

Misinformation in India about Communal Violence in Bangladesh: Its Implications

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Source: The Quint

Introduction

The proliferation of misinformation dissemination in this modern age has become a significant challenge for societies worldwide. In recent years, the rise of social media and digital platforms has transformed the landscape of information dissemination and made it easier for false or misleading narratives to gain traction. Countries like India and Bangladesh which have a complex relationship with shared cultural affinities and economic ties, at the same time have a history of

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communal tensions, which have been one of the sources of conflict.² Misinformation about communal violence in Bangladesh by targeting religious minorities has been a recurring issue that reverberates in India, where religious sentiments can be easily inflamed.

Just after the revolutionary movement in August 2024, Bangladesh witnessed a significant outbreak of vandalism and violence against the people of all religions especially groups of religious minorities by a particular extremist group led by the Hasina regime. As news of these events reached India, they were quickly sensationalized and distorted through various digital channels. Fake news stories and manipulated images depicting extreme forms of religious violence and vandalism particularly against Hindu communities spread like wildfire across social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter. These narratives often exaggerated the scale and severity of the violence, portraying it as a large-scale, organized assault on Bangladeshi Hindus by extremist groups.³ In reality, the situation was different than the incendiary portrayals circulated in online and news medias.

The spread of this misinformation had far-reaching consequences. In India, it led to heightened communal tensions, with some communities feeling under siege or compelled to retaliate. Politically, it became a tool for various actors to mobilize support and justify hardline stances. Diplomatic relations between India and Bangladesh have been strained too, as the misinformation created a false narrative of state-sponsored or widespread communal violence in Bangladesh.⁴ This misinformation must be stopped immediately to prevent further violence and worsening the divide between Bangladesh and India.

Historical and Modern Context of India-Bangladesh Relations

The historical communal tensions between India and Bangladesh are rooted in the complex and often violent history of the Indian subcontinent, particularly during and after the Partition of British

² 'Bangladesh-India Relations: An Increasingly Complicated Friendship | CGS'. Accessed 31 August 2024. <https://cgs-bd.com/article/21313/Bangladesh-India-Relations--An-Increasingly-Complicated-Friendship>.

³ Dhaka Tribune. 'Every Act of Vandalism Is One Too Many'. Accessed 31 August 2024. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/354568/every-act-of-vandalism-is-one-too-many>.

⁴ Rahman, Zillur. 'Misinformation Campaigns and the Future of Bangladesh-India Relations'. The Daily Star, 11 August 2024. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/misinformation-campaigns-and-the-future-bangladesh-india-relations-3674626>.

India in 1947. This event not only redrew the political boundaries but also set the stage for deep-seated religious divisions that continue to influence the relationship between India and Bangladesh.⁵

The Partition of British India into the independent dominions of India and Pakistan was marked by large-scale communal violence, with an estimated 10 to 15 million people displaced and up to two million killed. The division was along religious lines, with India becoming a predominantly Hindu state and Pakistan (comprising West Pakistan, current Pakistan, and East Pakistan, current Bangladesh) a Muslim-majority state. The communal violence during Partition led to a deep mistrust between religious communities, particularly between Hindus and Muslims, which has persisted across generations.⁶



Partition of India

Source: britannica.com

Bangladesh's war of independence from Pakistan in 1971, supported by India, led to the emergence of Bangladesh as a secular state with a significant Hindu minority. However, the years following independence saw periodic violence and discrimination against Hindus and other religious

⁵ 'Partition of India - Wikipedia'. Accessed 31 August 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partition_of_India.

⁶ Kulik, R. M. "Partition of India." Encyclopedia Britannica, August 16, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Partition-of-India>.

minorities in Bangladesh. This violence has often been driven by political instability, social tensions, and the rise of religious extremism within Bangladesh.⁷ For instance, in the early 1990s, following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in India by Hindu nationalists, there were retaliatory attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh.⁸ Such events underscore how communal issues in one country can have immediate repercussions in the other, fueling mistrust and complicating bilateral relations.

