tomorrow,
it will be us:

Facing and Challenging Digital Hate Speech Against Muslim Women in India
Author

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Cover image courtesy Amar Saeed

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Introduction

Muslim women have not been silent spectators to India’s back-sliding democracy and have spoken up for themselves and their communities with great force whenever the need arose. Indeed, a lot has also been spoken about Muslim women in India and the hate that they are regularly subjected to by the Hindu Right every time they dare to speak out. Yet, little has been done to address this persistent hate speech—either by the state or by the social media platforms where they are threatened, harassed, and abused regularly. Muslim women consistently report feeling overwhelmed, scared, and hopeless and rarely receive solidarity that holds any meaning for them. This report is a set of narratives from these women and begs the question of what meaningful solidarity and action centering Muslim women should look like. There are no answers, but there may be hope.

The title of the report comes from what one of the interviewees said in response to the ‘liberal claim’ that while Muslim women are being targeted today, tomorrow, other marginalized women will be, and then all women will be. ‘Today is it us’, she had said, ‘tomorrow it will be us, and yesterday it was us’. In asserting so, she reemphasized Muslim women’s victimhood in light of the Hindutva project and drew a critical distinction missed by many—that hate and violence against Muslim women is not a way for misogyny to fulfill its agenda, but that misogyny against Muslim women is yet another way to fulfill the Hindutva agenda. Such a distinction is significant as we are confronted with political leaders and groups regularly insisting that the issues that Muslim women face are ‘women’s issues’ and not Muslim women’s issues. Such conflation and reduction serve no purpose to the cause of Muslim women whose struggles are distinct from the broad category of ‘women’ and while Muslim women’s womanhood is often attacked, it is done to attack their Muslimhood. It is thus pertinent we locate Muslim women’s voices in their beliefs and their socio-political realities to recognize the layered nature of threats that they receive—this report is a small, imperfect step in that direction.

The interviewees for this humble report are all educated, politically informed activists in their own right. They use the internet for their activism, and often, they are activists outside of the internet as well. Yet, ultimately, as these women repeatedly asserted to me, they are just ordinary Muslim women in India doing their jobs as writers, lawyers, journalists, and researchers and what marks them as targets is that they are also using the internet to speak their minds.
Methodology

For this report, the author reached out to both:

a. Muslim women who have faced and spoken up about digital hate speech
b. Activists, researchers, lawyers, and writers who have worked on the issue of digital hate speech in India

Of course, both of these groups had substantial overlap and, in some instances, talking to someone from the former group helped the author consequently talk to someone from the latter group. To that extent, the broad outreach method was reaching out based on videos, news reports, and other online material and of course, snowballing. Based on what felt most comfortable and safe for the interviewees, the report either names the women or anonymizes them.

For the first group of people, the interviews were free-flowing without any specific objective outside of trying to make sense of what digital hatred the interviewee had encountered, how it had impacted them, and lastly, how they coped. The interviews were intentionally left unstructured so as to create a space where the interviewees could not just share their experiences but also their ideas and opinions and vent their frustrations. While this meant that many intricacies in terms of the exact forms of hate speech and their consequent impact could not be covered, the author strongly believes that allowing the interviewees a space to mold their own narratives has helped this report move beyond cliches of oppression and marginalization to allow Muslim women the space to explore their hurt outside of narratives that they are socially forced to perform.

This report is more a set of narratives than a formal report that contextualizes hate speech against Muslim women at the larger level of society. What the author has sought to do instead is to contextualize the lives, work, and hurt of Muslim women who have been affected by digital hate speech. In order to convey the same, the report is divided into three distinct chapters: the first dealing with the hurt, the second dealing with the impact and aftermath of being subject to this hurt, and the final chapter dealing with action that is being taken to challenge digital hate speech in India. The final chapter stresses upon the action and advocacy that is particularly being taken up by civil society initiatives at various levels in order to emphasize the bottom-up nature of digital hate speech.
Chapter 1: The Hurt We Hold

A recent study of anti-Muslim tweets that was conducted by the Islamic Council of Victoria highlighted that Islamophobia was more prevalent on the web than in real life and that India showed the 3rd largest spike in anti-Muslim hate posts with only 14.83% of such tweets being taken down after getting reported. While the worrying scale of this digital hate has been studied regularly across the world, how victimization comes to happen is still unclear. Most interviewees for this report expressed surprise that they had been targeted and until they had been targeted, did not know that they were doing something that could jeopardize their safety- a tweet was just a tweet until it brought down an avalanche of hate, and there is no saying what will blow up at what time.

