



# **THE DIGITAL MOB AND ITS ENABLERS**

**Gendered Disinformation and Online Abuse Against Women  
in Politics in India**

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This case study was written in partnership with a local researcher, who elected to stay anonymous.

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# INTRODUCTION

Initially praised as a “safe place for free expression,” social media platforms were viewed as an opportunity for those from marginalized communities in India to participate on equal footing in the public sphere, providing women across castes and religions with a platform to amplify their voices.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, however, online spaces have evolved into places of relentless attacks and harassment for these same groups. Social media has proven to be an important and useful avenue through which users may engage in politics, but it is also an extremely toxic place for women in politics and journalism, particularly women who question established socio-political practices or belong to doubly marginalized identities.

**Disinformation campaigns and trolling are pervasive, professionally organized and strategically deployed to seriously pollute the information system and electoral processes, resulting in weakening democratic debate and undermining progress on women's and minority rights.**

Online hate and disinformation are being increasingly used to silence or villainize political opponents and target India's religious women.

This case study analyzes the intersection of gender, technology and the erosion of democracy in India. It focuses on the dynamics, goals and modus operandi of gendered disinformation campaigns

targeting women in politics and how they play into efforts to undermine democracy, women's rights and multiculturalism in India. In order to do so, it relies on a combination of desk research, some very basic targeted social media monitoring of posts including the names of women leaders on Twitter and Facebook and interviews with local women's rights activists, women in politics and experts.<sup>2</sup> It also examines the complicit role of social media in the spread of disinformation, hateful and potentially dangerous content.

As the world's largest democracy is also becoming one of the largest markets for social media companies, the relevance of what is happening in India is hard to overestimate. It has implications for the future of digital technology, democracy and women's rights globally.



## INDIA

### Facts at a Glance

14.9%<sup>3</sup>

% of women in national government  
(as of August 2022)

47%<sup>4</sup>

Internet penetration rate  
(as of early 2022)

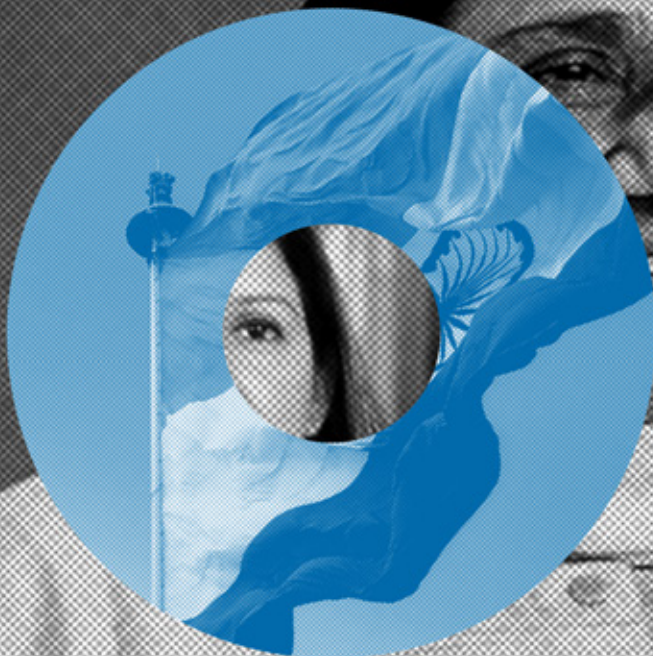
467M

OF 1.40 BILLION<sup>5</sup>

Number of social media users out of  
entire population (as of early 2022)

Most popular platforms: YouTube, Facebook and Instagram<sup>6</sup>





# **Political Leaders, “Heroic Mothers” and “Chaste Wives”: Women’s Role in Indian Democracy**

# WOMEN'S ROLE IN INDIAN DEMOCRACY

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been at the helm of power in India since 2014, when it won the Parliamentary election with an absolute majority.

The election marked a rupture in India's politics, which had seen coalition governments since 1989. In 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government returned to power with a more substantial majority and established a firm grip on power across several states.

Ever since, Modi's government has implemented several welfare schemes, boosting its narrative of a self-reliant India. Through these policies, Modi has aimed to establish himself as a strongman and dominant leader delivering on sweeping promises of growth and development.

The government also used the force of its electoral majority to bring about major legal and constitutional changes with little room for discussion or debate, passing critical bills in minutes without consultation or room for amendment. In addition to the concentration of power, the past eight years have seen a shrinking and ineffective opposition, stifling of press freedoms and civil rights, a judicial crisis and a growing normalization of communal hate and polarization.<sup>7</sup>

For those whose opinions differ from the government, freedom of expression has steadily weakened, as demonstrated by India's slide in global press freedom rankings. With a rank of 80 in the inaugural report of the World Press Freedom Index in 2002, India slipped to 122 in 2010.<sup>8</sup> By 2022, its rank had fallen to 150 among 180 countries.<sup>9</sup>

Women's rights, central to the Indian national project even before the country's independence in 1947, are also being threatened. In the Indian Constitution, inspired by values of democracy and social justice, women—historically denied several rights—became equal citizens with critical rights from the outset of modern India's journey. They received the right to vote, to contest, the right to property and rights against discrimination. Free India saw a strong



women's rights movement in a process that had started during the colonial era. Women fought for autonomy and against domestic violence and dowry and demanded justice in cases of sexual assault—rights that had been particularly out of reach for those from underprivileged castes and social classes.

**However, as B.R. Ambedkar, the Chairperson of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, observed,**

**in India, democracy was a “top dressing on an Indian soil” that was very unequal.<sup>10</sup> Even though women won more formal rights, the socio-cultural landscape continues to be deeply patriarchal to this day.**



From sex-selective abortions to discrimination within the household, dowry demands and violence, and limited opportunities to exercise personal choice, women in India continue to be denied the promise of equality and liberty envisaged in the country's constitution and founding vision. Young women and men who marry across religious and caste boundaries out of love are often attacked and even killed. Survey data shows that the idea of using violence against a dissenting wife is still considered normal by many.<sup>11</sup> Even as more women receive education, their labor force participation rates are not rising. On the contrary, they are dipping. India has among the lowest share of women in the formal labor force in the world.<sup>12</sup>

Women's political representation is a clear example of this complex dynamic. Droupadi Murmu, a woman, is currently president of India. In July 2022, she became only the second woman (and the first person from a tribal community) to be elected to the country's top post. Since 1992-93, quotas at the local level have enabled millions of women to lead villages and towns, paving the way for India to become the proud site of the world's largest pool of elected women in office, in absolute numbers.

