

RISING INDIA, TOXIC TECH

Inside the vast digital campaign by Hindu nationalists to inflame India



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Human read



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MUDBIDRI, India — At first, the WhatsApp messages touted roads paved, schools built, free food distributed to the poor — all the usual pitches from a government during election season. But as May drew closer, the messages turned darker.

One viral post that landed in Sachin Patil’s iPhone listed the names of 24 local Hindu men it said were murdered by Muslims. Another mass message warned of Hindu girls being groomed by Muslim men to join the Islamic State. Yet another viral post that reached Patil made an urgent appeal to vote: “If the BJP is here, your children will be safe. Hindus will be safe.”

By the time election day arrived here in south India’s Karnataka state, Patil, a 25-year-old bank teller in a sleepy village outside Mangaluru, said he was receiving 120 political messages a day in six WhatsApp groups. “They were definitely a reminder,” Patil said, to cast a ballot for the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party that governs India.

The rise of Modi and his Hindu-first state

India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi swept into power nearly a decade ago. Since then, he has repeatedly rallied voters in this vast democracy and entrenched his party’s power by exploiting differences between the Hindu majority and Muslim minority.



The BJP, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and affiliated Hindu nationalist groups have been in the global vanguard of using social media for political aims — to advance their ideology and cement their grip over the world’s largest electoral democracy. They have perfected the spread of inflammatory, often false and bigoted material on an industrial scale, earning both envy and condemnation beyond India’s borders.

Central to the success of the BJP, a party with 180 million members, is a massive messaging machine built on top of U.S. social media platforms. It is part of a wider effort by the right-wing forces aligned with Modi to wield technology in various ways — and restrict its use by opponents — in pursuit of a Hindu nationalist agenda that seeks to marginalize religious minorities and suppress criticism.

As hate speech and disinformation in India have grown in recent years, Silicon Valley giants have at times tried to police this incendiary content. But often they have struggled — or willingly turned a blind eye.

The Biden administration, meanwhile, has been aggressively courting India as a counterweight to China even as Modi has accelerated his country’s descent into autocracy. Just this month, the world’s attention was urgently focused on the conduct of the Modi government, after Canada alleged that Indian agents may have assassinated a prominent Sikh separatist on Canadian soil, again raising questions about the efforts of Western countries to draw closer to New Delhi.

This spring, Washington Post journalists spent several weeks in Karnataka as it was gearing up for elections and gained rare access to the vast messaging machinery and the activists who run it. In extensive interviews, BJP staffers and the party’s allies revealed how they conceive and craft posts aimed at exploiting the fears of India’s Hindu majority, and detailed how they had assembled a sprawling apparatus of 150,000 social media workers to propagate this content across a vast network of WhatsApp groups.

Using this infrastructure, the party was able to send messages touting the BJP’s accomplishments and denigrating its opponent, the Indian National Congress party, directly into the pockets of hundreds of millions of people.

But beyond the party's official online efforts, there was also a shadowy parallel campaign, according to BJP staffers, campaign consultants and party supporters. In rare and extensive interviews, they disclosed that the party quietly collaborates with content creators who run what are known as "third-party" or "troll" pages, and who specialize in creating incendiary posts designed to go viral on WhatsApp and fire up the party's base. Often, they painted a dire — and false — picture of an India where the nation's 14 percent Muslim minority, abetted by the secular and liberal Congress party, abused and murdered members of the Hindu majority, and where justice and security could be secured only through a vote for the BJP.

Today, India is WhatsApp's largest market, with more than 500 million users. Social media researchers, government officials and WhatsApp itself have acknowledged the platform's potential as a tool to fan polarization and stoke violence. But precisely what goes on within the BJP's WhatsApp ecosystem has long been a mystery to political scientists and opposition parties, which have struggled to replicate the party's digital success.

What this series reveals

Part 1: Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party and its Hindu nationalist allies have built a massive propaganda machine, with tens of thousands of activists spreading disinformation and religiously divisive posts via WhatsApp. Parent company Meta says WhatsApp cannot monitor content, no matter how inflammatory.



"Other parties in India have tried this. We've seen it in other countries like Brazil. But WhatsApp was really mastered first, and at scale, by the BJP," said Rutgers University professor Kiran Garimella, who has studied WhatsApp's role in Indian politics. "It requires resources, planning, investment, a top-down belief in building this infrastructure. But 99 percent of what's happening in these groups is off-limits. We have no visibility at all."

On the breezy, palm-lined coast of Karnataka, few trolls had more influence than "Astra," which means "weapon" in Sanskrit. Most BJP party workers said they did not know Astra's real identity, but many spoke glowingly about his fiery reputation.