“Most of the time, it’s random. You post one video, one tweet, or a picture, and two or three people will come to your DMs to say something”, an interviewee told the author when asked if she noticed any patterns in the way targeted hate speech works against Muslim women. “But sometimes, it is targeted”, she had added, recollecting an incident when a tweet of hers had gone viral and been picked up by ‘big right-wing accounts with lots of followers’ resulting in lots of harassment from ‘smaller accounts’. Inadvertently, she discovered on her first day as a freelance journalist after quitting a well-paying media job that she was one of the several Muslim women being auctioned on the Bulli Bai app. The effect was jarring; she was utterly devastated on a day that was meant to be a fresh start for her as an independent professional. She failed to understand why she had become the target, admitting that while she did tweet her political opinions now and then, she was not famous or particularly well-known for her politics.

Another interviewee shared how a few months ago while searching the Internet for an article that she had earlier written, she discovered pictures of her on a porn site. Having been through the unfortunate tangles of a police complaint in an earlier instance when her picture was used for the Sulli Deals app, this time, she did not even feel confident to speak out against it either on the internet or to any authorities. She simply cried.

Most of the interviewees for this report have been targeted through either Bulli Bai or Sulli Deals-both of which were apps hosted on GitHub where several Muslim women’s pictures were uploaded, and the women then ‘auctioned’. Bulli Bai was the second app in six months, closely following the example of Sulli Deals which was de-
platformed after colossal outrage. Rooted in the tradition of the Hindu Right’s hypersexualization of Muslim Women over different platforms online, Bulli Bai welcomed users with the tag line: “Your Bulli Bai of the day” accompanying doctored pictures and derogatory content about the women.

The predecessor to these apps had been Youtuber ‘Liberal Doge’s live-streaming of Eid photos of Pakistani Muslim women asking his audience to rate or auction them. While all of these targeted campaigns were met with anger and demands for accountability, little has since been done to provide justice for the victims or hold the perpetrators of the app guilty. Those who were arrested were soon released on bail with the court stating that allegations of creating disharmony between two religions cannot be held true since only one religion (Islam) has been targeted. Further, the court expressed disbelief that the accused whom the court deemed to be belonging to ‘respectable families’ could engage in such behaviour. Even if they did, the court held that a ‘fatherly view’ must be taken to rein in the menace instead of choosing to incarcerate the accused and ruin their futures.

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For the victims who found themselves being auctioned on these apps, life was obviously not the same for a long time. Working was hard, speaking out was hard, and continuing to have a voice online was harder. Some were scared that their families would ask them to stop writing, and others did not tell their families at all. The ultimate result was that these women were denied a critical support system when they needed it the most for fear that their careers as writers, journalists, and activists would be called into question by family and friends who were acutely aware of how little they could offer to help these women fight back the state-backed harassers. Writing itself was not the same for a very long time as some women feared writing anything that would land them in a similar place again. Most victims expressed that their careers had come to a painful pause as they reflected on the cost of their work.

Problems in professional lives escalated as young women increasingly rely on the internet to find work. This is especially true for freelance journalists, writers, researchers, and several professionals in the development sector who get to work as and when they come across openings online. One interviewee, a freelance journalist who was one of the victims of the Sulli Deals episode, spoke about an incident where
a person had reposted her tweet asking her to please check her DMs for some help. Earlier, she had used the internet for over a decade to connect with those in need and carry out social work in the form of donation works and also used it to share her writings and opinions. However, now, shaken from the Sulli deals experience and having been at the receiving end of a lot of ensuing hate speech that was sexually abusive, Islamophobic, and sexist, she had made it a point not to check Direct Messages from strangers. However, she decided to make an exception this time and check what help or work the person wanted from her. It was a mistake she instantly regretted—she found texts about Sulli Deals, how good a platform it was, and how it should not have been removed. That someone would go to the extent of reposting her tweet to get her attention and request her to check her DMs knowing very well that she was avoiding doing the same because of just how traumatizing Sulli Deals had been for her—that someone would do all this only to re-traumatize her intentionally stays with her as a reminder of just how far the Hindu Right is willing to go to harass Muslim women online.