Yet, beyond the local level, Indian politics is a space predominantly occupied by men. From the state assemblies to Parliament and the Council of Ministers, to chief ministers, party cadres and party officials, nowhere does one find a critical mass of women—forget parity. Women comprise just 14.9 percent of members of the Lok Sabha and 12.3 percent of members of the Rajya Sabha, the Lower and Upper houses of the Indian Parliament, and in state assemblies their share varies from 0 to 15 percent.<sup>13</sup>

**It is not simply the skewed numbers that matter—  
politics remains a very gendered space, often hostile  
to women.<sup>14</sup>**

**Misogyny abounds, and women politicians face greater scrutiny from a patriarchal lens. Men, including male politicians, do not think twice before making sexist and even lewd remarks about their female colleagues in campaign rallies, in party meetings, in Parliament and on social media, in full public view.**



Political parties remain the biggest roadblock to improving women's representation—they neither allow legislation to introduce affirmative action that could improve the share of elected women, nor do they give enough “tickets,” or opportunities to participate in elections representing the party, to women candidates. Moreover, they invest little in building gender-representative and sensitive cadres and leadership.

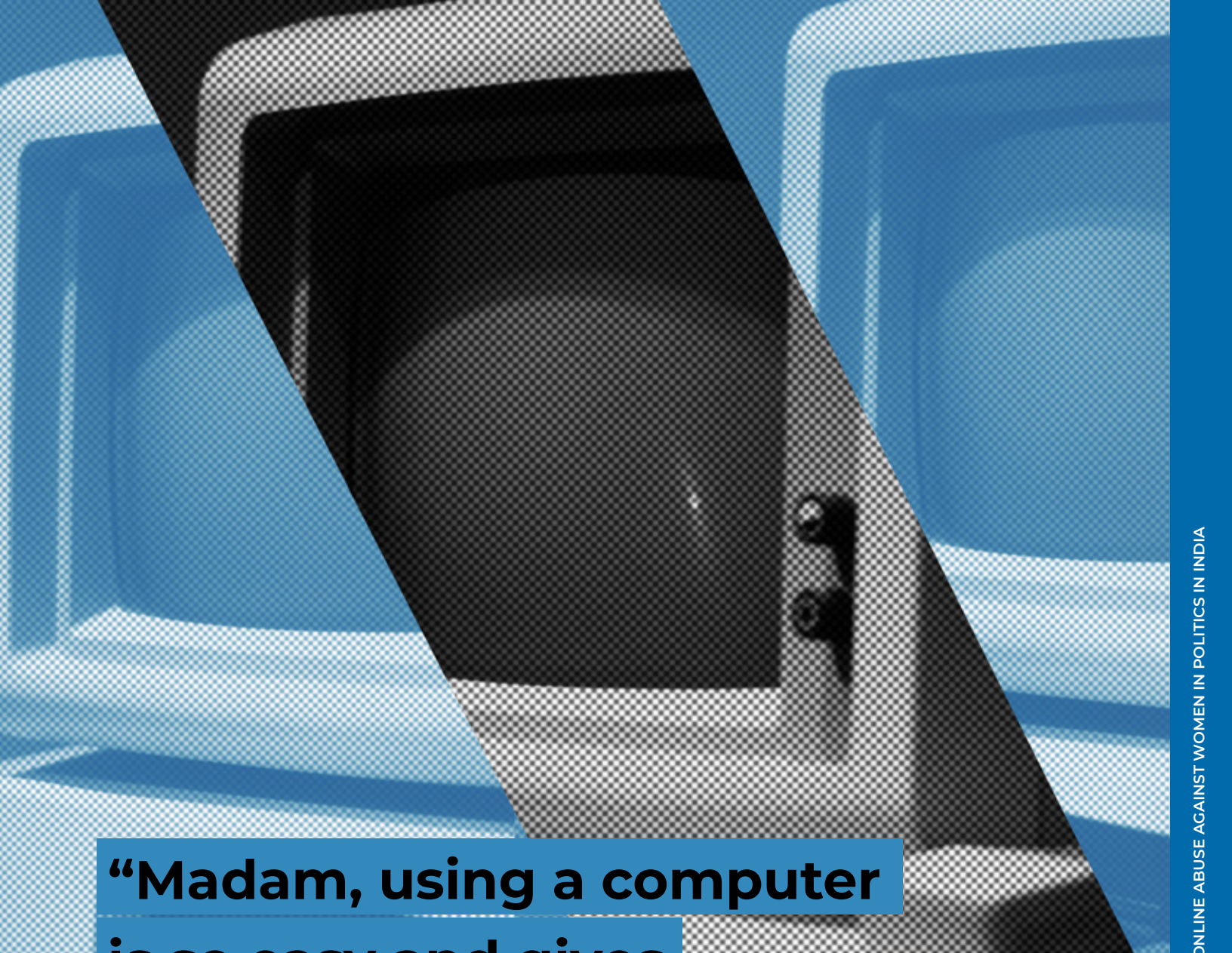
And yet, political parties are putting ever greater value on women voters every year, as more and more women turn out to vote, and vote independently.<sup>15</sup> All parties are going out of their way to woo the woman voter, competing with promises to benefit women if they are elected.<sup>16</sup> These include, but are not limited to, cash transfers, promises of free gas cylinders, free education, free public transport, free bicycles or two-wheelers, scholarship schemes—even free saris and mixer grinders.

The Modi government is consciously cultivating women as beneficiaries and, by extension, as loyal voter banks by introducing flagship schemes to build toilets in every part of the country, providing free gas to enable a shift to clean cooking fuel, encouraging girls' education, discouraging the practice of female feticide and opening bank accounts for women.<sup>17</sup> These efforts seem to be working—not only has the BJP achieved exceptional electoral success, but data also indicates that women are among its strongest supporters.

