

# Media Narratives on Hinduism: A Study of Digital News Portals

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No major religious issue in contemporary times can be understood without the attention and intervention of mass media. Religious realities are “mediated,” and increasingly religion is seen occupying center stage in different media formats such as print, audio-visual, and digital (Cloete, 2016). The media-religion relationship can be understood in two ways – first, use of media in religious dissemination<sup>1</sup> and second, media’s representation of religious issues. News regarding religion and religious institutions was of negligible importance till the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Religious news was never considered “hard news” until the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) and many other religious movements across the globe. A noticeable change in the coverage of religious news was seen after the 9/11 attack in the United States. The World Trade Center attacks placed religion on the news agenda, providing a global impetus to the coverage of religion (Johnston, 2011).

A significant aspect in the media-religion interface is what Stig Hjarvard calls “mediatization”. The concept is used to examine the influence media institutions have on religion, religious practices and religious discourse. Owing to “mediatization,” an increasing mediated influence is observed with regard to formulation of religious opinions and public discourse on religious issues (Hjarvard, 2013). Due to emergence of globalization and digitization, there is an ever-increasing interaction between religious institutions and media both in the

traditional as well as new media space. Intense public debate and scrutiny of religious practices takes place in these media avenues.

The issue of misrepresentation of religion in media underlies the conflicting relationship between the two. Religious communities often find their representation in media to be objectionable as news about religion is linked to crime, controversy, and anti-social activities. Religionists opine that religion is a complex subject, reporting on which requires nuance, a holistic perspective, and deep investigation of religious contexts and messages, often found to be lacking in journalistic practice (Nielsen, 1996). Media are frequently accused of demonizing religion through the pursuit of selective identification of the religious affiliation of the accused in a crime, biased, and agenda-driven reportage (Amana, 2014).

Public discourse around “religion” framed by media has consequences for important “social processes such as religious assimilation and accommodation” (Stout & Buddenbaum, 2003). Evensen (2002) discusses the power wielded by the media in shaping public opinion that can facilitate both religious revivalism and religious fervour. Samuel Huntington (1993) in his classic work *The Clash of Civilizations* explains how future global fault lines shall be propelled by cultural differences rather than by politics or ideology (Huntington, 1996). Hence, a fair, balanced, and informed media discourse on religion is essential for global harmony. Unverified, and misleading news about religion, culture, traditions, etc., can deepen religious and civilizational divides.

With developments like Artificial Intelligence (AI), Augmented Reality (AR), Big Data, and Internet of Things (IoT), ethical considerations around new media technology have risen making it all the more crucial to understand and investigate the religion-media interface

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critically. While digital spaces can help people crack complex religious concepts, and amplify positive religious teachings, these can also be used to spread hatred, bigotry, and exclusionary ideas (e.g., the use of social media as a recruiting platform by terrorist organizations). Enhanced new media penetration also signifies loss of authority and monopoly on part of religious institutions, making people more dependent on media symbols, visual representation for making sense of religion. In such a scenario led by “media determinism”<sup>2</sup>, religion will find it increasingly challenging to remain unaffected by media.

### Digital News in India

The internet has significantly transformed how individuals communicate, socialize, and search for information to stay updated. In India, the number of Internet subscribers stood at 776.45 million at the end of September 2020. This was characterized by accelerated growth in internet traffic, wireless data usage, and reduced cost of data thereby making internet access affordable for citizens. Both the internet and social media have tremendously impacted journalistic practices, news dissemination, and consumption and media narratives. As high as 73% of respondents in India accessed news through smartphones with 53% accessing social media for news (Newman, *et al.*, 2021). The prominence and popularity of new media in general and digital news portals in particular is attributed to a conducive media-information landscape. In the present study, we examine the role of these digital news avenues (also called “alternative media”) with respect to the discourse on Hinduism.

“Alternative Media” are media platforms that provide options to the mainstream media (MSM) discourse and present viewpoints that are either corrective or in opposition to those dominant in MSM (Kristoffer, Figenschou, & Frischlic, 2019). The term “alternative” suggests the presence of alternative creators, publishers, voices and narratives that are usually found missing in elite media, lack of big media ownership, no direct linkage with legacy media, use of internet technology for reaching out to audiences, focus on opinion/commentary over news, and altruistic corporate funding.