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Tavishi, a development studies major, is interested in feminist cybersecurity and tech-based gender violence. During her time in college, her work particularly examined digital hate speech and how the process of othering takes place in the various Hindu Right public groups on Facebook, especially in the context of ‘love jihad’ and Islamophobic narratives around population control. Speaking about her work, she affirmed the prevalence of high amounts of hate speech against Muslims online and explained:

“what makes it so difficult for platforms to regulate targeted hate speech is that it is rooted in language, in culturally sensitive slurs. It is rooted in inside jokes and memes that are circulated as a part of these groups, and which wouldn’t be understandable to someone who looks at it from the outside, someone who doesn't understand the currency of what is used in Hindu nationalist groups or someone who doesn’t properly understand the ideology behind the words. I found that these groups build a digital community through the circulation of memes with very specialized or niche language or inside jokes. So people established their membership in the Hindu Right spaces by targeting Muslim men and Muslim women through very nuanced language, attribution, and even emojis and images. These communities also often reshare each other’s content.”
The significance of this understanding lies in the fact that digital hate speech is increasingly becoming a currency of sorts to find one’s sense of belonging. Additionally, we also observe how such speech, even if coming from a particular individual, is fostered in community spaces. With this in mind, if we were to look at the GitHub apps, then we notice that the problem is not just at the level of the perpetrators who had created the app- these people were rightly identified and arrested, but the problem also lies at the level of the app’s intended audience, i.e., those participated in the mock-auction and those who reached out to harass the women whose identities were shared on the app. As the interviewees highlighted, it was not the app itself that marked the peak of harassment- more was to follow in much more targeted forms.

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An independent Kashmiri journalist who had covered the story of the Sulli Deals app was similarly shocked as she discovered that this time, she was also victimized along with a few other Kashmiri journalists on the Bulli Bai app. She spoke of feeling ‘doubly assaulted’- she had already been working on precarious grounds and faced regular harassment working as a journalist in Kashmir. Now she was on the radar of the Hindu Right online as well. She was the only Kashmiri woman who managed to speak up and was inundated with calls and requests from media who wanted to hear more from her on this. She decided to speak up and was infuriated by how the victims were being blamed across social media for having a profile picture of themselves in the first place. She posted a tweet clarifying that it was not just her photo that the perpetrators had uploaded; her Twitter handle was shared on the app, too- “so they’re not just attacking me for my picture, they’re attacking me as a person”.

There are only a handful of female journalists reporting on the humanitarian crises, much fewer photojournalists, she said, explaining how she was part of a vocal minority whom the Hindu Right was trying to silence. She had not come across anything like that in Kashmir and was traumatized for a very long time- “I changed my DP after that. I didn't write anything stories, and my work was impacted a lot. To be honest, I was not able to work for at least three months; I was just speaking to the media and people from international publications. I was not able to do anything. I even moved to Delhi with a friend because I felt so unsafe”. She felt she was privileged and could afford to speak up, and she was grateful she had her family
backing her. Still, her mental health was severely impacted in ways she had not anticipated, even as she continued to speak up.

Even as women like her were being careful, they were continuously agitated by these restrictions—“why should I be careful?” she asked, upset about how Muslims are increasingly denied the freedom to share their opinions, speak out their heart, work, and utilize social media to its fullest potential. Ultimately, as a Kashmiri journalist, she did not consider approaching the police or any other state authorities as a viable option and came full circle to resigning to the fact that we only have ourselves and need to train ourselves to use the internet in a manner which would not jeopardize our safety.

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One interviewee, a journalist-tuned-law student, wrote extensively about human rights violations against minorities and the various hate speech and hate crimes becoming common in India. She identified her work as ‘protecting human rights’, and challenging gender inequality and religious inequality’. To this end, she also wrote during the anti-CAA movement, the farmers’ protest, and movements to reduce private school fees in India.

She knows how social media has come to fill the gaps that traditional media now espouses. Elaborating on this, she lamented that the mainstream media is working parallely on the government’s agenda rather than upholding itself like the fourth pillar of democracy. Referring to the hijab ban in Karnataka, she pointed out the crucial role of the internet in showing just how hijab-wearing girls were condemned and segregated, how mobs of Hindu boys chased and surrounded an abaya-wearing Muslim girl Muskaan and how she held her ground and raised the slogan of ‘Allahu Akbar’ in retaliation. The media, she pointed out, did not show the ‘Muslim side’ of the movement, ‘Facebook, Twitter, Instagram offered the ground reality’.