In recent decades, minor incidents of violence in Bangladesh have frequently led to heightened communal tensions in India as they assume it to be state-sponsored targeted violence over the Hindu community. These incidents are often amplified by media coverage and political rhetoric in India, where Hindu nationalist groups may use the situation to mobilize support and justify hardline stances. This can strain diplomatic relations between two countries, as India may express concern over the treatment of Hindus in Bangladesh, while Bangladesh views such concerns as interference in its diplomatic affairs. Moreover, the rise of digital media has exacerbated the spread of misinformation regarding communal violence, further inflaming tensions and making diplomatic management of these issues more challenging.⁹

Types of Misinformation about Communal Violence:

Misinformation can take many forms, each with the potential to distort public perception and incite unrest. In the context of the portrayal of 2024 communal violence in Bangladesh, several types of misinformation were prominently spread in India.

Fake News:

This type of misinformation involves deliberately creating and distributing false information disguised as legitimate news. During the 2024 violence, fake news articles falsely reported large-

⁷ 'Bangladesh', 2 November 2023. <https://minorityrights.org/country/bangladesh/>.

⁸ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Babri Masjid." Encyclopedia Britannica, August 9, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Babri-Masjid>.

⁹ Rahman, Zillur. 'Misinformation Campaigns and the Future of Bangladesh-India Relations'. The Daily Star, 11 August 2024. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/misinformation-campaigns-and-the-future-bangladesh-india-relations-3674626>.

scale, organized attacks on Hindu communities in Bangladesh. These articles were often sensationalized to provoke emotional reactions, leading to widespread panic and outrage in India.

Manipulated Videos and Images:

Visual media, including photos and videos, are powerful tools for spreading misinformation. In this case, videos and images from unrelated events or past incidents were repurposed and circulated as current evidence of the violence. Some were digitally altered to exaggerate the extent of the destruction and brutality, making the situation appear far more severe than it was. Such content spreads rapidly on platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, where users often share information without verifying its authenticity.

False Narratives:

Alongside fake news and manipulated media, false narratives were constructed to frame the violence in a specific, often misleading, context. These narratives portrayed the events as part of a broader, state-sponsored campaign against religious minorities, particularly Hindus, in Bangladesh. This narrative was especially potent in inflaming communal tensions in India, where similar historical grievances have long existed.

Sources of Misinformation about Communal Violence

Misinformation does not arise in a vacuum. It is often propagated by specific actors who stand to benefit from its spread. In the case of the misinformation surrounding the 2024 Bangladesh violence, several potential sources can be identified:

Politically Motivated Groups:

Within India, various political groups and organizations may have used misinformation as a tool to further their agendas. By amplifying reports of violence against Hindus in Bangladesh, these groups could mobilize their base, stoke fears of religious persecution and justify hardline stances on issues of national security and communal harmony. This tactic not only deepens divisions within Indian society but also strengthens the political position of those advocating for stricter measures against perceived external threats.

Fringe Elements:

Fringe elements including extremist groups and online communities implemented targeted exploitation of the power vacuum situation after the fall of the Hasina regime to advance their ideologies in Bangladesh. These groups may deliberately spread false or exaggerated reports to incite violence, sow discord or gain followers. Their involvement in disseminating misinformation is typically characterized by a lack of accountability, making them difficult to trace and counteract.

Foreign Actors with Vested Interests:

In some cases, foreign entities may have a vested interest in destabilizing regional relations between India and Bangladesh. These actors might have engaged in these disinformation campaigns to weaken diplomatic ties, create internal strife, or shift the geopolitical balance in their favor. By spreading false information about the violence, they can exploit existing communal tensions in India, further straining relations between the two countries.

The nature of misinformation in this context is complex and multi-faceted, driven by various actors with differing motives. Understanding the forms it takes and the sources behind it is crucial for developing strategies to combat its spread and mitigate its harmful effects on society.