In India, the post 2014 period proved to be a boon for digital news. News portals such as *The Quint* (2015), *The Wire* (2015), *Boom Fact Check* (2016), *Alt-News* (2017), and *The News Minute* (2014) were launched in this period. Others like *Dool News* (2009), *Azhimukham* (2013), and *East Mojo* (2018) focused on region specific news in the digital environment. These portals pitched themselves as spaces where fake news would be exposed, fact-checking

would be done, and they would act as flagbearers of independent journalism in a politically shrill, polarized media environment where the credibility of mainstream media was increasingly questioned (Kalra, 2021).

### Hinduism, Hindus, and Media Discourse

As the world’s oldest religion and an ancient civilization, Hinduism is known to promote intellectual curiosity and inquiry. Hinduism’s beliefs, principles, traditions, practices, and spiritual doctrines followed by 966 million adherents (Census 2011) have always been a subject of interpretation, deliberation, and debate. It is also regarded as a ‘way of life’ and has followers across the world, though mainly in India and Nepal. Hinduism attracts media attention due to its diversity, values and practices, as well as its worldview on politics and social justice.

Presently, we take up an investigation of how left leaning<sup>3</sup> digital news portals in India represent Hinduism, Hindus, and Hindu issues. The study is conceptually informed by ‘Hinduphobia’ (also referred to as ‘Hindumisia’, ‘Hindudvesha’). Hinduphobia is largely understood to reflect an over-arching anti-Hindu sentiment that depicts Hindus and Hinduism negatively, and propels an irrational dislike of the same. It also signifies hatred or repulsion towards Hindus and Hinduism, owing to which anti-Hindu sentiment can flourish in political discourse, and sections of bureaucracy, media, and academia (Understanding Hinduphobia, 2021).

Additionally, we employed ‘News Framing’ to explore the techniques and strategies used to report on Hinduism. News frames highlight bits of information, render some aspects of news more salient to drive a certain news agenda, and compel audiences to think about issues in specific ways. Frames are powerful tools used by media outlets to validate and legitimize one kind of narrative over others. This is done to promote a problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and solution to the issue concerned (Entman, 1993).

### Review of the available literature:

A variety of academic as well as popular literature on “Media and Hinduism” was extensively reviewed for the study. Pertinent ideas and implications emerging from the literature review are presented below:

Heinz Scheifinger (2008) discusses how Hinduism thrives in cyberspace and how the online environment has proved to be favourable to Hindu religious expression. He cites examples of Hindu rituals such as puja, ordering prasad, festivals, cremations, etc., which are carried out online. Certain

characteristics of Hinduism such as its dynamism, innovation, openness to change, and absence of a central controlling authority lend it compatible to the cyberspace template which is laterally organized, decentralized, defused, and challenges traditional hierarchy. He refers to Margaret Wertheim's (1999) "theory of cyberspace" and Walter Ong's (1982) "evolutionary theory of culture" which demonstrate the nature of cyberspace and religion and concludes that new media communication will have cultural consequences, and that religion will have to reinvent itself to keep up pace with technology (Scheifinger, 2008).

Mann (2015) analyzes media coverage of the Ganesha milk drinking 'miracle' (1995) in India. Using discourse and content analysis, he carries out comparative analysis of coverage given to the event in the Canadian and international press. He points out flaws in the way in which Canadian media covers religion – especially the Ganesha milk drinking miracle event which was associated with a minority diaspora community in Canada, i.e., Hindus. More importantly, he makes note of the views prevalent around Hindus and Hinduism which project the religion and its followers as irrational and exotic, barbaric, bizarre, fit for subjugation, and the need for Hindus to be civilized based on western standards. Such views about Hinduism as the "exotic other" prevail and remain unchallenged even in the post-colonial era (Mann, 2015).

