violence inflicted on others who have a different ideology through use of words, visuals, and sounds. In other words, when individuals use derogatory language, hateful remarks, abuses, and violent memes online to silence diverse and/or liberal voices they are essentially enacting discursive violence.

Extending this line of inquiry, studies have analyzed the influence of radical online networks on adolescents (Biddle, 2015; Khalid and Leghari, 2014; Blackwood *et al.*, 2015). These studies claim that engaging in extremist content online is a consequence of marginalization experienced by the youth in their offline communities (Khalid and Leghari, 2014). In one such study, Biddle (2015) used experimental design to argue that young people who are more susceptible to the influence of extremist content lack critical skills to evaluate the credibility and bias of a given information source and often remain confined to a single interpretive frame of meaning making. Similarly, a study conducted by Blackwood *et al.* (2015) argues that adolescents raised in situations of political instability and marginalization are vulnerable to radical voices online because engaging with extremist ideas anonymously allows them to express their grievances and give meaning to their lived realities.

Although several studies have been conducted to understand how a discriminatory ideology is perpetuated in and through online networks, most studies focus on large scale commercial online networks. These studies overlook cloaked social media spaces where more information can be revealed about engagement of adolescents with extremist

content and radical voices. Conducting research linking social media to offline experiences of discrimination requires infiltration of some kind to get access to encrypted and closed-access spaces or proxy sites such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Hangouts, and the like. In order to access these personal online spaces of networking and communication, researchers must adopt an ethnographic approach and immerse themselves in the lived realities of young individuals, both online and offline.

In this paper, therefore, I use social media ethnography to study high school students in three villages of Gujarat, belonging to two religious communities, *i.e.* Hindus and Muslims, and explore how their social media engagements facilitate the formation of radical religious identities among them. An ethnographic immersion in their social media networks reveals how their media engagements exacerbate the formation of politico-religious silos wherein they acquire radical religious identities. Based on social media ethnography tracing the online engagements of 49 high school students over a period of eighteen months, and supplemented with in-depth interviews conducted in their village communities, this study examines how adolescents negotiate their politico-religious identities in and through their social media networks.

## ABOUT THE STUDY

This paper is based on a research study designed to explore how adolescents, in situations of political polarization, use social media networks to enact their political and religious identities. Situations of political polarization can be experienced at two levels: first, at the societal level where the discourses and practices used by political groups reinforce a [religious] discriminatory ideology informed by preferences diverging towards ideological poles (Wojcieszak, 2015; Abrams and Fiorina, 2012); second, at the individual level where partisans view each other as adversaries and develop identities, religious and civic, based on the imagined binaries such as us versus them, self versus the other, victim versus the perpetrator (Pratt, 2015). According to Iyengar *et al.* (2012), political polarization at the individual level operates within the affective realm as it influences ways in which individuals relate to and behave with the demonized [religious] other. Such studies argue that affective polarization has increased with the advent of online networks through which negative remarks imputed on the other are circulated at a faster speed and reach a larger audience (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). I build on these ideas to conceptualize political polarization as everyday rituals of participation in public life wherein individuals enact their stake in reinforcing the dominant ideology of religious discrimination at the societal level. This is done through the everyday "practices of microaggression" (Bhatia and Pathak-Shelat, 2019), involving but not limited to violating, abusing, and dehumanizing the religious other in their immediate offline communities.

The young people who participated in this research belong to the rural areas of Gujarat, the westernmost state in India. Through community engagements, local media narratives, education, and political systems of governance, they are raised in an ideology of religious

discrimination. Data detailing how they are socialized as religious subjects have been published in previous studies (Bhatia, 2017, 2018; Bhatia and Pathak-Shelat, 2017, 2019). Students enact this ideology of religious discrimination by practicing micro-aggression towards the religious other. These experiences of enacting and facing discrimination in the everyday realities often manifest in their online social networks. Also, the access to and participation in their online social groups is based on religious identities and often include members from their offline religious communities. In these online groups, they find it easier to articulate their ideas of religious discrimination without accounting for the authenticity or validity of the discourses they engage in.