A Comparative Analysis Between Reality and Misinformation

Following the 2024 revolutionary movement in Bangladesh, a surge of misinformation spread across social media, particularly from ultra-right-wing influencers in India. This fake news distorted events in Bangladesh, often portraying exaggerated violence against the Hindu community. Fact-checkers from both India and Bangladesh revealed that many incidents were manipulated to suggest widespread religious persecution, while in reality, the violence was more politically motivated and affected both Hindus and Muslims. Various misinformation from different source has significantly heightened communal tensions and strained India-Bangladesh relations.

Misinformation Spread from India:

Amid the chaos following the 2024 revolutionary movement in Bangladesh, ultra-right-wing influencers in India exploited the situation by sharing misleading videos and fake news on social media, particularly targeting the Hindu community. For instance, one viral post claimed that the

house of cricketer Litton Das had been burned down by extremists. This post was widely shared, reinforcing the false narrative of targeted attacks on Hindus. However, it was later revealed that the house in question belonged to former Bangladesh national team captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza. Similarly, a video showing a fire near a Navagraha temple in Chittagong was spread with claims that "Islamic militants" had attacked the temple. The temple remained unharmed, and the fire had originated from an Awami League office behind the temple, where party-related materials were burned.¹⁰



Source: BBC News

Moreover, A video circulating on social media, particularly by right-wing X (formerly Twitter) accounts, falsely claims to show the harassment of a Hindu teacher in Bangladesh after the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government. The video, shared by users like ISKCON Kolkata's Radharaman Das and amplified by others, allegedly shows Hindu teachers being targeted. However, fact-checking reveals that the video depicts a different incident: a municipal engineer named Taufiq

¹⁰ Dhaka Tribune. 'BBC Verify Uncovers Misinformation about Hindu Persecution in Bangladesh'. Accessed 31 August 2024. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/354457/bbc-verify-uncovers-misinformation-about-hindu>.

Islam being harassed by student protesters in Chapai Nawabganj, Bangladesh, over a local issue unrelated to religion.¹¹

The officer of Chapainawabganj municipality returned home after spending a day in the hospital. But fear is not going to the office.



Chapainawabganj Municipality Executive Engineer Taufiq Islam was pressured to resign last Monday due to cigarette packets in his room.

Source: bdnews24.com

Fact-Checking and False Communal Narratives:

Fact-checkers, including those from Bangladesh, has uncovered that many of the fake posts claiming widespread “atrocities” against Hindus in Bangladesh were being posted from accounts based in India. However, some of these rumors also originated within Bangladesh. Fact-checkers confirmed that while there had been some attacks on Hindus, these incidents were not as widespread as portrayed in the fake news. Moreover, Muslim homes and properties, particularly those belonging to Awami League leaders and activists, were also targeted. This points to the fact that religious identity was often secondary to political affiliation, with both Hindu and Muslim

¹¹ Bhattacharyya, Indradeep. ‘Bangladesh: Harassment of Rajshahi Civic Official Taufiq Islam Falsely Shared by Indian RW as Attack on Hindus’. Alt News, 22 August 2024. <https://www.altnews.in/bangladesh-harassment-of-rajsahi-civic-official-taufiq-islam-falsely-shared-by-indian-rw-as-attack-on-hindus/>.

members of the Awami League being attacked. Despite this, a communal angle was imposed on the situation, particularly by social media accounts in India, which amplified the narrative of religious persecution.¹²



Source: BBC News

Bangladeshi fact-checking organization Rumor Scanner identified X as one of India's greatest media spreading communal misinformation. Between 5 August to 13 August, 50 accounts on X, 72% of which claimed to be based in India, were responsible for promoting misleading content that garnered over 154 million views. These accounts, including some linked to prominent individuals and media outlets, distorted facts and repurposed unrelated videos to fuel communal tensions. One example involved a video of a tragic electrocution incident during the Jagannath Dev's Ratha Yatra in Bogura, falsely circulated as a bomb attack on Hindu women. Another case involved Bangladeshi actress Azmeri Haque Badhon, whose video was misrepresented as a Hindu