However, these ‘ground reality’ sources are often inundated with hate speech. This makes it increasingly difficult to access these sources without having one’s mental health jeopardized. One of the interviewees, a graduate of TISS, spoke of unfollowing Maktoob Media and Rana Ayyub after being bothered by how much hate speech was in the comments section, a space she preferred to frequent to understand the broader context of posts and what people feel about it.

Digital hate speech against Rana Ayyub in fact reflects the deep crisis politically vocal Muslim women face on the internet in India. As of July 2022, there were a recorded
8.5 million tweets targeting Ayyub. This is despite the international intervention that had been taken in 2018 through a team of five special rapporteurs of the United Nations urging the Indian state to provide Ayyub with security in light of her regularly receiving death and gang-rape threats.

What we thus observe is a challenge at two levels when it comes to people accessing media that is independent and sympathetic to Muslim realities: on the first level, journalists and media outlets are fraught with hate speech and struggle to work in a safe atmosphere online, and on the second level, their audiences as witnesses to their struggle find it challenging to cope with visible forms of hate speech in the form of comments on these pages’ posts.

Aside from these concerns, consistently using social media to understand the ‘Muslim side’ of the news also has had the effect of hindering Muslim women’s participation in public spaces as the algorithm-fed stories of regular violence and hate speech against Muslim bodies instils a perpetual sense of lack of public safety, especially for Muslim women. Violence seems random, and everywhere, there is no saying who would be targeted and who would be spared. Fatima, a young girl currently residing in Saudi Arabia, uses social media to stay in the loop of Indian politics and keenly follows and speaks up against atrocities committed against Muslims in India. While visiting India this year, she admitted that her ‘entire family was terrified’. When she did stay some time in India, she felt a sense of dissonance. Safety was surprising, not relieving.

It is not as if social media exaggerates or distorts the issue; communal violence against Muslims in India is not a rare event. Instead, the problem seems to be that the gap between the mainstream media that rarely reports on such violence, especially how common it is, and between social media algorithms that exclusively show such content regularly, one struggles to locate the actual violence, whom it affects most, in what places, and in what forms. As Fatima explained, if mainstream media was to be believed, communal violence is rare. If social media is to be believed, it is everywhere, all the time, and always gruesome. The reality is somewhere between actual violence and perpetual risk of violence - social media’s algorithmic portrayal of the issue is unequipped to give a clear, contextual picture of the problem without pushing users into exaggerated binaries. For young Muslim women like Fatima, though, there is no choice but to reconcile themselves to the ways of the algorithm -

“I feel like the moment you stop being on the internet; you're not listening to these stories every single day. It doesn't feel like it's that big a problem. And I would rather
think that it’s that big of a problem than think it doesn’t exist at all because I know my people are being oppressed every day”.

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Rcollecting an incident where a video on hate speech that she had posted had gone viral on Instagram, an interviewee narrated how it inevitably led to her receiving a barrage of hateful DMs and comments. She turned off her comments section on her page, at which point she was being tagged in other people’s posts and stories and harassed with derogatory speech and threats. After she disabled this option as well, she started receiving emails. When she was threatened with a claim that an FIR would be filed if she didn’t remove the post, she did not take the threat seriously, knowing the trolls ‘didn’t have the guts’ for it anyway. She identified how most regular hate comes from anonymous accounts and how people with a decent following often do not sneak in hateful comments on others’ profiles online. While the barrage of hate still worried and followed her everywhere, this distinction helped her to overcome her fears, knowing that those hiding behind anonymous accounts would not dare to file an actual FIR or create ‘real-life’ harm. For most, digital hate is normalized and the threshold for it actually being harmful or dangerous is when the digital hate or its consequences seep into ‘real life’.

Other times, the interviewee’s ‘real life’ also impacted how they stepped back from using the internet politically. “I think I probably trained myself not to be interested in political conversations”, an interviewee who witnessed the Gujarat Riots told me, “I told myself that if I’m not interested in this, no one is going to bother me. People who are more vocal are bullied more”.

For most Muslim women interviewed, social media was their window to the world. Its discursive potential had what had enticed them. For the first time in their lives, using social media, they learned to forge a political identity, be stakeholders in political conversations that have traditionally been dominated by men, advocate for what they believed in, and create an impact even if such impact meant changing a colleague’s ideas about something through extensive debating in the comments section.