In this research, the offline spaces of my student-participants include their village communities, religious organizations, media and communication technologies, and education institutions. I worked in the role of a media educator with 180 school students in these villages over a period of 22 months, starting mid- August 2016. During this phase, I designed an ethnographic research to draw narratives from their communities on how young individuals are socialized within a discriminatory ideology of religious belonging. I explored their how they engage with different forms of media technologies and narratives to identify the ways and means through which they were socialized to discriminate against the religious other. For this purpose, I used ethnographic methods such as in-depth interviews of students and village residents and observation schedules.

The young children from these three villages who constitute the sample of the study range in the age group of 11-14 years, attend classes in a Gujarati medium school, *i.e.* the only municipal primary school in these three villages, and lack English language competencies, *i.e.* they cannot read, write, or speak in English. At the outset, I provided a detailed description of my research to all the students in grade nine, eight, and seven and invited all of them to participate. For this study, I recruited students from the school who volunteered to participate in this research and were willing to add me to their online social groups on WhatsApp and Facebook. In all, 44 students – 34 boys and 10 girls, agreed to participate. They added me on the different social media groups they frequented or were a member of and towards the end of the induction phase I was a part of 30 social media groups. There was a lot of overlap between these groups with regard to both the content that was circulated and the individuals who were identified as group members. Table 1 and 2 outline the key features of the student-participants.

Table 1. **Gender and Age**

Male	77%
Female	33%
12-11 years old	20%
11-13 years old	52%
13-14 years old	28%

Table 2. Religion and Languages spoken in offline and online spaces

<b>Religion</b>	
Hindu	53%
Muslim	47%
<b>Language</b>	
Hindi	18%
Gujarati	55%
Urdu-Gujarati	27%

I also requested the student-participants to seek a written permission from their parents allowing them to participate in the study and give interviews. Some students requested me to brief their parents about the research and I visited their homes to carry out the process. Subsequently, I conducted interviews with 39 students who volunteered to participate in this study. For this study, the data collection phase (observations and interviews) started in September 2017 and continued for a period of eighteen months. I prepared a semi-structured interview-schedule including open-ended questions related to their routines, interactions at school, media environments, and family relations. Extensive observation notes were prepared to analyze when, where, and how students articulated, enacted, and reinforced their religious identities. Observation was conducted at several sites including classrooms, their houses, playgrounds, community centres, village lanes, and other hang-out spaces in the villages. The observation schedule was constructed to examine interpersonal relations among students from different religious communities. The schedule included guidelines to observe how adolescents from the two religious communities interacted with and referred to each other. I also observed the role of adults and village residents in this process. Additionally, I used the observation schedule to examine how adolescents engaged with media technologies and narratives – which media they had access to, whether the access was independent or regulated by adults, how they interpreted the media narratives, who helped them understand media texts, and so on. Finally, I also used observation as a method to examine adolescents' engagement on social media platforms – do they have access to Facebook and WhatsApp? What do they consume and circulate through these networks? Why and how do they use social media to enact their religious identities?

In order to examine their online engagements, I requested my student-participants to add me to their social media networks on Facebook and WhatsApp. In time, I was added onto their social media accounts and groups and I started observing and examining how young people enact their religious identities online. I could see linkages between their offline socialization as religious subjects and their online engagements with radical discourses. I, therefore, decided to conduct a social media ethnography (Hobart, 2010) to allow myself to immerse in their digital life. Social media ethnography is one of the most dynamic methodologies which allow researchers to combine participant interviews

with relevant online material by following or actively participating in their social media platforms and online communities (Postill, 2010). To trace how social media ethnography emerged as a useful research methodology, it is important to acknowledge the work of scholars such as Baym and Markham (2009), Hine (2008), and Hobart (2010), who argued that the internet is the new emerging site of research and changes the way we understand and conduct qualitative inquiry. These scholars wrote about the Web 1.0 context, very different from the social media platforms we discuss in this paper. Their analysis, therefore, focused on conducting an ethnography of internet examining how the internet allows some communities and cultures to flourish in virtual spaces (Kozinets, 2010). With the advent of social media, there was a felt need to unpack how social relations between individuals were emerging in and through the online networks. This strand of research also focused on understanding how the socialities in the social media spaces between individuals were influenced by their offline lived experiences. Postill and Pink (2012), therefore, developed social media ethnography as a research methodology to conceptualize how ethnographic places which are traceable on the web connect with offline realities of individuals participating in the social media spaces and networks. This methodology can be deployed to examine how linkages between online and offline practices can shape constitution of social groups and the practices they engage in together.