**But the attention given to women's interests is not necessarily driven by feminist or rights-based concerns. Instead, it is part of what researcher Priya Chacko argues is:**

**a traditional vision of women as "responsible, sacrificing, laboring, silent and virtuous market citizens," drawing on a narrative of "women as 'heroic mothers' and 'chaste wives' whose ultimate duty is to serve the nation and whose chaste and virtuous bodies represent the nation."<sup>18</sup>**

**Women who are outspoken or refuse to comply with this narrow identity often face enormous backlash and abuse, both online and offline.**

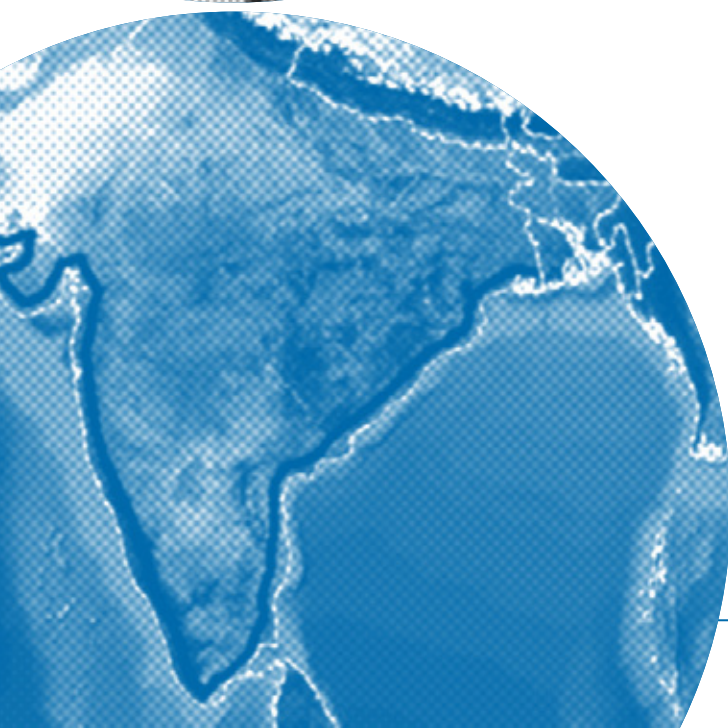


**“Madam, using a computer  
is so easy and gives  
me so much power”:**

**The BJP Years and the Growth of Digital  
Media in Indian Politics**



# THE BJP YEARS AND THE GROWTH OF DIGITAL MEDIA IN INDIAN POLITICS



The years of BJP rule have coincided with massive growth in internet and social media use in India.

These have been accompanied by a deepening and widening reach of smartphones and an explosion of messaging apps, transforming the way people communicate with family, friends, colleagues and even distant acquaintances in various corners of the country and the world.

A May 2022 report by the Future of India Foundation notes:

**"social media usage has grown exponentially in India over the last decade. Aggressive growth tactics adopted by social media platforms such as Facebook's abandoned 'Free Basics' program coupled with India's booming telecommunication industry that lowered data and smartphone device costs to affordable levels have provided the necessary tailwinds. Most social media platforms including Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter registered impressive increases in user base especially since 2014. By 2020, over 50% of India's population was accessing social networks."**<sup>19</sup>

**Over 600 million Indians actively used the internet in 2020, and that number is likely to cross 900 million by 2025, estimates an IAMAI-Kantar Cube report.**<sup>20</sup>

An estimated 530 million individuals have accounts on WhatsApp, 448 million on YouTube, 410 million on Facebook, 210 million on Instagram and 175 million on Twitter. Furthermore, India is now the largest market for Facebook and its related companies.<sup>21</sup>

Recent years have also seen the growth of social media platforms as important sites of political discourse and spaces used by political parties to drive their propaganda.



The extensive use of social media for political campaigns "has established these platforms as de facto public squares," as noted in the aforementioned Future of India Foundation report.<sup>22</sup> This development has been accompanied by the growth of "IT wings," "social media cells" and "troll armies"—formal and informal networks on social media that political parties use to amplify their messages by sharing, liking and retweeting content multiple times. Political parties also employ these networks to silence critics and the opposition by using tricks that range from disputing legitimate reports with counter allegations to posting doctored images and videos that spread false claims, and spreading abuse and hate to silence dissenting voices through intimidation and humiliation.

In the book *I Am a Troll - Inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army*, authored by journalist **Swati Chaturvedi**, recipient of the 2018 Prize for Courage for her reporting on politically organized trolling and online harassment, she notes, "these 'yodhas' (soldiers) wage a darker battle—against journalists who hold opposing views, minority communities like Muslims and Dalits, and opposition parties. This kind

of fight is ugly; its weapons are vicious language, sex-filled imagery, outrageous lies and doctored photographs and videos."<sup>23</sup>

The BJP was one of the earliest among political parties to see the internet's potential to help the party take its message far and deep. In this sense, the 2014 elections for the Lower House of the Indian Parliament, the Lok Sabha, were a turning point. For the first time, the BJP successfully leveraged social media platforms—especially Twitter—in pursuit of electoral victory.<sup>24</sup>

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological parent organization of the BJP, recognized the power of the internet right from the early years of the new millennium, notes Chaturvedi in her book. As early as 2001, the RSS created the concept of "IT Shakh" —centers for training political cadres in the use of technology for communication. Chaturvedi writes: "the BJP has the country's most impressive social media cell compared to any other political party. They, along with the RSS, took advantage of new technologies earlier than anyone...This early attention to social media was one of the factors behind their extraordinary electoral victory of 2014. Today this cell is made up of a tight, efficient group of paid engineers, party workers and volunteers."<sup>25</sup>

**"Madam, using a computer is so easy and gives me so much power."**

**These are the words a young Indian man who worked for the social media cell of BJP, India's ruling party, said to Swati Chaturvedi during her research for a book on politically organized trolling and online harassment in India.<sup>26</sup>**

The man was one of several "trolls" Swati Chaturvedi interviewed for her book.<sup>27</sup> Social media platforms around the world are full of such trolls today, and in India they are deliberately sharing false information that has led to communal violence, mob lynchings and killings, mostly affecting Indian Muslims.<sup>28</sup>

Akin to a mob, these trolls often come together to perform a range of tasks online, from working to get topics to "trend"—ensuring high numbers of likes, shares and comments for posts by certain individuals—to coordinating efforts to attack, abuse and silence those who voice support for an opposing agenda.