With the Hindu Right policing and picking on vocal women and then harassing them, most women expressed both a fear and a sense of pointlessness to discoursing online. Those who had stepped back from such discourses of their own volition felt a sense of calm and pointed out how damaging such utilization of social media appeared for
those who continued to engage. Others, however, had stepped back in resignation and deeply felt the loss of platforms that helped them interact and grow. The absence of safe and respectful spaces for Muslim women to exist politically is a loss everyone grieved.
Chapter 2: Coping with Harsh Realities

Speaking about the impact of digital hate, one interviewee pointed out how it has been found that lynchings are planned on closed networks online and how Gauri Lankesh had received phone calls and other death threats before being shot by Hindu Right vigilantes in broad daylight in 2017. A joint investigation by Forbidden Stories and Digital Witness Lab revealed that a video of Lankesh received more than 130 million interactions on Facebook and over 250,000 views on YouTube which led to “an intense and vitriolic character assassination that painted her as anti-Hindu well before the plan to assassinate her had been hatched”.

Digital hate, as some interviewees understand it, is not distinct from ‘real-world’ hate. It directly occurs either as a forewarning of physical harm or as a result of real-life issues and controversies. Under such circumstances, it is difficult for victims of digital hate speech to now worry about how this would overspill into their ‘physical’ lives.

The need to clearly demarcate their real life from their internet lives was felt strongly by all the women who had faced targeted digital hate. Most of these Muslim women found themselves in a lonely place where they could not even reach out to their families for support in the aftermath of the Sulli Deals and Bulli Bai episodes. As one interviewee expressed, the perpetrators sought to attack their ‘dignity’. She spoke of how Savarkar had advocated for violence and retribution against Muslim women and how he wrote about weaponizing Muslim women to achieve Hindu Rashtra finally. “Twenty, twenty-five years of our lives we have been told that to guard our chastity, protect our dignity, we are brought up a certain way’, she explained, ‘they know how it will hurt us, and they attack us there’.

As a daughter of a single mother, this interviewee dared not worry her mother with the news that there was such a platform as Sulli Deals and that she was of its many victims. In our interview, she told me of the struggle to block all the resources that deal with the specific news about the apps and their victims from reaching her mother- ‘till date, she doesn’t know’, she said.

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On the flip side, another interviewee spoke of how relieved she was when her brother found out about her victimization and instead of discouraging her, told her he ‘was
proud’ of her work and that she should not be scared despite these attempts to silence her. As endearing as this gesture is, it is incredibly rare, and most interviewees were sympathetic to why it was so. They highlighted how they came from ‘normal’ families- middle class, with no political affiliations that would come to their resume, with parents who worked ordinary jobs, and siblings whose futures were dependent on their futures, as is often so in most Indian families. These Muslim families simply could not bear the thought of risking their daughters’ lives and well-being and would often want to ‘protect’ them, knowing they don’t have the resources to help their daughters if any danger occurs. As one interviewee put it, ‘for our families, what happens in India does not matter. What happens to us matters immediately.’ Most of the interviewees understood this and reciprocated their family’s sense of dread.

‘See, digital hate is okay’ one interviewee said, ‘it is going to happen all the time, but it should not turn up in your real life: like someone coming to your house and threatening your family. That has always been a big concern for me’.

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Speaking of why they chose not to go to the police despite the seriousness of the digital hate speech they were facing, one interviewee recounted an incident of the police arresting a Muslim journalist who was simply reporting the Delhi pogrom. These riots that claimed the lives of over 50 people happened right before the eyes of the police, who walked shoulder-to-shoulder with the perpetrators and refused to take any action to help Muslims who were vulnerable to violence. With this being the stance of the state officials, the interviewee expressed an inability to find solace in the solidarity she receives from those around her, knowing ultimately that this solidarity can only make her ‘feel good that there are people’ who support her but not protect her or take action against the perpetrators.

Interviewees victimized by the GitHub apps repeatedly brought up how the police and the justice system cared more about the offenders and their futures than the safety and security of the victims. One interviewee narrated how the police had asked her if a boy was involved when she went to the police station with her cousin and waited for several hours to find an audience with the police. When she insisted that no boy was involved, the policeman insisted that he had seen several such cases and that men usually resort to threatening women online when an affair goes wrong. Such an attitude from the police is hardly surprising. It has been found that ‘on average, at least one woman files a complaint against police apathy every two hours,
and analysis of the information accessed from the National Commission for Women (NCW) shows that at least 13 women wanting to file complaints—ranging from domestic violence to harassment are either discouraged, turned away or further harassed by the police every day’.