In this research, the online communities of my student-participants consist of members who seek to identify and define public issues based on their religious identities and collaborate with their group members to reinforce radical ideas – often contextualizing these within the larger political milieu of their villages, cities, states, and the country. Examining their discursive participation in their online social communities “involves embracing online ethnography as a textual practice and as a lived craft, and destabilizes the ethnographic reliance on sustained presence in a bound field site,” which is exclusively online or offline (Hine, 2000: 43). Online discursive enactment of social identities implicates the physical as well as digital realities of individuals (Hine, 2008; Postill, 2010) and so the focus of this study is to bind together the range of social media discourses on religious discrimination with associated offline contexts of the participants, described in their interviews.

I designed an observation schedule to monitor their social media engagements and prepared extensive notes details issues such as the nature of their social media networks, the kinds of discussions they participated in, the news and/or updates they shared via social media, the kinds of groups (WhatsApp and Facebook) they engaged with, their online friend list, and so on. I also prepared an observation schedule analyzing their social media habits addressing questions such as- Did they check the authenticity of the information before circulating it? How frequently did they post and/or share political and religious content? How often did they promote discriminatory content either by sharing it or consuming it?

These observations were substantiated with in-depth interviews conducted with 44 students to understand how they use social media as a performative site to practice,



enact, and reinforce their religious subjectivity. Two rounds of interviews were conducted – first, to understand how they experience and practice their religious identities both on/offline; second, to examine if their social media engagements reinforce or challenge the ideology of religious discrimination prevalent in their communities. Each interview lasted for approximately fifty minutes and was conducted in Gujarati. Interviews were transcribed in Gujarati and later translated into English. The pre-publication audio-video tapes and transcripts were shared with the student-participants and their families for respondent validation.

Data were added into the NVivo software program and coded by observations and responses. Data were then analyzed using descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013) to understand how their offline communicative ecologies socialized them within a discriminatory ideology. I also analyzed how social media networks provided adolescents with closed and regulated spaces wherein their prejudice against the religious other was reinforced by members who share the same ideology. On these social media platforms, the entry-exit of alternative narratives that can challenge the validity of their radical discourse is strictly restricted. Three themes emerged from this analysis, *i.e.* using social media affordances to create religious silos, using anonymity to discursively violate the “religious other”, and expressing radical religiosity in offline spaces.

## USING SOCIAL MEDIA AFFORDANCES TO CREATE RELIGIOUS SILOS

Based on the findings, I argue that offline experiences of discrimination and violence translate into the use of social media networks to legitimize adolescents’ radical ideas and behaviour. Stories from village neighbourhoods, informal and domestic communication spaces, and the local media narratives they consume dovetail into their online engagements and participation. When these young students, for instance, are exposed to anti-minority discourse circulating their mediascapes, they interpret it from within the meaning-making frames endowed upon them through the socialization they receive in their local communities. For instance, many young people in these villages watch and circulate WhatsApp videos related to lynching of the members of religious (and/or caste) minorities in India. When young people watch these videos under adult supervision, they interpret the act of lynching based on what their community members and peer groups suggest. As a result, when young people in Hindu households witness the lynching of Muslims they tend to interpret this incident as “called for” by the Muslim community. Ravi, a Hindu student, explains, “The Muslims kill cows – our mothers. They have asked for the beating. How dare they harm the animal we worship!”

On the other hand, Muslim students interpret this incident as a violent act designed to oppress Muslims in India. In doing so, they often abuse the entire Hindu community and consider the all Hindu residents in their villages as perpetrators.

There, young students often use their social media platforms to seek information and content consistent with their views to bolster their radical claims and religious prejudice. This creates online religious silos. Many student-participants in the research agreed that instead of seeking alternative narratives and perspectives, they use social media networks to support their arguments and find information to "prove others wrong". Nusheen, a 14-year-old Muslim student, explains:

*I remember reading about the Muslim traders' being lynched to death over suspicions that they possessed beef. I felt so angry and scared at the same time. My father is a butcher and owns a meat shop... My first thought was "Is he safe?" In such times of anxiety, I talk to my Muslim friends online through WhatsApp and Facebook. I feel safe with them. Also, they understand my anger. When I talk to them I realize it is not our fault; they are evil!*

Like Nusheen, many other student-participants claimed that the national anti-minority discourse perpetuated their communication channels and texts through the local news organizations and the informal conversations emerging from their community engagements in the villages. Also, these discourses are interpreted from within the frame of religio-political socialization they receive in their villages.