In an analysis of media coverage of Asia's two major religions – Hinduism and Buddhism -- Sen (2012) observes that even as these two religions are practiced by a large number of people in Asia, and their followers are also increasing in other parts of the world, they are ignored by the mainstream media. Using theoretical underpinnings provided by agenda setting and framing, and priming and media bias, the coverage of these two religions in US newspapers and cable TV networks (*The New York Times*, *CNN*, *TIME*, etc.) is examined. Both religions are off the media radar and are not given adequate coverage unless there is a controversial event. In case of Hinduism, coverage is given to scandals emerging out of Hindu temples, parodies of Hindu gurus as seen in Bollywood movies, chanting, Hindu rituals, casteism and the caste 'system', construction of temples, celebrities practicing Hinduism, Hindu threats to Christians in India, religious boycott of movies that ridicule Hinduism, etc (Sen, 2012).

Alex (2015) focuses on the portrayal of communities on Indian news channels in the context of the Hindutva movement in India. Through focus group discussions, interviews with news consumers and media professionals, and content analysis, Alex demonstrates the existence of a Hindutva public sphere which has been able to set its agenda through mass media and films. Alex argues that

a new kind of nationalism is seen being pushed in India, and that the media is being employed to manipulate the socio-cultural base and religious experiences of Hindus in the country (Alex, 2015).

In the area of 'Media Hinduphobia,' Edwards (2017) and Juluri (2019, 2020) discuss and delineate the challenges Hindus face in the digital world, even as new media transforms the way in which Hindus understand their faith and practice it. Edwards (2017) focuses on Hinduphobia found on internet websites. These websites contribute to anti-Hindu hate-speech and create an environment where discriminatory behaviour, and violence and oppression against Hindus can occur easily and even be normalized. Her study analyzes select websites that manifest hatefulness and bigotry in their content and lead to socially accepted constructs of Hindus and Hinduism as inferior. The discourse on these websites, emerging from a Christian fundamentalist viewpoint – 1) categorizes Hindu rituals and traditions as "devil worship"; 2) portrays Hindu practices as profane and morally repugnant; and 3) claims religious superiority of other traditions by asserting inferiority of Hinduism and Hindu beliefs. An understanding of the "causal flow of violence"<sup>4</sup> is used to study how select websites promote Hinduphobic content (Edwards, 2017).

In their works on 'Hinduphobia,' Juluri (2020) and Long (2017) scrutinize the phenomenon from a media and academic prism respectively. While Juluri presents a theoretical and conceptual understanding for media researchers to engage in studies around Hinduphobia, Long devotes his attention to identifying Hinduphobia, its characteristics, types, and root causes. Juluri discusses techniques and strategies used for representation of Hindus and Hinduism in the media (inaccurate labelling, factually incorrect representations, misrepresentation, stereotyping, representing Hindus as privileged elites or privileged minorities, hurtful racist tropes, colonial concoctions etc), and Long discusses the manifestation of Hinduphobia in scholarly discourses. Juluri concludes that coverage of Hinduism in western news outlets (*The New York Times*, *National Public Radio*, etc.) underplay or whitewash all violence against Hindus. Long advocates understanding of the conceptual underpinnings of the Hinduphobic discourse in all domains (Juluri, 2020; Long, 2017).

Commentary on media representation of Hindus and Hinduism in the popular domain stand testimony to the anti-Hindu sentiments reflected in Indian news media discourse. A dominant section of the Indian media itself portrays Hindus negatively but the same treatment is not meted to religious groups whose behaviour has been more violent, exclusive, and oppressive. For

instance, numerous and continuous examples of news media headlines during and after the Ram Janmbhumi-BabriMasjid demolition (1992) (Frawley, 2015). Saxena (2015) calls this the 'anti-Hinduism industry' wherein ruling elites, government establishments, academia, and media and popular culture profit from abusing Hindus and their culture. He says that the anti-Hinduism narrative is an industry whose latest flagbearers are left leaning news portals, which have become the newest critical contributors in manufacturing and disseminating Hinduphobia. Such outlets rely mostly on opinionated interpretations of Hinduism and are often quoted by left leaning intellectuals on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms (Saxena, 2015). That the distortion and misrepresentation of Hindus is not confined to modern day media and popular culture is brought out in an essay by Prakash (2020). The article refers to a paper by Koritala<sup>5</sup> in which hostilities faced by Hindu immigrants to the United States because of outlandish beliefs about them are brought forth (Prakash, 2020). Additionally, analyses by Viswanathan (2019) and Juluri (2019) dissect the systemic and systematic bias stemming from elite western media's reportage on Hindus and Hinduism.