Further, research conducted by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) and Quill Foundation revealed how unwelcome the police were to distressed Muslims in general: One respondent to the research survey said that “As soon as a policeman sees a woman in a burqa or a hijab, he refuses to entertain her, and asks her to sit and wait. Her turn never comes. In fact, the waiting period turns into an hour, then two hours or so on”.

When an interviewee discovered that she was on the Sulli Deals and approached the Cyber Department to file a case, she found the officials utterly unaware of what was happening even though it had been over four to five days since the outrage against the app had started. After explaining everything to the official, the official asked her to narrate the entire incident to another female police official. She had to explain her problem to three different police officers, after which they ‘accepted’ her complaint but still did not register an FIR for over a month. During this period, she had called them multiple times, but to no avail. Finally, as the outrage escalated and reached international media, the police called her and took her to the magistrate to record a statement. They did not follow up, and she watched as those arrested for creating the app were granted bail for being first-time offenders. ‘These are the cyber police; they should be doing more’, she said, ‘they should be on the watch, preventing these incidents from happening in the first place’.

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What does solidarity mean under such circumstances? For those whose family life, career, and mental health are constantly at stake for occupying political space on the internet, the limitations of solidarity in the face of apathetic and often complicit state authorities are unmissable. One interviewee narrated the story of how she discovered that solidarity didn’t matter much during such times—
“...I was unaware that even my photographs were there. People were talking about it. Muslim women were talking about it. I got to know that something was going on and that Muslim women like Afreen and Nabiya were speaking out against the Sulli Deals app. So I gave them my words of solidarity, saying, ‘I understand that this is a tough time for you’. As usual, we all are sad that this is happening. Of course, listening to
these interviews makes you very sad, but for the person who's going through it, their feelings are completely different. I was offering words of solidarity to my companions at around midnight. But by six or seven in the morning, I received a screenshot showing that my pictures were published too. From that moment, I cried for over two hours. I just didn’t know what to do”.

She disagreed with the narratives that came with the solidarity that was offered to her and resented that people had made it a women’s issue and left out that these are Muslim women who have been targeted en masse. In fact, this was the narrative that was taken up by Smriti Irani, the Union Minister for Women and Child Development and even Rekha Sharma, the NCW Chairperson who said that “it is not a matter of Hindu or Muslim women. Communities of both religions need to come together and protect their women. These apps are not about hurting each other’s communities but hurting women.”

The interviewee pointed out how people claimed that it is only incidental that Muslim women are the target; they would be the targets tomorrow. What happens if you are victimised and then not even allowed to claim that victimisation? She contended that today is us (Muslim women as victims) because it has always been us, and it will continue to be us.

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Though many women did speak up publicly about their experiences, this was not easy either. One interviewee found that people had left problematic and sexually abusive comments in the comments section of interviews she had given to news outlets. The interviewees understood that they were being targeted because the Hindu Right wants them to stop talking about the crimes, the atrocities- “I can't let them do that”. They made peace with the fact that their online political existence would lead to this. After taking a few precautions by safeguarding their families and removing all pictures, they continued to work and participate politically online. So long as the hate is at a scale at which it can be ignored, they ignore it and prefer not to speak about it since that would only give them a bigger platform and allow them to amplify their hate.

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In the course of the interviews, several interviewees mentioned how much hate
journalist and writer Rana Ayyub receives publicly every day. Yet still, she goes on, raising a strong voice against the fascist regime. Rana gave these women hope and reason- if Rana can endure so much and still persevere, so should we, they said. They spoke of how they don’t feel anything except maybe hope- digital hate speech is an eventuality they must come to accept if they have to live. **These women felt obligated by work, conscience, or faith to resist- ‘the Quran says that when there is an injustice, we must stand up and oppose it, even if we have to stand against our own families’**. ‘When I feel bad, I think of Bilkis aapa’, one interviewee said, referring to the atrocities suffered by Bilkis Bano in the Gujarat Riots of 2002. Bilkis, who was then pregnant, was gang-raped and watched her three-year-old daughter be killed. She lost fourteen other family members in these riots. Eleven people were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for their crimes against Bilkis and her family. “I think of her daughter”, my interviewee told me, “she was three years old in 2002 when she was killed. She would have been around our age if she were alive.”