Let us take the example of Rahim, a 14-year-old Muslim boy, who is a member of four WhatsApp groups, i.e. one family group, two groups of Muslim community male friends, and one group consisting of his cousins. All these groups include members only from the Muslim community and they often share political discourse through these networks. These online social communities are also used to discuss issues pertaining the Hindu-Muslim relations in the villages such as the dispute on who can use the grounds surrounding the temple, how girls from the Hindu families are losing their values because they are being encouraged to pursue higher studies, how Muslim boys should not be allowed to mingle with Hindu girls, and how Muslims are richer and making progress despite the political situation due to their faith in *Allah*. Sometimes, during these conversations in WhatsApp groups, Hindu villagers were referred to as *Kafir*, *Haraam*, *Mushrikun*, *Takfir*, *Murtad*, and so on, all alluding to a person who refuses to accept the Islamic teachings and the one true God. Rahim explains:

*What we see in our societies, we discuss on these groups. When we didn't have phones and WhatsApp, we used to stand in the village lanes to talk. Now, we also do it over WhatsApp. It is easier to just forward a video to explain your point... and there are so many available to show that everyone wants to harass us [Muslims]. Talk to the village elders... they will tell you how Muslims have always suffered.*

As is evident, their online engagements are influenced by their offline religious commitments as they learn to use social media to strengthen the sense of belongingness among their religious community. The feeling of solidarity resulting from such social media engagements is "negative" for it builds the community against the imagined religious other who is constructed as a merciless and violent deviant. Also, for bringing this constructed perpetrator into existence, community members use discursive violence as a modality around which the identity of the religious other is articulated.

<sup>1</sup> Some Muslim traders who transport and sell meat in Gujarat have been lynched on the suspicion that they trade beef, a product which is banned in the state of Gujarat (Banaji, 2018).

When young individuals interact with the religious other in this imagined realm of experience defined by violent discourse and an uncritical interpretation of the socio-political realities, the process engenders animosity and hatred among members from different religious communities.

According to my student-respondents, the imagined realm of experience in social media communities shield the members from external scrutiny and sanctions being imposed in their offline spaces either due to their religious or gender identities (Sageman, 2004). Social media allow young individuals to enact their participation remotely. In other words, the online space enables their virtual selves to be invested in the construction of reality; in the absence of real time physical interaction amongst each other, it isolates them further from their local neighbourhoods where the prevailing reality is more diverse and interspersed with the presence of the religious deviant (Hussain and Saltman, 2014). Let us take the example of Pratik who is an 11-year-old Hindu boy. He is a member of four WhatsApp groups and is very active on Facebook. He explains,

*I don't send friend requests to my classmates who are Muslims. I share many things which are in favour of the Hindus... I am a proud Hindu. I don't want to hurt them. Also, they will never like my posts and photos. Why add them to my Facebook? Or talk to them on WhatsApp?*

As is evident, their online interactions, though emerging from their offline routines, reinforce their hardliner thinking and pull them away from the realities in their local communities. Let's take another example of Sunil, a 12-year-old Hindu student, who identifies himself as a proud member of the Thakor caste. He has read about cases of lynching and actively participates in discussions on "How to save cows and the Hindu religion from the dictates of *Musalman*?" through his social media networks. He is a member of two WhatsApp groups and also actively engages with his community friends through Facebook Messenger. Sahil, participating in the discussion related to the lynching of a Muslim man from Rajasthan on the suspicion that he possessed cow meat<sup>2</sup>, wrote in his WhatsApp group,

*I have observed this in our villages too. Hindus will have to punish them because Musalmans steal our cows. The Bharwads and Rabaris in the neighbouring villages have faced this problem because of the mias<sup>3</sup>. They steal their cows, kill them, and sell the meat.*