#### Implications from the literature review:

- Mass media like news, films, advertisements, soap operas, internet, OTT platforms have a profound influence on public opinion and narrative building. Hence, it is imperative to examine representations of religion in different media formats to understand the dominant references made to Hindus-Hinduism.
- Studies in "Media Hinduphobia" point out to the extent and nature of the impact such representations can make on individual and community psyche. Representations which are one-sided, dehumanizing, demonizing and disrespectful can result in inferiority complex, low self-esteem, and the need for external validation for a community.
- Many media outlets which engage in Hinduphobia are in fact "high-consequence" and "trusted". They are extremely influential in a digital media universe which is highly media saturated and their coverage on Hindus and Hinduism can have real-time impact wherein constant demonization and blatant misrepresentation of a community can lead to grave consequences such as persecution and genocide (Juluri, 2019).
- Mainstream media coverage of Hinduism presents the faith as strange, weird, violent, unscientific, superstitious and at loggerheads with the Abrahamic and proselytizing religions of Christianity and Islam (Sen, 2012).
- There is an overall lack of attention on the hatred faced

by Hindus in the new media space. This is done by negating the positive contributions of Hinduism. This can normalize violence against Hindus, vandalization of their places of worship and hateful attitudes towards them in public life (Hindu American Foundation, 2007).

#### Knowledge gap:

In the context of new media and Hinduism, research is limited in terms of examining how cyberspace is advantageous to having a correct understanding of Hinduism and how online platforms have contributed to the facilitation and flourishing of Hindu cultural festivals and rituals. However, equal if not more attention needs to be given to how the same digital space doubles up as a purveyor of hatred and bigotry towards common followers of Hinduism. The nature of content, discourse, and representation of Hinduism in the digital sphere merits critical examination. There is a plethora of academic literature which examines media representations of Christianity and Islam, and the mass media are regularly called out for the lopsided and unfair treatment given to the two. There is research that focuses on western elite media's coverage of India (Rao, 2021). An examination of Hinduism through a similar lens is lacking. A study of Indian news media content is essential as India continues to be a natural homeland to Hindus. Hinduphobia is derided and denied in mainstream media and academia both in India and the West. It is considered as exaggerated, non-existent, a misnomer, and loaded with pejorative connotations. The discourse is instead driven by what is labeled as Hindu nationalism, Hindutva, and the "otherization" of minorities in India by Hindu supremacists (Pamplany, 2020). The present study aims to address the gaps discussed above.

#### Left leaning digital news portals:

The present research focuses on two left leaning digital news portals, viz, *The Wire* and *The Quint* and their coverage on issues pertaining to Hindus and Hinduism. A content analysis of four major events in 2019 was undertaken: 1) The Lok Sabha Elections; 2) The Ram Mandir verdict by the Supreme Court of India; 3) Passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA); and 4) presentations of/around the Hindu festivals such as *Diwali*, *Holi*, *Navratri*, *Karwa Chauth*, etc. An analysis of the coverage of above events was done to find out the dominant news frames employed by these portals in their reportage and commentary on Hinduism. Additionally, in-depth interviews with media scholars, scholars in religious studies, journalists, historians, social media influencers and op-ed writers

were carried out to understand the nature of coverage on Hinduism in left leaning media and reasons behind the dominance of specific media narratives on Hinduism in the digital space.