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Chapter 3: On the Threshold of Hope

Delhi-based lawyer Zeeshan Ahmed who has written extensively about hate speech laws in India pointed out how present-day technology is not infused with elements of integrity, equality, and dignity and accepts exclusion as inevitable. As he succinctly put it-

“Technology is never conceptualized by the poor people. It is always the men sitting in America who come up with technology as a means to accentuate their can capital.”

Zeeshan’s observation lays the ground for this chapter since it led the author to-

1. Ask many of the interviewees what they would imagine a safer internet to be like and what they felt their needs as victims of digital hate were
2. Interview those who were challenging hate speech and indignity as an inevitable consequence of existing online

This chapter briefly reviews some ideas and forms of activism that challenge the status quo of digital hate speech. Most victims who were interviewed were overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the problem even as they identified what needed change. Hate speech is indeed perpetuated by what may seem like everyone, everything, all at once- the state, the corporations, the communities, and the individuals, are all complicit in their own ways. Impossible as it may seem, this is the moment where victims, activists, and concerned people can take charge by imagining and demanding technology that has been conceptualized by us, for us.

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The Dignity in Difference Project is an initiative that seeks to address and document hate speech in South Asia. Hameeda, a freelance journalist and gender consultant from Kashmir, who had initiated the project in South Asia, stated that one of the reasons why she wanted to be involved with this project was because she came across several comments targeting her identity when she published a report online a few years ago as. The comments were targeting her ‘integrity as a journalist’. They led her to realize that they were very limited avenues for Muslim women like her to speak out or even ‘report such hate speech in such a manner that could empower us, provide us some form of support, and could also provide counter-narratives in the process’. 
DID recently started a flagship program called the Safe Digital Space Research Fellowship has been designed to challenge hate speech at multiple levels: at the individual level by training a batch of fellows, at the collective level by empowering researchers to create a pool of knowledge, and finally at the collaborative civil-society level by bringing in other actors as stakeholders to the question of how hate speech needs to be challenged in the sub-continent.

In addition to this fellowship, DID has also hosted several workshops that empower participants to examine what lies at the very root of hate speech. These workshops covered concepts such as intuition, perception, and cognitive bias and imparted skills such as non-violent communication, evidence gathering, fact-checking, and much more. The focus is thus removed from the spiral of how to find ways to challenge hate speech and instead shifted towards identifying and preventing such speech and its seeds from sprouting in the first place.

Rachit Sharma, an activist, and writer who is a DID fellow spoke of his experience facilitating dialogue spaces with this foundational focus by highlighting how hate speech itself is part of a much larger pyramid-

“When we look at jokes, stereotypes, cultural narratives in the context of hate speech, we see that these are a foundation that goes up a pyramid- this is when bias comes in forms such as maintaining a social distance, name-calling, and so on. You go a little step ahead, and it can turn into discrimination, which could be educational discrimination, economic discrimination, and other such forms of systemic discrimination. When you just look at the stereotypes, it may feel like it doesn’t make much difference. But when you see it in the context of a pyramid, you see that the first step that could ultimately transform into incitement of violence and genocide is right at the top of that pyramid. When participants can see that context, they realize that they are probably responsible for a larger problem.”

Rachit has also helped create awareness about hate speech in the ‘Action Learning Days’ in Delhi. This is a space where people come together once every month and try to create something with their hands or collaborate with another organization to learn something. For him, it makes sense to facilitate sessions around hate speech in physical spaces since it allows participants to see each other as more than disembodied usernames. Physically, he says, these spaces allow you to ‘see your own biases right in front of you’, and this makes it easier for participants to hear somebody’s story, sympathize, and see what part they played. He added-

“I think all these spaces are founded upon dignity in so many ways, and I don’t feel any dialogue can happen without that. Participants may feel like they probably
disagree with the speaker, but they would still respect the speaker's dignity enough to hear them out, ask questions, and share their points of view. And this comes with a certain grounding that, in turn, comes from physically creating a comfortable and safe space for everybody.”

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While challenging digital hate speech and trying to build solutions is a difficult task in itself, for those belonging to marginalized or oppressed groups, prevalent narratives fixated around their disadvantage and disempowerment further discourage changemakers from reaching out to people from other communities, building bridges, and explore grassroots approaches to addressing hate speech online. As Hameeda shares-

“When I am in fem-tech spaces listening to very intelligent colleagues speak about their experiences, why it is that they want to introduce a particular piece of technology, I feel they often feed onto the notion that someone else is the problem, that the state is the problem, that this particular community is the problem, and that is why we need a safe space”.