Photo credit: Vinoth Chandar/Flickr

Sometimes they work as volunteers, driven by their passion for a certain ideology or agenda. At other times, they are hired and paid like professionals by political parties and communication agencies.

**Ruchi Gupta**, formerly in charge of the student wing of the Indian National Congress and now executive director at the Future of India Foundation, which works on issues pertaining to youth, technology and politics, observes:

**“on social media, arguments often tend to turn personal. And when fights get personal, women are likely to bear a greater brunt of the backlash.”<sup>29</sup>**

**RUCHI GUPTA**



**According to Indian parliamentarian Priyanka Chaturvedi:**

**“Usually, it is the ‘IT Cells’, mostly unofficial but fully supported by the ruling party that target women, especially women of the opposition. These attacks are frequent in nature, well-orchestrated and it is not unfamiliar for politicians, even Cabinet Ministers to also engage or for the matter of fact, initiate such kinds of attacks.”<sup>30</sup>**

**PRIYANKA CHATURVEDI**



In 2018, five United Nations special rapporteurs issued a call to India's government regarding their concern about the BJP's misuse of digital technology: “it has been reported that the ruling party through the use of social media volunteers pushes critical messages about public figures perceived to be opposed to the BJP.”<sup>31</sup> The rapporteurs also expressed concern about “what appears to be a wide presence of fundamentalist discourses and intolerance, including from members of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, which may encourage negative social mobilization leading to expression of intolerance, incitement to hatred, violence, including gender-based violence, as well as discriminatory practices against women and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes that are inherently discriminatory and undermine a full

range of women's human rights in all spheres.” In addition to playing an increasingly negative role for the promotion of democratic and civil debate, digital platforms in India also have a problematic record when it comes to gender equality.

The internet and associated technologies remain out of reach for a large majority of Indian women. Even when women use the internet, it is strictly monitored by members of the family.<sup>32</sup> In the 75th round of the Indian government's National Sample Survey (NSS) from 2017-18, 22.3 percent of men said they had used the internet during the past 30 days.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, only 12.5 percent of women said they had done the same. The gap was prevalent across states, and regardless of income or literacy levels.





**For the small share of women who have access to and use the internet—particularly those who are politically outspoken—social media platforms can be a hostile space. Women who come from religious and caste minority groups are especially vulnerable, and often find themselves being targeted doubly for their gender and their community identities.**

In early January 2022, personal testimonies of Muslim women shed light on the “Bulli Bai” app, created on the open-source coding platform GitHub. The app simulated an online auction of several Muslim women, including women journalists.<sup>34</sup> Using photographs of the women taken from their social media profiles, the app would sell off these women as “deals of the day.” Bulli Bai was the second app found to engage in such auctions, as six months earlier another app called Sulli Deals had been doing the same.<sup>35</sup> Both “Bulli” and “Sulli” are demeaning words used to refer to Muslim women. “The purpose of the app was just to degrade and humiliate,” noted BBC reporter Geeta Pandey.<sup>36</sup>

According to a recent study from **Shakuntala Banaji and Ram Bhat**, “WhatsApp use and WhatsApp content is highly gendered. This is the case in terms of access to smartphones, privacy of use, media literacy and spending power (for device and data).”<sup>37</sup> The researchers further found that “physical, psychological and mediated violence is disproportionately directed against women, more so if they belong to Muslim, Dalit, Adivasi, Christian or any other minority groups. Forms of WhatsApp- and smartphone-enabled violence against women in India include unsolicited sexts, sex tapes, rape videos, surveillance, violation of privacy, bullying, forced confrontation with pornographic material, blackmail and humiliation. All of these actions were reported to us both in urban and rural areas.”



**Alaphia Zoyab, Director of Campaigns and Media at Luminate Strategic Initiatives, reports that:**

"The gendered disinformation isn't just a continuation online of an old gender fault line in India. It is subsumed under a dangerous project of Hindu nationalism whose greatest insecurity is Islam and the peaceful co-existence of Muslims and Hindus in India.

**That's why the BJP's project of a so-called 'New India' or in other words, a 'Hindu state' relies on spreading hate and lies at an industrial scale.**

**Silicon Valley has provided the tools and appointed the staff who will help make that happen. That's the deadly trap that Indian women, crucially Indian Muslim, Dalit and other religious and ethnic minority women are caught in."<sup>38</sup>**

In a country where they are trained culturally to be invisible, women who speak up online, particularly those with influence such as journalists, politicians and activists, may find themselves the victims of sexualized imagery, rape and death threats and disinformation campaigns.<sup>39</sup> When women with power—activists, journalists, politicians—use their voices to put forth challenging views, there are attempts to silence them.

The independent journalist **Rana Ayyub** is a case in point. She has been the target of relentless online hate, abuse and disinformation for exposing government human rights violations. The targeting of Ms. Ayyub, a Muslim journalist who has been an open critic of the government, has been extreme, drawing international concern and condemnation.<sup>40</sup> Barkha Dutt, a former TV reporter and now independent journalist, has also been attacked repeatedly. In 2019, the abuse and threats were so severe that Ms. Dutt filed a police complaint. She shared a screenshot on Twitter illustrating what she called an "organized hate campaign" against some journalists.<sup>41</sup> **For Swati Chaturvedi, the most vicious and copious attacks come when she writes about the Prime Minister: "Modi Modi Modi – if you mention [Prime Minister Narendra] Modi the amount of hate, threats are greatest."<sup>42</sup>**

While some women seek justice in the courts for the hate crimes targeting them, the majority of cybercrimes against women go unpunished, and the strongest law against online hate—the Information Technology Act, 2000 (Section 67, 67 A, 67B)—has proven insufficient to protect women.<sup>43</sup>

Online hate speech, abuse and disinformation have a range of chilling effects on those who are targeted, often leading to self-censure and silencing. But the consequences of online abuse go well beyond its direct targets and profoundly influence social norms.