Media reportage of Hinduism is a highly understudied area in terms of academic investigation and inquiry. It is readily assumed that because Hindus constitute majority of the population in India; there is either negligible or no bias against the community in media reportage. A lack of systematic inquiry on the theme is seen in the Indian context. Even as the internet propels democratization; its negative side in terms of furthering hate speech, bigotry, discrimination, and marginalization has been explored only through the lens of India's minority communities, namely Muslims and Christians. There is an absence of scrutiny about how Hindus in India are also targets of online bias.

Digital news portals constitute an "alternative public sphere" (Sampedro & Avidad, 2018) wherein parallel worlds of opinions and ideas that influence public discourse are created. It is seen that western media outlets depend on mainstream media as well as on these digital outlets for their understanding of India at the global scale (Iyer-Mitra, 2020). It is noteworthy that Hindus are a global minority since the world is predominantly Christian or Islamic (Hackett & McClendon, 2017). Hence an investigation of media representations of Hinduism is important.

On various news portals, coverage on Hinduism is often dominated by commentary and opinions on 'Hindutva'. The discourse presents Hindutva as a dangerous ideology, militant in nature, exclusionary, and anti-Muslim with use of terms as 'hostile saffron'. Hindutva is presented as a threat to India as a secular republic and held responsible for dividing the nation on religious lines. It is associated with authoritarianism, jingoism, and extreme aggressive nationalism. On grounds of critiquing Hindutva, the portals, in effect, blame Hindus for religious nationalism<sup>6</sup> and weakening the secular ethos of the country. For instance, in an article "If India Loses Bangladesh's Friendship, Blame 'Hindutva' Brigade," (*The Quint*, 10 May, 2019), Hindutva is held responsible for a slide in India's diplomatic relations with its neighbours. Hindutva thought and politics are regularly attached to negative connotations<sup>7</sup>. The BJP's electoral victories are also attributed to Hindutva politics ("Hindutva vs. Soft Hindutva: How Pragya Beat Congress in Bhopal", *The Quint*, 27 May, 2019). Such portals predict that Hindutva will ultimately lead to a 'Hindu Rashtra' and snatch constitutional dignity from Indian citizens. Comparing Hindutva to Islamophobia it is claimed that, "The decision to cast the Muslim as the illegal immigrant, and not simply as an outsider, allows the Hindutva

ideology to complete its new alignment with Western Islamophobia" (*The Wire*, 7 February 2020).

### Majoritarianism and Muslim Minorities

The news portals blame and hold Hindus responsible for religious nationalism. Hindu votes for the BJP in itself called bad by some commentators, "More than EVM's, it is the "Hindu Mind" which has been effectively rigged" (*The Wire*, 21 May 2019), and a threat to India's democratic and pluralistic ethos. A BJP's victory is routinely attributed to Hindu 'communalism'. While consolidation of Hindu votes is framed as communalism, the consolidation of Muslim votes is framed as effective representation. Terms like 'Saffron Terror' and 'Hindu terrorist' are employed, without care of any sensible data. In an article titled, "As the Hindu Rashtra project rolls on, it's time to consider what the end goal is" (*The Wire*, 12 June 2019), a graphic shows South Asian countries painted in saffron with RSS walking over and conquering them. Similarly, in their coverage on CAA, support of the CAA is linked to 'Hindu majoritarianism'. Support to CAA is used to portray them as a community that abhors diversity and is against the spirit of democratic pluralism. For instance, "With the CAA, India is hurtling down the path of Majoritarianism" (*The Wire*, 2 January 2020), and "As a Hindu, I feel cheated by those opposing anti-CAA protest" (*The Quint*, 20 January 2020). Under the guise of calling out majoritarian and supremacist political tendencies, such observations arbitrarily link Hindus and Hinduism to hate speech, bigotry, rigidity, and radicalization ("Citizenship Bill: Why Crafting a 'Hindu Rashtra' Won't be Easy", *The Quint*, 9 December 2019).