Sahil reads the regional newspapers and watches the local news channel. These regional media channels clearly articulate their ideology of religious discrimination and cater to the populist discourse (Bhatia, 2017; Sonwalkar, 2006). Also, Sahil's WhatsApp profile photo is the image of a Hindu god, *Hanuman*, with the slogan "One *Musalman* said that this photo of a Hindu god won't even get 5000 shares. Let us see how many Ram (Hindu) *Bakhts* (Believers) are there!" Also, Sahil uses his privacy settings to ensure that only his friends on WhatsApp, i.e. those he has added in his phone book, can see this display photo. He explains, "I make sure I don't add these Muslim people in my phonebook. I don't

<sup>2</sup> For more details read the article, "Alwar lynching: Pehlu Khan, killed by cow vigilantes, was no cattle smuggler". (<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/alwar-lynching-pehlu-khan-killed-by-cow-vigilantes-was-no-cattle-smuggler/story-oHFwjT3e8R8kjn396KEG00.html>)

<sup>3</sup> A slang used for Muslims

want them to know what I feel or else they will start a discussion and I am bored of proving them wrong.”

According to Sahil, online social media enable him and his Hindu friends to create an orchestrated public space where Muslims are not recognized as legitimate participants and thus they have no right to voice their concerns, ideas, and opinions. Online social networks, therefore, enable young individuals with extremist ideas to animate a society and an experience that lies beyond the secular obligations of the country and where the “religious other” is not recognized as a stakeholder in the “meaning-making process influencing the politics of truth in the society” (Power, 2012). This practice of creating online religious silos permits adolescents to design a public sphere based on the politics of exclusion wherein the “religious other” is denied the right to speak, participate, and enact their differences.

It is important to note here that the social media offer several affordances such as the easy entry and exist mechanisms, decentralized participation and networks (Awan, 2007), and uncritical and/or anonymous public engagements in online social communities. Young people rely on these affordances to curate experiences and an imagined public sphere wherein they have the institutional authority, by the manner of being the online group admin, to restrict, deny, and erase differences, personified in the religious other. When Sahil and his friends create a religious silo and engage with political issues in their social media groups, for instance, they present their narrative as the “truth” and reinforce it continuously; the cultural and religious other is disrespected and their values and identities are interpreted as deviant in the dominant culture.

In the next section, I discuss how this engagement with radical ideas is reinforced and translates into discursive violence inflicted on the religious other through social media platforms.

## **USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO INFLICT DISCURSIVE VIOLENCE UPON THE “RELIGIOUS OTHER”**

Though it is argued that online conversations and dialogues shield the participants from the world out there that is harsher, more conflict-ridden, antagonistic, and not always fair (Arntfield, 2015), through this study I claim otherwise. My student-participants use their social media platforms to hurl discursive abuses towards the religious other. Some of the participants claimed that they use their social media networks to identify people who criticize their religious practices and/or political opinions and create fake Facebook pages to hurl abuses at them. On social media platforms, most of the participants claim to be “freer”, implying that they are more abusive and harsh while articulating their religious identities.

Rafiq, is a 14-year-old Muslim boy, who claims to be “addicted to social media”. When interviewed, he eagerly sent me a friend request on Facebook and added me to his friend

list. On his timeline, many of his Muslim friends share links to news stories criticizing the Hindus and initiate discussions motivated by their religious prejudice. They shared examples of how they belittle Hindus on various public posts and identify themselves as members of an "ideological army" created to protect their Muslim brotherhood. Kuchiya, an eleven-year-old Muslim boy who regularly comments on Rafiq's timeline, once posted a video made by a local news channel regarding the ban imposed on Muslim youth, restricting them from entering Garba grounds<sup>4</sup>. In the comment thread of this post he wrote, "They [Hindus] think we are interested in being friends with them. In our families, we aren't even allowed to talk to Hindus – they are so dirty and lesser humans. I wish I had the power to teach them a lesson!" To this, his other friends responded with a string of violent abuses hurled towards the imagined Hindu other. The construction and use of these abuses insert in the discursive space shared by Hindus-Muslims an intentionality to defy, violate, and defile the human body of the 'religious other' which is situated in offline sites. Though online discursive violence in the form of abuses and bullying does not always translate into offline acts of aggression, the threat inherent in the discursive act of desecrating the religious identity embedded in the virtual self of the "religious other" gives the abusers a sense of power over them and their community.