As **Arti Raghavan** notes in her 2021 report, *The Internet-Enabled Assault on Women's Democratic Rights and Freedoms*, online abuse "devalues" women's speech and place in society, undermining their credibility as political actors: "the implications of this problem for the political participation of women in a democracy are acute, and it only serves to further undermine their efforts at securing substantive equality under the Indian Constitution," she finds.<sup>44</sup>



# **Gendered Disinformation and Online Abuse as Political Weapons in India**

# GENDERED DISINFORMATION AND ONLINE ABUSE AS POLITICAL WEAPONS

**#ShePersisted works to address gendered disinformation in the form of the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information targeting highly visible women, such as political leaders, journalists, activists and other public figures.**

Data from political campaigns—both in Europe and the United States—show women politicians are more likely to be targeted with higher volumes of online abuse and disinformation. These attacks are also more likely to be steeped in sexism, often focusing on a woman's character and sexuality, and they are "stickier," or harder to recover from and fight with traditional tools like fact-checking and media literacy.<sup>45</sup>

According to Kristina Wilfore, a global democracy activist and co-founder of #ShePersisted: "gendered disinformation campaigns build on, and are rooted in, deeply set misogynistic frameworks and gender biases that portray masculine characteristics as those fit for leadership while painting women leaders as inherently **untrustworthy** (insinuating a woman is dishonest or not trustable is a tried and true attack), **unqualified** (one of the biggest barriers women face when seeking office), **unintelligent** (tropes about women as dumb and unfit for the job are a prominent feature of gendered disinformation, made worse with objectifying sexualized content), and **unlikable** (which for women can be the death knell of their campaign)."<sup>46</sup>

Gendered disinformation is often coordinated and spread with malignant intentions. It aims to manipulate the public into developing falsely informed understandings of women politicians' track records, with the ultimate goal of portraying women in the public sphere as incapable of holding leadership positions, or otherwise discrediting them.

Perhaps most devastating, women may be dissuaded from running for office or participating in public debate due to widespread gendered disinformation and online abuse, and this can especially affect young women. To evade the very public and dangerous attacks facilitated by social media, women may also disengage from politics and self-censor.

The combination of gendered disinformation and abuse is a stark reality for women in politics in India. Indian women politicians endure a barrage of abuse on Twitter, as uncovered by a study from Amnesty

International India published in early 2020. The study identified that of every seven tweets mentioning Indian women politicians, one was "problematic" or "abusive," and observed that Indian women politicians "experienced substantially higher abuse" in India than in the U.S. or the U.K.<sup>47</sup> The abuse is not always limited to the women themselves—it may extend to their families. For example, one of the women we interviewed reported that her very young daughter had been targeted with rape threats on social media because of the interviewee's outspokenness.

"I do believe that Twitter is my workplace. But if my workplace were to be a battlefield, all the time, would I be able to contribute, to the cause that I represent, easily and with fairness, if I am constantly being attacked for being a woman," BJP politician Shazia Ilmi told Amnesty International during their research on online abuse targeting women politicians in India.<sup>48</sup>

**Women from marginalized casts and minority religious communities and those who question traditional norms, the government or male political leaders with a large following, face particularly vicious attacks.**

They become the target of fake stories and hate campaigns steeped in sexism, often revolving around their supposed untrustworthiness, loose morals, sexual promiscuity and lack of patriotism.

Below are some illustrative examples from our analysis of how gendered disinformation has been viciously deployed against women leaders and political activists in India. A necessary caveat is that while this analysis represents an important effort to map and begin to make sense of gendered disinformation in the country, wide scale data analytics and a thorough monitoring of social media channels over an extended period of time would be needed to gather more evidence and achieve a more comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon and the malign actors behind it.

Future research should aim to map the weaponization of digital tools to facilitate malign behavior, including basic listening and trend monitoring, mapping and tracking malign actors, tracking monetization and the role of advertising, conducting terms of service compliance experiments and analyzing the activity of political actors.



For **ANGELICA ARIBAM**—former general secretary of the student wing of the Indian National Congress and the founder of Femme First, a foundation working to expand women’s political participation—**“being trolled has, unfortunately, become an integral part of my life.”**<sup>49</sup> Ms. Aribam pointed out that, “in my case, the trolling has been worse because of the intersection of race and gender. There is a stereotype in the country that women from the north-east region are ‘easy,’ ‘characterless.’

**Racism and sexism combine in our cases, and because of my intersectional marginal identity I have been targeted so much. If you see my blocklist on Twitter, it would easily cross thousands.”**

The Delhi politician from the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) **ATISHI** stopped using her second name “Marlena” ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, which she subsequently lost.<sup>50</sup> She did so to counter a rumor spread by her opponents that alleged she was a Christian and a foreigner.<sup>51</sup> The name Marlena was given to Ms. Atishi by her parents, of which she stated, “my last name was coined from Marx and Lenin and was given to me by my Left-leaning parents.”<sup>52</sup> A year later, she found herself the target of another false rumor in an anonymous smear pamphlet that made derogatory claims about her personal life.<sup>53</sup> In 2014, Ms. Atishi’s party colleague, Alka Lamba, filed a complaint against a legislator who had been expelled from the AAP for posting a false claim that Lamba was running a sex racket in her house.<sup>54</sup>