Astra cranked out polarizing WhatsApp posts that would be shared over and over in coastal Karnataka — like those that eventually reached Patil, the bank teller. Astra was courted by local BJP candidates whenever they launched their campaigns, although he rarely spoke at rallies. Astra was such a militant voice on the internet that even BJP leaders feared being accused by him of being too moderate toward Muslims.

"Pages like Astra are much bigger than the official BJP accounts," said Sudeep Shetty, who heads social media for the BJP in Udupi district. "They're our secret weapon."

On a sultry morning in April, with the election still a month away, Astra emerged from his office, an airless, converted college dormitory overlooking a dirt cricket field. He pressed his palms together in a traditional Hindu greeting and introduced himself.

In person, Astra wasn't as fearsome as he was by reputation. He was a willowy, bespectacled 28-year-old, and his name, he said, was Sunil Poojary.

A vast army

Wedged between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats mountain range, the twin cities of Mangaluru and Udupi boast top universities and historic temples. Along tidy village roads, Muslim women cloaked in body-length black niqabs walk past Hindu priests resting under sacred fig trees. Ethnically and culturally diverse but conservative, affluent yet a hotbed of religious friction, the coast has always stood apart from the rest of Karnataka state.

In the 1980s, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the paramilitary volunteer organization that serves as an umbrella for Hindu nationalist groups, swept in. The RSS built homes for poor tribes and fed the needy. It sent aspiring politicians into the BJP, its political wing. It established camps for youngsters and indoctrinated them in Hindutva, or Hindu nationalist ideology.

It funneled them into hard-line activist groups, most notably the Bajrang Dal, a group that accosted and beat up Muslims accused of smuggling cows, considered sacred in Hinduism. Gangs of Bajrang Dal members tracked down and forcibly separated interfaith couples, often accusing Muslim men of waging "love jihad," and frequently clashed with Muslim activist groups.

While young men roiled the streets, political parties jockeyed at the ballot box. In the past seven years, the BJP and Congress — the two biggest parties — have battled on WhatsApp. (While Congress attracts some Muslim voters, its leadership happens to be predominantly Hindu.)

It was approaching noon one day this spring, and Ajith Kumar Ullal, the BJP's social media head in Mangaluru, had been up for seven hours, barking orders over a droning air conditioner that struggled to match the south India heat.

Ullal, 59, worked out of a "war room" in the BJP's gleaming downtown office, commanding a social media "cell" of nine volunteers responsible for an area in coastal Karnataka inhabited by 1.5 million people. The cell included his deputy, who serves as copywriter, and three graphic designers who combined text with photos and logos to craft rectangular picture posts, widely considered the most attention-grabbing and shareable format on WhatsApp.

Volunteer fieldworkers, who had combined phone numbers from voter registration rolls with information collected going door to door, added as many residents as possible to WhatsApp groups. All told, the BJP had 150,000 workers staffing WhatsApp just for the state election, according to Vinod Krishnamurthy, a former head of BJP social media for Karnataka.

Ullal, himself, belonged to 200 WhatsApp groups. Within an hour of seeding a new WhatsApp post, Ullal expected it to be spread to hundreds of thousands of residents in his coastal district. "Each and every BJP volunteer who has a mobile is a social media warrior," he said.

A revolution begins

This revolution in political communications started to stir in 2016, when the Reliance conglomerate entered the telecommunications sector and offered new customers unlimited free data, sparking a price war. Within three years, India's mobile data went from among the most expensive to among the cheapest in the world.

Late that decade, BJP officials began assembling huge databases of phone numbers and seeking ways to streamline the messaging process, three former campaign officials recalled. During an election in Gujarat state, the party used software written in Python code that could hijack WhatsApp's web interface to spread attack ads to tens of thousands of recipients with just a few clicks, according to an internal presentation seen by The Post.

WhatsApp's engineers in 2018 introduced new limits on message-forwarding in India after witnessing the rise of fast-spreading rumors, which had led to mob killings and other tragic consequences. They also made technical changes to curb mass messaging.

So the BJP turned to its biggest strength: organizational discipline. "Everyone who wants to know how the BJP operates looks for hi-fi, extraordinary tech, and some of that exists," said a former BJP campaign manager. "But the reality is, it's mostly brute, manual labor."

According to a field study conducted in 2020, Indian users told Meta researchers they "saw a large amount of content that encouraged conflict, hatred and violence" that was "mostly targeted toward Muslims on WhatsApp groups." "Anti-Muslim rhetoric ... is likely to feature in upcoming elections," warned the internal study, which was shared with The Post by whistleblower Frances Haugen. One former Meta employee who examined Indian elections said that the problem has been recognized internally for years but that executives have not found a solution to monitor or moderate a platform that is by design private.