In readings of collective violence, dismantling the human body is seen as a sign of dishonouring and/or defiling the entire religious community (Sarkar, 2002). Sapna, a 12-year-old Hindu girl, identifies herself as an "active user" of WhatsApp and Facebook and has many groups on these social media platforms. She explains how abusing the imagined religious other through social media helps her attack the entire community,

*On social media groups it is easier to show the Momin community their true place... they are the weaker community and the foreigners. I sometimes use my fake Facebook profile to join such comment sections where Hindus from everywhere are seeking our support in showing Muslims their true place.*

As is evident from this conversation, in identifying a common and imagined enemy in the "religious other" and attacking this enemy, student-participants experience a sense of solidarity and belongingness. The discursive practices of violating the "other" enable young individuals to be invested in an embodied experience of discriminating and by that virtue dehumanizing the religious other. According to Rakesh, a 14-year-old Hindu student, the anonymity of social media is a "blessing" for it allows the Hindus to express their raw potential without the fear of being recognized. When I asked why people like him experience a sense of fear in expressing their dislike towards Muslims in their local neighbourhoods he explained,

*We have to work with these momins every day. We work together in farms, schools, and villages. If we abuse them for who they are and they know we don't like them, the work will suffer and then our family income will be less. That doesn't mean that they are good people. On social media you can actually tell them who they are, their true worth as the lesser, unreliable, and selfish people.*

<sup>4</sup> For more details read, "Gujarat: Muslims barred from garba events in Bharuch." <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/gujarat-muslims-barred-from-garba-events-in-bharuch-3041473/>

As is evident, social media are used by the student-participants to anonymously wage a discursive war with the religious other and translate their radical ideas into discursive activities in which members of their community can participate.

Ruksana, a 14-year-old Muslim girl, feels that when she actually writes a comment criticizing and calling out the faults among the Hindu community or sends her support in the form of a message to a Muslim friend who is being abused by the Hindu trolls, she experiences a sense of accomplishment. She says,

*When you actually write a comment that can silence the Hindus who are abusive and mean, you feel as if you are actually supporting your people [religious community]. Through social media, I often extend support to my community members either by liking their comments/posts or by defending my community in my comments from the [religious] abuses hurled at its members.*

Like Ruksana, many student-participants agree that engaging in and through social media and posting comments against the religious other help them experience a sense of solidarity among their offline local neighbourhoods. Though they do it in and through words and in cyberspace, the sense of belongingness dovetails into their offline commitments and increases their bonding within their offline religious communities. Many researchers (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Busher, 2015) have identified and even measured a "sense of virtual community belongingness" among young individuals who see validation in and through their enactment of affective affiliation with their community members on social media networks.

These online engagements sometimes feed into reinforcing their aggressive behaviour towards the religious other in offline spaces such as their classrooms, village lanes, market places, and so on. In the next section, I explore how students use online communicative texts of religious discrimination to validate their sense of hatred towards their classmates belonging to a different religious community.

## EXPRESSING RADICAL RELIGIOSITY IN OFFLINE SPACES

Based on my research findings, I argue that the feeling of solidarity experienced in the virtual religious silos can compel young individuals to sever their ties with the religious other in their offline spaces, thus, making them averse to commonplace diversity existing in their local neighbourhoods. For instance, Zabeen, a 13-year-old Muslim student, finds her local neighbourhoods unfriendly and extremely formal. She explains,

*In the village lanes, if I come across a Hindu classmate I have to act nice. I have to greet her or else the community members will think I am 'katar'<sup>5</sup>. It is not as if I don't want to smile and greet them ever. I just don't like staying with them in close proximity. Also, if I wear a hijab and walk through a Hindu neighbourhood I feel strange; maybe a little scared. I wish we could copy [replicate] our social media groups here in the villages. Lock them out!*

<sup>5</sup> *Katar* is a word in Hindi/Gujarati language which is used to describe a person who has rigid religious views and thus refuses to even interact with the "other".