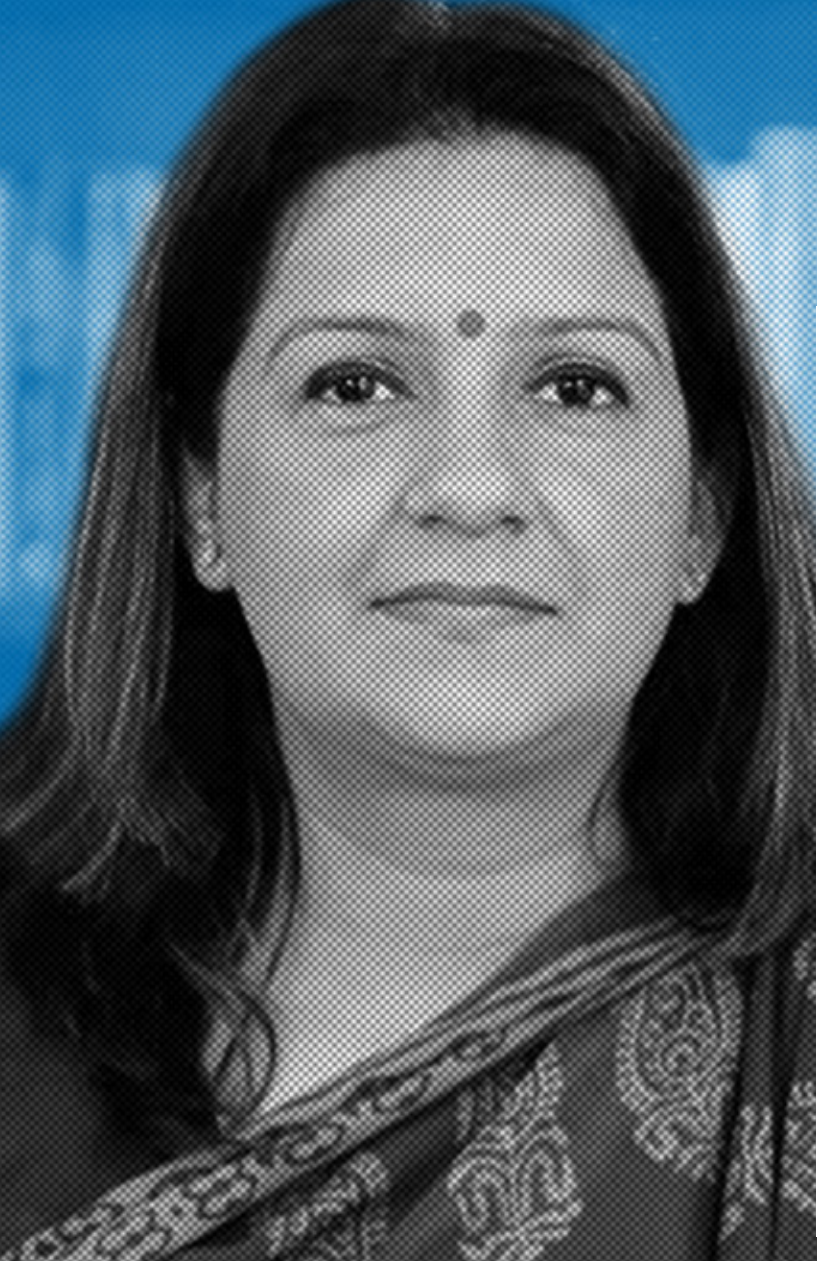


This post, shared on Facebook, falsely describes these two photos as rare images of Sonia Gandhi when she was a “bar dancer” in Italy.

The president of the Indian National Congress (INC), **SONIA GANDHI**, is no stranger to sexist and hateful comments. Born in Italy, she is often targeted because of her roots. She faced allegations that she was a “bar dancer” before coming to India, doctored images of her have been circulated and PM Narendra Modi once called her a “jersey cow” and her son (Indian politician Rahul Gandhi) a “hybrid calf.”<sup>55</sup>

Sonia Gandhi’s daughter, politician **PRIYANKA GANDHI**, is also another target of such hateful and sexist attacks. When she announced her candidacy for her party’s general secretary for Uttar Pradesh (East) in the run up to the 2019 polls, misogynistic comments followed closely behind.<sup>56</sup> Male politicians wrote that she was just beautiful and had no other talents. A politician from the BJP called her a “skirt waali bai” (a skirt wearing woman), and another leader from the same party alleged that she had bipolar disorder and often beat up people, making an insensitive remark about mental health disorders in the same breath.<sup>57</sup>





**PRIYANKA CHATURVEDI**, a member of parliament, has also been the target of vicious online attacks and gendered disinformation campaigns. In 2018, she filed a complaint to the Mumbai police after a troll account threatened the rape of her 10-year-old daughter.<sup>58</sup> The attack came after a fake quote was attributed to her and circulated online, claiming that she had defended the rapist of a young girl in Mandsaur, and that it "is the right of Muslims to rape."<sup>59</sup>

In a personal interview, she stated: "as the world and the operations turned to digital space, the incidents and the severity of hate attacks against women particularly women in politics, journalists and feminist activists, increased. As more women took to social media platforms to raise concerns, the level of abuses and insults shifted drastically. Words, statements which otherwise would not ever be used in the offline space were spewed so casually without any regards to the person at the other end. I refuse however to just be a cog in the system and bow down to these cowards. I continue to persist despite the hate sent across my way, every day."<sup>60</sup>



The tweet on the left states, "Priyanka I want to rape your daughter. Send your daughter to me."<sup>59</sup> It was posted in response to the photo on the right, falsely attributing a statement to Ms. Chaturvedi which reads, "only one rape has been committed in Mandsaur. It is the right of Muslims to rape. Our party is with Irfan (the rapist)."<sup>61</sup>

PRIYANKA CHATURVEDI





**MAMATA BANERJEE**, currently the only woman serving as the Chief Minister of an Indian state, has been a target of such toxicity too. Misogyny was on full display as Ms. Banerjee fought to retain power in the state of West Bengal in the 2021 assembly polls, which she won. Amid a heated election campaign, male leaders from the BJP made a range of obnoxious statements against Ms. Banerjee. Political opponents called her a demon with “no values or characteristics of women,” saying she should “wear Bermuda shorts if she was so keen to show her legs,” as a bandaged foot injury was seen underneath her sari.<sup>62</sup> The Prime Minister mocked her in a tone that reminded many women of the kind of cat calls they receive while walking in public. It wasn’t the first time that Ms. Banerjee was the target of online abuse and disinformation. In 2019, a fake post circulated claiming that Ms. Banerjee would have said that “she would show how to make Hindus cry if she wins all 42 seats in the state.”<sup>63</sup> In 2020, the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), Ms. Banerjee’s party, wrote a letter to Facebook’s CEO Mark Zuckerberg expressing “concerns about Facebook’s role during the 2014 and 2019 general elections in India” and writing that the company’s “blocking of Facebook pages and accounts in Bengal also points to the link between Facebook and the BJP,” noting “there is enough material now in the public domain, including internal memos of senior Facebook management, to substantiate the bias.”<sup>64</sup>



On the left is a screenshot of the photoshopped image of a newspaper article claiming that Ms. Banerjee said that “she’ll make Hindus cry if she got 42 seats.”<sup>65</sup> The photoshopped article had a different title than what was originally printed in the newspaper in 2019, shown on the right.