¹² 'Disinformation About Attacks on Minorities Threaten Stabilization Efforts in Bangladesh'. Accessed 31 August 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/disinformation-about-attacks-on-minorities-threaten-stabilization-efforts-in-bangladesh/>.

woman's speech. The report found that 80% of the misleading posts relied on video content, with 36% of the false narratives involving the misrepresentation of Muslim individuals as Hindus. Mainstream Indian media outlets such as Asian News International (ANI), NDTV, and Mirror now and international figures were also implicated in spreading similar disinformation.¹³

Misinformation from religious minority within Bangladesh:

Within Bangladesh, the spread of misinformation also played a role in distorting the reality of the situation. For instance, a viral post falsely claimed that “Islamic militants” had attacked a Hindu village, showing a video of a man trying to escape by swimming in a pond. Indian fact-checkers later discovered that the man was a Muslim. Another misleading story involved a video showing a woman being forcibly taken away, which was portrayed as a kidnapping for gang rape of a Hindu woman. In reality, the incident involved a personal dispute, unrelated to communal violence. These examples highlight how misinformation spread within Bangladesh also contributed to the false narrative of widespread communal violence.¹⁴

Fear Among Hindu Communities:

The widespread violence and looting, particularly targeting the homes of Awami League leaders and activists, created an atmosphere of fear among the Hindu minority in Bangladesh. Although both Hindu and Muslim communities were affected, the circulation of fake news exacerbated fears among Hindus. For example, in Chittagong, Moinul, a protester who took it upon himself to guard the Shree Shree Sita Kali Mata Temple, reported that the viral posts claiming attacks on Hindu temples did not match reality. He emphasized that such posts presented a false image of Bangladesh, contributing to a sense of insecurity among the Hindu community despite efforts to protect all religious sites.

¹³ Tech & Startup Desk. ‘X - Major Misinformation Source on Communal Violence in Bangladesh: Rumor Scanner’. The Daily Star, 19 August 2024. <https://www.thedailystar.net/tech-startup/news/x-major-misinformation-source-communal-violence-bangladesh-rumor-scanner-3681196>.

¹⁴ Dhaka Tribune. ‘BBC Verify Uncovers Misinformation about Hindu Persecution in Bangladesh’. Accessed 31 August 2024. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/354457/bbc-verify-uncovers-misinformation-about-hindu>.