In response to questions about what measures parent company Meta has taken to address divisive political material on WhatsApp, Meta spokeswoman Bipasha Chakrabarti said WhatsApp has limited message-forwarding and used spam-detection technology to prevent automated mass messaging.

When asked whether the company was aware of the online campaigns in Karnataka, Chakrabarti said: "WhatsApp provides end-to-end encryption by default to protect people's conversations, and that means that nobody — including WhatsApp — can read or listen to your message." She declined further comment.

At the start of the campaign season, Ullal added The Post to one of his WhatsApp groups, and in the ensuing weeks, his team mostly disseminated traditional campaign messages about public services and government achievements. But as election day neared, the tenor of the campaign changed dramatically, and the WhatsApp group became strewn with incendiary posts and appeals to religious bigotry. Ullal compared it to cricket strategy. "In the last few overs," he said, "that's when you do the big hitting."

One post likened Congress politicians to Tipu Sultan, an 18th-century Muslim king who is often vilified for allegedly butchering Hindus. Another post defended as a "victim of conspiracy" a Hindu vigilante who was arrested in March for allegedly beating a Muslim man to death.

Typically, BJP staffers didn't create the inflammatory content, said Akshay Alva, Ullal's deputy. But they spread it anyway. "There are things we may not say, but the troll pages say it," Alva said.

A string of viral hits

Sunil Poojary pounded on his office desk.

"I don't want beautiful videos. I want only content!" he shouted toward the next room, where Ashwini, his video editor, was struggling to keep up with the pace.

On this day in April, the BJP's nominees for state assembly were registering their candidacies, officially kick-starting the election season, and Poojary, who led a team of four, was overwhelmed. New computers and streaming equipment for YouTube were still sitting unboxed in his windowless office. Using his three Android phones, Poojary needed to churn out a steady stream of image posts, stamp them with the Astra logo and blast them out to 30 WhatsApp groups.

In the past few days, Astra had scored a string of viral hits. Poojary had compared the election to a struggle between nationalists (the BJP) and terrorists (the Congress party). He disseminated a photo of a Muslim man groping a statue of a goddess worshiped by a community that's considered a swing vote in the state. He also edited down a speech of a local Congress candidate, he admitted, to make it falsely seem that he was praising Muslim kings.

Poojary didn't make money from the Astra posts, he said. But his social media exploits and his reach helped garner him an unusual level of influence for a 10th-grade dropout who had never held a regular job: The chief minister of Karnataka shared Astra posts on Facebook, and Poojary said he would get calls from other top government and party officials.

A writer, not a fighter

Poojary, who hails from an ethnic group that traditionally tapped coconut trees for sap, never expected this kind of success. When he was 7, Poojary recalled, the RSS arrived at his family's remote two-acre farm carved out of the jungle. They asked to recruit him. His father said yes.

In the local RSS branch, young Sunil learned Hindu chants and nationalist songs. He performed military drills and practiced yoga. His formal schooling was derailed in the 10th grade when his father died, leaving him adrift, he said. But he had already found a family in the RSS and purpose in hard-line Hindutva.

Elders in Poojary's RSS chapter diverted him into the Bajrang Dal, but he quickly knew he did not fit in with muscle-bound bruisers. When his Bajrang Dal gang would start drinking by the highway to steel themselves for ambushing cow transporters, Poojary would not drink or join in the beatings. When they roamed around looking to break up cases of "love jihad," Poojary would urge what he considered restraint: "I would tell others, 'Don't hit the women.'"

Instead, he turned to writing, penning lengthy essays about Hindu mythology and Indian history, and self-publishing three books.

But nothing gave him the attention he desired until he found WhatsApp. In 2020, Poojary launched Astra and three other troll pages and learned to craft headlines, insert images using the free Android app Blend Collage and tweak colors for maximum virality. He reveled in the fact that people assumed the man behind Astra was a “gangster.”

“If people see me, they’ll see I’m slim and diminutive,” he said. “But I have a gift from God: Goddess Saraswati holds my hand and tongue.”

Braying for revenge

In April, the BJP’s state leadership sent shock waves along the coast by tapping a local businessman named Yashpal Suvarna as a candidate for the state assembly. In 2005, as a local leader of the Bajrang Dal group, Suvarna had become known after stopping two Muslims transporting cows in a truck, stripping them naked and parading them before reporters while police looked on.

Given Suvarna’s past as a thug, his campaign team was hoping to use WhatsApp to soften his image and showcase his “humility.” But Suvarna’s personal assistant Yatish felt unsure, so he called up the best social media whiz he knew: Astra.