When I probed her further to find out if she tries to limit her interactions with her Hindu classmates in the school as she does on her social media she said,

*Yes. I try very hard. In the classes, for instance, we – Muslim girls, sit together in the last three rows. It helps. If you sit with the Hindu girls they make you feel as if you are impure. Also you can't bring chicken<sup>6</sup> in your tiffin boxes because the Hindu girls then start making faces and all.*

Zabeen, Mahin, Ashiyana, and other Muslim girls in grade 8 have a WhatsApp group where they share and discuss classroom assignments and academic issues. They started replicating their classroom groups on their social media platforms. As a result of the politics of exclusion where Hindu classmates are neither invited nor feel welcomed to participate in collaborative learning processes, the constructed reality is constituted of a single truth. Offline religious silos are replicated into online learning spaces so that they never get an opportunity to reconcile their aspirations and interpretations with the experiences and expectations of the religious other.

In one such learning situation, while they sat reading from the history textbook, a discussion was initiated on the rule of the Mughals<sup>7</sup> in the Indian-subcontinent. During classroom discussions, students were hesitant to participate and refused to voice their understanding of the issue. After the class, however, Hindu and Muslims students withdrew into their groups on the playground and started discussing and debating this issue. While the group of Hindu students identified the Mughal emperors as “invaders, prosecutors, cruel, barbaric, and plunderers”, the Muslim students elaborated on how the Mughal emperors contributed towards strengthening the art, culture, architecture, and governance in India. In these in-group discussions, students often pulled out their mobile phones to extract information related to this issue. Referring to one such article describing how the Maharashtra government was trying to delete the discussion regarding the Mughal period from the primary school history textbooks, Manoj, a 13-year-old Hindu boy said,

*The government knows that they were cruel and the invaders. Why study them. Just yesterday, my uncle shared a video on our family WhatsApp group in which there was detailed information on how Muslims want to convert the entire world. That is not happening! Look at our classmates; they were so upset when the teacher said that Aurangzeb was cruel and vicious. Haven't you seen [the movie] Padmavat!<sup>8</sup>*

There is a constant exchange between the online engagements in the virtual religious silos and the offline experience of the students in these villages. The online interactions, resource, and engagements are used by young individuals to justify and validate their prejudice towards the “religious other” so that in and through their discourse they reinforce the negative representations of the other pervading the societal fabric.

<sup>6</sup> Most of the Hindu residents in these villages are vegetarians. They find it difficult to share the dining space with their Muslim classmates because Muslims eat non-vegetarian food items.

<sup>7</sup> Mughals represent the Muslims in India; in the current climate of political polarization, the Muslims are the “other” who do not fit into the right-wing populist idea of the nation. For more details read “No Mughals in Maharashtra” by Sarah Farooqui (<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/maharashtra-government-history-textbooks-no-mughals-muslim-rulers-4805837/>)

<sup>8</sup> Padmavat is Bollywood movie in which the Muslim ruler Khilji is represented as the most cruel and barbaric emperor while his enemy, the Rajput king Ratnasimha, is portrayed as extremely virtuous and kind. These representations in popular culture often reinforce the discriminatory ideology that Islam is a violent religion.

There were, however, some student-participants who acknowledged the role of social media and online interactions in reinforcing the communal divide between Hindus and Muslims in their villages. According to Sumit, a 14-year-old Hindu student, social media create an unreal world where the divide between the religious communities is impenetrable and irreconcilable. He explains,

*On social media one can control almost everything [who they talk to, what they talk about and hear, who gets to connect with us]. The real world is not that rigid, or is it? I mean there are differences between Hindus and Muslims in our villages but we also live together, talk, and laugh. We work together; sometimes we reach out to our neighbours to ask for sugar and salt!*

Sumit and other student-participants emphasize the orchestrated nature of social media groups wherein negotiations with political and religious issues are contained within the dominant interpretive frame reifying the naturalized power dynamics between Hindus and Muslims. The ease with which young individuals can mobilize people to support their ideology of religious discrimination plays a crucial role in drawing young individuals' attention away from lived experiences of co-existence in their own communities. On the social media groups, young individuals operate in a highly decentralized realm where the dynamics of interactions are extremely selective and controlled. As a result of this, young individuals do not have to negotiate with differences or participate in deliberative dialogues to address differences. Ravida, a 13-year-old Muslim girl, feels that this engenders unrealistic expectations among young individuals to create a society that is "free of differences". This aspiration was evident through the interviews conducted with student-participants wherein they claim that their version of an ideal society/community entails a place constituted of and governed by the rituals and expectations of their religious community. Nishant, a 12-year-old Hindu boy, expects that the access to the common public grounds around the Ram temple in the village is restricted to the Hindus because if Muslim children occupy this space, they will pollute its sanctity. Social media allow them to imagine a community where the religious other can be pushed to the margins and be invisibilized from the public sphere. It instills in them a negative aspiration to strive for a homogenous community which is devoid of religious differences. In an attempt to create this imagined society, young individuals often draw inwards towards their respective religious communities while discrediting their everyday engagements with the religious other in their local neighbourhoods as mere obligations.