Indeed, while such an approach may seem warranted at one level, what it does in the long term is to further distance communities from each other, thus allowing miscommunications, misunderstandings, and misgivings to consume their channels of communication with each other inevitably. This problematic culture of distancing people is highly prevalent among social media users. For Hameeda, the key lay in patience, perseverance, and collaboratively building bridges and she warned: “We have to hold these multiple realities together. We cannot juxtapose one reality against the other and call it justice”.

Alongside community organizing efforts to examine hate speech, there is an urgent need for advocacy at the level of platform governance as well. In an investigation by the TIMES, it was found that Facebook employees had discovered “a high volume of Love Jihad content” and groups and pages “replete with inflammatory and anti-Muslim content”. Moreover, they suspected a lot more such content hadn’t been accounted for due to the Facebook algorithms’ inability to detect content posted in other popular Indian languages such as Hindi and Bengali. They also discovered that the RSS regularly posts inciteful content that clearly violates Facebook’s rules. Facebook employees were also aware of the threat posed by such ‘politicized hate’ to vulnerable groups such as Muslims in India.
The investigation also found that Facebook employees raised the issue of the Love Jihad conspiracy as early as 2019. Still, the company decided against banning it by designating it as a ‘militarized social movement’ as it did with QAnon in 2020 and instead chose to down-rank and individually remove reported Love Jihad content in users’ feeds and continue letting RSS and other organizations posting dangerous content in light of ‘political sensitivities’.

Greater engagement with local communities can help social media platforms move from a hierarchical model to a model where people are actively involved in framing the rules and policies that work for them. DID’s approach to addressing the critical issue of a lack of a universally accepted/acceptable definition of hate speech is an excellent example of how technology could be democratized and built on the experience and expertise of those it often ignores. While brainstorming about this issue, DID decided to build a chatbot where survivors of hate speech would explain what kind of hate speech they were subjected to. They felt this would be a good decision instead of approaching the government or any organization because such a tool would give survivors the power to explain and define what hate speech is for them. This shifts the attention to several details that an impartial and unaffected body would otherwise miss. As Tavishi added in her interview-

“It is very important to look at the internet and digital rights in light of its feminist critique. We should move away from a technocratic or purely legal approach where only certain experts are believed to be the bearers of like knowledge. Instead, people who experience the internet, especially those on its margins and those who have been victimized, should be considered legitimate sources of knowledge. Their lived experiences and needs should be at the center of addressing technology-facilitated gender-based violence.”

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Conclusion

As the report indicates, digital hate speech looms over the lives of Muslim women like an ominous dark cloud. Each time a Muslim woman dares to unabashedly occupy political space online, she gambles with her safety, and there is no system in place to support her if things go wrong. While the Hindu Right likes to intervene as saviours by positioning Muslim women as ‘victims’, the narratives in this report reveal that what they are really bothered by is not Muslim women’s victimhood but in fact their claim to victimhood that the Hindu Right itself has imposed on them. After all, if Muslim women are allowed to argue that what is oppressing them is not their faith, their work, or their family, but instead the hypersexualized and patronizing tropes the Hindu Right has imposed on them, how would the Hindu Right assert its superiority as the Muslim woman’s saviour?

In fact, Muslim women’s narratives reveal that they need no saviour whatsoever. What they need is for the perpetrators, the state officials, and the social media platforms to be held accountable. For the purposes of this report, the interviewees spoke about how they are being seen, not heard. National as well as international organizations recognize the threat these women face, yet do little in response. These interviewees’ voices are sure to drown in the cacophony of more such voices of hurt and hope, and despair seems to be the rule of the game. However, the resilience offered by these women in the face of all these attacks, as well as the excellent work that is being done at the civil society level, must inspire us to imagine, hope, and advocate for a safer and more democratic internet for all.
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The people I interviewed for this project were not acquaintances or friends of mine, and I am grateful that they still decided to contribute to this project. Their good wishes, words of advice, and hope have been my anchor through this tumultuous journey, and I am indebted to them for the same. This short narrative report may not capture everything that was shared with me. However, I hope that as we move forward, either I or some other person just as invested in the community’s well-being will pick up from where I have stopped here and weave together narratives and build solutions that will, Insha Allah, help us make the internet a better space for Muslim women.