Poojary told the campaign that the strategy would not work. Up to a third of voters were young men, who liked an aggressive candidate, he reasoned. Furthermore, the Congress party was hinting that if elected, it would ban the Bajrang Dal. Suvarna’s team pivoted. It began sharing to about 1,000 WhatsApp groups strident posts bearing Suvarna’s face next to a menacing Lord Bajrangbali, the deity after which the Bajrang Dal is named, and boasting of his ties to the group.

Poojary also jumped into action. To boost the BJP campaign, he exploited a number of communal killings that had rattled Karnataka the previous summer.

In July 2022, a Muslim teenager was killed in an altercation with members of the Bajrang Dal. That led to the revenge killing of a BJP volunteer by local members of an Islamist militant group, according to Indian law enforcement. Poojary and several other right-wing influencers then spread material agitating for the volunteer’s death to be avenged.

Days later, around sundown on July 28, Mohammed Fazil, 23, was hacked to death by four masked men as he walked near a busy highway crossing north of Mangaluru. Police said Fazil was randomly targeted as a Muslim. At a Bajrang Dal rally, a Hindu nationalist leader openly boasted that Fazil was killed out of revenge. The role of the heated WhatsApp discourse in the violence remains unclear.

A perpetual ‘civilizational battle’

Looking back months later, Poojary said he believed that the anger circulating on WhatsApp had contributed to the bloodshed and that violence could be justified in the service of Hinduism.

Santosh Kenchamba, who runs the highly influential Rashtra Dharma troll page, said he also called for the revenge killing. He explained that it was part of a perpetual “civilizational battle” by online activists to help remake India into a Hindu state where Muslims knew their place.

As the election heated up in April, Poojary doubled down on spurious claims on WhatsApp that Muslims, abetted by the Congress party, had killed dozens of other Hindu activists.

One of the voters who received these pre-election messages was Patil, the bank teller. Lounging with friends outside a barbershop not far from where Fazil was killed, Patil, a middle-class young Hindu man with a taste for flower-print shirts and new iPhones, said he had known Fazil from school.

Patil said that while growing up, he did not think Fazil, or most Muslims, posed much of a threat. But over the past five years, Patil had become increasingly troubled by what he was seeing on WhatsApp about the danger Muslims allegedly posed, he said. He had heard anonymous voice recordings on WhatsApp that purported to be of Muslim extremists plotting to kill Hindus. As the May election approached, he received warnings about more violence if Congress won.

Patil did not question any of this disinformation. Instead, he and his friends, who said they consumed news only from WhatsApp, arrived at an inevitable conclusion.

“Hindus are in danger,” Patil said.

An unending struggle

With the campaign reaching fever pitch at the start of May, Modi landed on the coast to lead a teeming rally. Poojary stood in the heat, mostly bored as his hero spoke about the economy. But after an hour, Modi’s voice began to rise. His arms reached for the sky. Finally, he unleashed his fury over the Congress party’s proposal to ban the Bajrang Dal.

“When you press the button in the polling booth,” Modi thundered, “punish them by saying, ‘Hail, Lord Bajrangbali!’”

The crowd, including Poojary, erupted in rapture.

But even with the prime minister’s last-minute intervention, the statewide election proved to be a disappointment for the BJP. Television analysts said the party had been weakened, in part, by infighting among its leaders, and the Congress party gained enough seats to take control of the state legislature in Karnataka.

On a quiet street north of Mangaluru, Patil — who ultimately had voted for the BJP — worried about Hindus’ safety. With Congress now running the state, he said, “Muslims will be emboldened.”

But the shrill warnings that left Patil so alarmed had actually helped carry the day for the BJP along the coast. In this part of the state, where operatives such as Poojary and Ullal had filled voters' screens with their divisive content, the BJP swept all but two of the 13 contested legislative seats. Down by the sea, roads were blanketed every 100 yards by banners congratulating one of the region's rising stars, "Yashpal Suvarna, Member of the Legislative Assembly."

Up in the red clay hills, Poojary seemed relieved. Five local BJP candidates he had supported on social media all won. But he was also worried, he admitted, that with Congress now controlling the state police, he might be charged with libel or spreading fake information.

Still, Poojary could not help continuing to stir the pot. The election had barely ended, and he was already spreading posts that compared the new Congress state government to Tipu Sultan, the Muslim oppressor. He warned, using an image of splattered blood, that a Hindu holy man had already been murdered near Bangalore.

In his windowless office, Poojary was still giving directions to his video editor and graphic designer every few minutes. His phone was still lighting up constantly with WhatsApp notifications.

"The Muslims have won," he said, "for now."

He excused himself, pressed his palms together in front of his heart, and went back to work.

Mohit Rao and Shams Irfan contributed to this report.

About this story

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