Participation in these online religious silos, however, intensifies the communal divide between these two communities and reinforces the dominant rationality of religious discrimination.

## CONCLUSION

This paper suggests that in situations of political polarization and religious discrimination in societies, young individuals use social media to create and inhabit religious silos. Young individuals experience a sense of solidarity in these online groups



as members share in the same ideology and often exchange views, information, and interpretations which are consistent with the dominant ideology of religious discrimination. For young people who are placed in situations of political polarization and have to constantly negotiate with power structures to articulate and enact their identities, the sense of security extended by their virtual communities act as a “fleece blanket” against the expectations of a polarized world (Busher, 2015). Based on the empirical findings presented in this study, I argue that adolescents use social media networks to engage with co-religionists who reinforce and validate their religious world views and biases. They created enclosed and highly regulated online sites through social media which can be accessed only by those individuals who support their ideology of religious discrimination and/prejudice. This helps young individuals experience a sense of security and belongingness online as they struggle with the lived experiences of discrimination in their offline spaces.

Social media allow young individuals to construct an “imagined reality” where differences are obliterated and a normalized society based on a single “regime of truth and practice” is created. Invisibilizing differences in and through these online religious silos occurs in the practice of discursively violating the “other”. Many student-participants in this study claimed that the affordances of social media platforms and networks encouraged them to enact their religious identities in and through the use of discursive violence. Social media are characterised by technical affordances such as easy entry and exit, anonymity, interactivity, ease in production and circulation, and so on. These online platforms are highly decentralized and so used by young individuals to create online communities and networks where they can articulate their religious identity in isolation of the existing religious differences prevailing in the real offline spaces. Social media grant them a discursive field where they can be hateful, can hurl abuses, spread rumours, circulate messages designed to hurt the sentiments of a religious community, and so on, without being held accountable for their actions.

Young individuals, who use discursive violence to extend support to their religious community and its members online, undergo an embodied experience of discriminating against people based on their religious identities. In and through these online articulations, young individuals gather discursive support for their ideas which then, sometimes, manifest in the form of everyday practices of discrimination enacted in their offline communities (Salem *et al.*, 2008).

For these young individuals, social media provide new and more efficient channels, resources, and affordances to articulate their religious identities as experiences in solidarity building by means of discursively violating and excluding the other.

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## „U VRIJEME KRIZE, SLJEDBENICI JEDINOG PRAVOG BOGA, UJEDINITE SE“: DRUŠTVENI MEDIJI I FORMIRANJE ONLINE RELIGIOZNIH SILOSA

Kiran Vinod Bhatia

**SAŽETAK** Rad se temelji na istraživanju koje ispituje kako adolescenti, u situacijama političke polariziranosti, razvijaju online zajednice da bi iznijeli, obrazložili i branili svoje političke i religijske identitete. Polazeći od etnografije društvenih medija, praćenjem online uključenosti 44 srednjoškolska učenika tijekom osamnaest mjeseci te provođenjem dubinskih intervjua u njihovim seoskim zajednicama, istraživanje nastoji odgovoriti na pitanje zašto se društvene mreže javljaju kao ideološke niše učenika gdje pokazuju svoju uključenost kao članovi određenih religijskih zajednica. To sugerira da u situacijama u kojima su iskusili političku polarizaciju i diskriminaciju učenici koriste pogodnosti društvenih medija da ponove svoj offline društveno-politički i religijski angažman u virtualnim prostorima te da u tome procesu osnaže svoj radikalni religijski identitet.

### KLJUČNE RIJEČI

ETNOGRAFIJA DRUŠTVENIH MEDIJA, ONLINE RELIGIOZNI SILOSI, RADIKALNA RELIGIOZNOST, ADOLESCENTSKE STUDIJE, INDIJA, POLITIČKA POLARIZACIJA

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