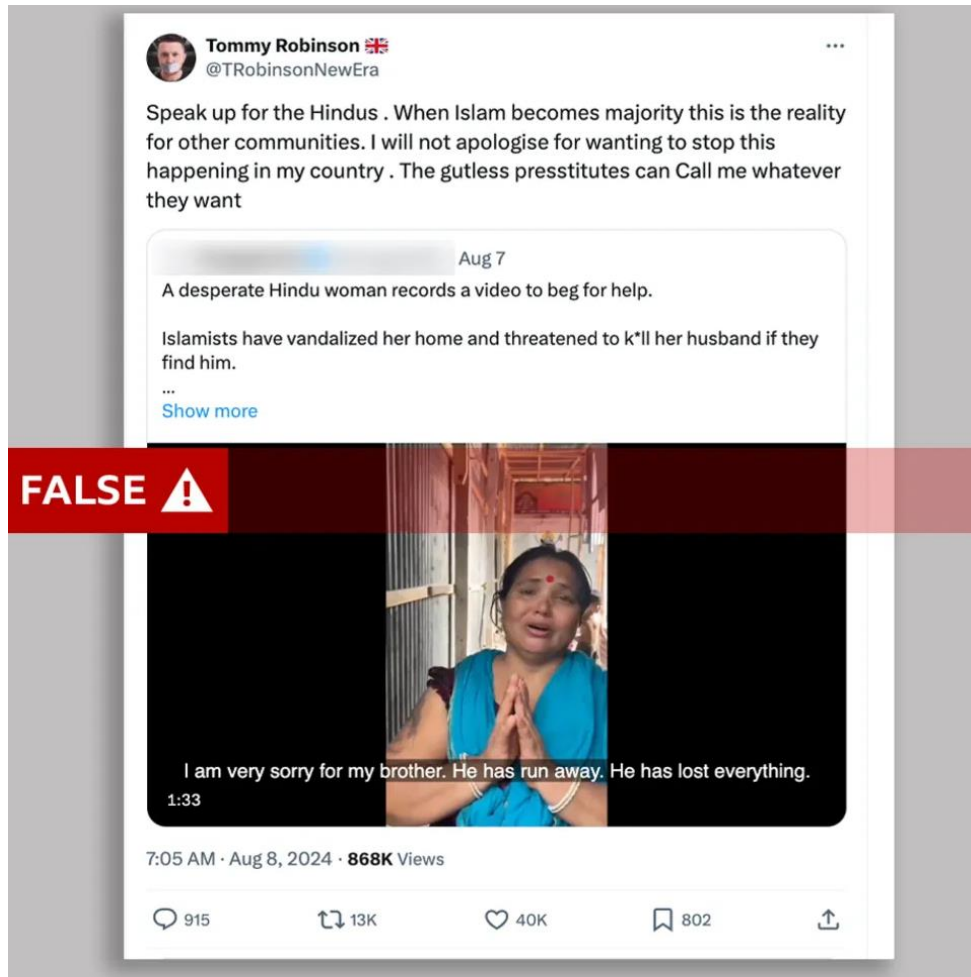
Muslim volunteer on guard in front of Dhakeshwari Hindu Temple

Source: The Diplomat

Political Exploitation through Misinformation

The spread of fake news was not limited to social media but also extended to traditional media outlets, some of which are known for their Hindu nationalist leanings. These outlets created news reports based on social media rumors, further fueling the false narrative of communal violence. The BBC reported that even far-right influencers outside the subcontinent, such as Tommy Robinson in the United Kingdom, contributed to spreading these unverified claims, describing the situation as a “genocide of Hindus” in Bangladesh. This political exploitation of misinformation served to deepen communal divides and inflame tensions between India and Bangladesh.¹⁵

¹⁵ ‘Far-Right Spreads False Claims about Muslim Attacks in Bangladesh’. Accessed 31 August 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2n8pzk7gzo>.



Source: BBC News

This spread of misinformation events in Bangladesh highlights the danger of fake news in inciting communal tensions and deepening divides. Misleading content, largely from Indian sources, distorted reality and fueled fear among vulnerable communities. This political exploitation threatens regional stability. Combatting misinformation through fact-checking and responsible media is crucial to preserving the social fabric of both India and Bangladesh.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The spread of misinformation following the 2024 events in Bangladesh underscores the critical need to address the growing influence of disinformation in shaping public perception and international relations. The deliberate manipulation of facts, particularly by ultra-right-wing influencers in India, has had profound implications, exacerbated communal tensions and fostered

an atmosphere of fear and mistrust among both Hindu and Muslim communities of the two countries.

This misinformation campaign has not only distorted the reality of the situation in Bangladesh but has also contributed to a dangerous narrative that fuels division and animosity. To mitigate the damage caused by such misinformation, efforts to combat disinformation must be significantly intensified. This requires a multi-faceted approach that includes rigorous fact-checking by independent organizations, responsible journalism that prioritizes accuracy over sensationalism and a collaborative effort between the governments of both India and Bangladesh, civil society, and tech platforms to identify and curb the spread of false narratives. Cross-border cooperation is particularly crucial, as misinformation often transcends national boundaries, impacting regional stability and international relations.

Furthermore, there must be a concerted effort to educate the public on the dangers of misinformation and the importance of verifying information before accepting it as truth. Media literacy programs can play a vital role in empowering individuals to critically assess online content, reducing the susceptibility to misleading narratives.