**MAYAWATI** is the former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state in India. Ms. Mayawati comes from one of the most socio-economically marginalized communities of India—the Dalit community—and has been targeted doubly with sexist and casteist remarks. When she joined Twitter in 2019, critics flooded her account with hateful comments steeped in sexism and casteism.<sup>66</sup> Politicians, actors and stand-up comics alike have made disgusting remarks about her and her appearance. She was called “an unmarried porn star,” “a woman who can do everything for power,” “Kanshi Ram’s secret wife” and the “ex-girlfriend of Mulayam Singh.”<sup>67</sup> Kanshi Ram was the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party, the party which Ms. Mayawati now leads, and Mulayam Singh is a former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. The post generated a lot of criticism and led to a police complaint.<sup>68</sup>



Finally, no Indian politician has come close to using social media, and especially Twitter, to conduct political work and address citizens' grievances as prominently as the late **SUSHMA SWARAJ**, India's Minister of External Affairs between 2014-19. Ms. Swaraj, one of modern India's most noted politicians, was a prominent leader of the BJP. When she took charge of the Ministry of External Affairs in 2014, she used Twitter to provide instant relief to citizens who tagged her and her ministry in posts that stated their concerns. In 2016, Foreign Policy named her as one of 15 global leaders in its list of Global Thinkers for "fashioning a novel brand of Twitter diplomacy."<sup>69</sup> Ms. Swaraj used Twitter to solve a range of citizen grievances, including one notable instance of a problem linked to the passport application of a woman in an interfaith marriage. Interfaith marriage—especially when a Hindu woman marries a Muslim man—is a heated topic in India and considered a deplorable act by many Hindu nationalist groups, who talk about it in terms of a broader plan called "Love Jihad"—i.e., a conspiracy by Muslim men to "lure" Hindu women to fall in love with them, marry and convert to Islam.<sup>70</sup> After assisting the couple, Ms. Swaraj was viciously attacked with vile disinformation narratives, followed by memes and posts calling for violence against her.<sup>71</sup> One account speculated that her decision to support the interfaith couple was based on her "Islamic kidney" (Ms. Swaraj had previously had a kidney transplant due to illness). She was portrayed as someone who had a bias towards Muslims and Pakistan, and opposed her own country. People called her "Visa Mata" (Visa Mother) and Sushma Begum (Begum is an allusion to her being a Muslim), and showed her dressed as a Muslim and sometimes as a Christian nun.



The Hindi text in the image reads "Visa Mata" (or Visa Mother), showing Ms. Swaraj as saying, "I have only one job, to sit in the Ministry of External Affairs of India and distribute visas to dear people from Pakistan."







# Polluters Operating in a High-Risk Enterprise: Digital Platforms in India



# DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN INDIA

The nature of social media platforms has changed substantially over the last decade, and they have come under scrutiny for their role in undermining democracy around the world. Yet, they remain largely in denial about their role and complicity in enabling polarization.

According to Ms. Raghavan: "the regulatory framework dealing with misogynistic hate speech on the internet primarily focuses on individual acts of speech and its effects. Gendered cyber-violence is primarily addressed by certain provisions of the Information Technology Act, 2000 ('IT Act'), the IT Rules, and the IPC. However, the focus of these laws is on proscribing and criminalizing *individual acts* of gendered cyber-violence, and fails to address or account for the systemic nature of misogyny, or the enablement of hate by internet platforms and intermediaries."<sup>72</sup>

Online hate and disinformation—including gendered disinformation—are not individual problems. However, they are systemic and very much linked to the way social media platforms are designed and function.

In their 2022 report, Future of India captures the problem as such:

**"social media platforms have adopted design choices which have instead led to a proliferation and mainstreaming of misinformation while allowing themselves to be weaponized by powerful vested interests for political and commercial benefit."**

The consequent free flow of organized misinformation (disinformation), hate and targeted intimidation has led to real world harm and degradation of democracy in India: anti-minority hate has been mainstreamed and legitimized; communities have become divided and polarized; sowed confusion in the minds of the people; made it difficult to establish a shared foundation of truth; and led to political alienation."<sup>73</sup>

The design of social media platforms is what enables—and even fosters—this type of behavior. According to Ms. Gupta, "the anonymity of platforms can encourage people to say nasty and unsubstantiated things without fear or accountability."<sup>74</sup> Ms. Raghavan cites Alexander Brown, a Reader in Political and Legal Theory at the University of East Anglia, when noting "the non-visual nature of most online communication (the absence of a face-to-face dimension) results in speech being created without the '...normal social-psychological cues of empathy and censure that tend to keep harmful or antisocial behavior in check,'" and that the "ease of access and reach, and the anonymity and invisibility of audience and speaker also distinguishes it from offline hate speech."<sup>75</sup> Of even greater concern are reports that both Facebook and Twitter have allowed government officials to disseminate hateful content and provide them access to sensitive user data.<sup>76</sup>

In 2020, former Facebook data scientist turned whistleblower Sophie Zhang revealed that Facebook was allowing "fake engagement" to distort global politics.<sup>77</sup> Zhang pointed out that some leaders around the world were amassing fake engagement on their posts to manipulate the political conversation in their countries and Facebook decided not to act, even in instances where they knew about it. India was one of the countries identified by Ms. Zhang's report, which described finding a member of parliament from the BJP involved in coordinating a network of 50 fake accounts. Despite Ms. Zhang's demand that the network be taken down, the company refused to do so, possibly due to fears of repercussions.<sup>78</sup>

A related Wall Street Journal investigation from the same year revealed that Facebook had been complicit in the spread of disinformation on its platform and had not taken down hateful and potentially dangerous content posted by members of the BJP.<sup>79</sup> The investigation “examines the role of Ankhi Das, Facebook’s public-policy executive in India, and the social media giant’s refusal to take down the page of T. Raja Singh, a member of Modi’s BJP party who has asked for Rohingya Muslim immigrants to be shot, labeled Muslims as traitors and threatened to destroy mosques.”<sup>80</sup> The investigation notes employees at Facebook quoted Das saying that “punishing violations by politicians from Mr. Modi’s party would damage the company’s business prospects in the country.”

Ms. Zhang has been unable to give a deposition before a parliamentary panel even though some members had sought permission for her to do so.<sup>81</sup>

In 2022, another investigation—this time by the Reporters’ Collective—showed that the BJP’s “large following, proxies and polarizing content” were helping it “game Facebook’s algorithm” to obtain low advertising rates.<sup>82</sup>

Most recently, a former security chief at Twitter alleged that the Indian government had “forced the social media firm to put a government agent on the payroll” and give him access to sensitive user data.<sup>83</sup>

Despite the criticism and mounting evidence of harm linked to online disinformation, violence and hate, the response from Facebook and other social media platforms has been lacking.

**According to a 2019 report from Equality Labs, “93% of all hate speech posts reported to Facebook remain on Facebook.”<sup>84</sup>**

The report finds that “this includes content advocating violence, bullying and use of offensive slurs, and other forms of Tier 1 hate speech, reflecting a near total failure of the content moderation process. Procedures for reporting these activities to Facebook are opaque, increasing people’s vulnerability, and safety concerns for the persons affected.” The report also identified that “while hate speech almost completely remains up or is reinstated by moderators on Facebook, an increasing number of minority user accounts are being banned or removed entirely.”

According to **Shalini Joshi, Program Lead, Asia-Pacific region of Meedan:**



**“The content moderation policies of social media platforms need to be transparent (for example, on how do they define harassment) and much more nuanced and sensitive to local cultures, languages, and contexts to be able to identify gendered violent content. Social media platforms need to show more willingness to address this issue and engage at a much deeper level with experts to better understand local realities in countries like India.”<sup>85</sup>**

**SHALINI JOSHI**

Ms. Raghavan, a lawyer at Bombay’s High Court and author of research cited previously in this report observed:



**“social media just doesn’t simply mirror the structures of the offline world. There is a degree of aggression and toxicity that you don’t see in real world encounters.”**

**Large social media platforms should be looked at as polluters operating in a high-risk enterprise that has an identifiable and detrimental impact, and they should have to pay.”**

**ARTI RAGHAVAN**

There has to be an incentive for social media companies to reduce the harm they cause. Harms are built into the very architecture of the platforms - and right now we are waiting for their goodwill to address them. It is difficult to get compliance from platforms. We have seen on Twitter several prominent women share that when they raised a complaint with the platform, they received a message saying the content did not violate the platform’s community guidelines.”<sup>86</sup>

In the absence of accountability from companies, many women in politics have found their own way to deal with this reality and respond to the attacks. Ms. Aribam’s story illustrates this trend and the difficulties women encounter when seeking justice from social media platforms:

"during the pandemic, I had criticized the government's response, and the barrage of abusive responses I got was insane. One of these impacted me badly - a graphic image of a sexual organ. So I called it out and went ahead and filed an FIR with the Delhi police. The media interest sparked - Delhi police officials reached out to me and said they would take appropriate action but it didn't reach a logical conclusion. In another instance, when I was harassed by a law student online, I adopted a different strategy. Because of my previous experience with the police, I didn't file a complaint but called him out. People

helped me track the person, and then I wrote to the principal of the college he was studying in. The institution reached out with an apology letter from the young man, and informed me that they had counseled [him].”<sup>87</sup>

**Of her experience, Ms. Aribam also shared, “I have had to do investigative journalism, resort to legal measures, and find my own ways of responding to such incidents.”**

According to Swati Chaturvedi, social media companies are responsible for enabling and even fostering sexist abuse and gendered disinformation on their platforms:



**“Hate is their business model— they are weaponizing and monetizing hate, at the expense of social cohesion and democracy.”<sup>88</sup>**

**SWATI CHATURVEDI**



# CONCLUSION

**Social media usage has grown exponentially in India over the last decade. Most social media platforms—including Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter—registered impressive increases in their user base, and especially since 2014, the year that the BJP came to power. Furthermore, “by 2020, over 50% of India’s population was accessing social networks.”<sup>89</sup>**

India is now the largest market for Facebook and its related companies. With over 294 million accounts registered to users in India, this amount will likely outnumber the population of the entire U.S. in the near future.<sup>90</sup>

Unfortunately, digital platforms in India are far from being a place of equal access or a tool for democratization, as few women have access to the internet in India and those who are outspoken online face criticism and hate. **Mounting evidence suggests that social media platforms have become a tool for political parties to drive their propaganda machines, abusing women leaders and spreading gendered disinformation.**

As documented in this case study, gendered disinformation is a potent form of attack against women in politics in India. It weaponizes misogyny to undermine women from opposing parties, women belonging to religious minorities and those who speak in defense of women’s and minority rights. These women are targeted with false narratives that question their morality, their personal beliefs, their mental health and more, with openly sexist, casteist, xenophobic and racist undertones.

Tragically, digital platforms are complicit in these attacks against women, often refusing to take down hateful and potentially dangerous content posted by political operatives, despite blatant violations of the company’s policies on hate speech. At the same time, Facebook has permanently taken down activists’ accounts.

**As the world’s largest democracy is also becoming the largest market for social media companies, it is impossible to overestimate the implications of these findings for women’s rights and democracy globally, and it is urgent to address them.**

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