News frames and narratives suggesting victimization of Muslim "minorities" at the hands of the Hindu "majority" find particular emphasis on the news portals. The Ram Mandir verdict by the courts is presented as a betrayal and oppression of India's Muslim minorities ("Ayodhya's D-Day: Hindus Rejoice Mandir, Muslims Feel 'Betrayed'", *The Quint*, 10 November 2019). Through the narrative on the Ayodhya verdict by the Supreme Court of India, the news portals blame Hindus for reclaiming their own civilizational heritage, as if they are demanding and building a *mandir* on Muslim graves ("Can Ram Mandir be Built on Muslim Graves: Letter to Temple Trust", *The Quint*, 17 February 2020). Building of the temple is framed as the death of the Indian Constitution and constitutional values, and a threat to the quintessential 'Idea of India'. Hindus are shamed for celebrating the verdict ("The land handed over to Ram lalla will never be the same, for it is where our constitutional values were threatened", *The Quint*, 10

November 2019, and “Planting of a ‘Jai Shri Ram’ flag on a vandalised mosque has done more harm to Ram than any external aggression”, *The Quint*, 27 February 2020). Hindu symbols and slogans such as “Ram Mandir,” “Ram Lalla,” “Ram Rajya,” and “Jai Shree Ram,” are summarily framed as political slogans rather than social ones. The verdict is presented as ‘terror and fear’ under which Indian Muslims purportedly live and speculations are made about the future of India’s minorities after this landmark judgement (“Hindutva Reaches Milestone in Ayodhya: What will the fallout be?”, *The Quint*, 9 November 2019). The verdict is equivalent to darkness<sup>8</sup> and sensibilities of the judges and the due process of law by way of which the verdict was delivered is challenged (“Ayodhya Verdict: In ‘Balance of Probabilities’, Judges Missed Chance to Speak With Courage”, *The Wire*, 10 November 2019).

### Deracination and De-Hinduization:

Coverage of Hindu festivals like Diwali, Holi, Rakshabandhan, Makar Sankranti, Karwa Chauth, etc., is criticized as deracination of Hindus from their heritage, culture, and civilization. Elements of politics in the name of social justice are added to the coverage of whereas the same is not found in the reportage on festivals of other faiths. Diwali is linked to weight gain (“A Diwali Without Gaining Weight? Before the Sweets, Have Karela!”, *The Quint*, 7 October 2019). It is also linked to air pollution and poor quality of air especially in the National Capital Region (“Air Quality Today: A Day Before Diwali, Delhi Struggles to Breathe”, *The Quint*, 26 October 2019).

Many news narratives, thus, either discourage Hindus from celebrating their festivals or induce a sense of guilt in them if they choose to follow their traditions. This promotes both deracination and de-Hinduization. As part of the ‘social justice’ frame used to report on Hindu festivals, these are seen as opportunities to promote ideas about environmental awareness, gender equality, fairness, and pluralism. Value judgements are routinely passed on Hindu festivities and sermons given to the community on how they should go about celebrating their festivals. For example, “Happy Holi 2020: How To Play A Safe and Eco-Friendly Holi?” (*The Quint*, 9 March 2020), “Now buy plastic-free rakhis in Jaipur this Raksha Bandhan” (*The Quint*, 24 July 2019), “Independence Day Only Reminds Us India’s Manja Threat Still Hangs Around” (*The Wire*, 14 August 2019), “Hindutva Forces in Bengal Target Puja Pandal for Celebrating Communal Harmony”, *The Wire*, 7 October 2019). Also, celebration of Hindu festivals such as Durga Puja, Ganesh Utsav, and Dahi Handi is framed as land grabbing and encroachment (“Encroachment in the Name of Religion” (*The Wire*, 7 September 2019<sup>9</sup>) and

a threat to religious minorities (“Aligarh Mosque Covered in Tarp Ahead of Holi Celebrations ‘To Maintain Peace’”, *The Wire*, 9 March 2020).

### Experts assessment:

Interviews with experts on the situation bring out some noteworthy observations. First, in such media presentations Hinduism is presented as a ‘primitive religion’ with many strange gods and evils through which marginalized castes and women are oppressed and dehumanized. It tend to examine Hinduism from an obsessively hostile lens which is not applied to other religions and communities. Hindus are portrayed as a privileged majority community and dogmatic people, e.g. in many reportage on Sabrimala from a gender equality lens. Cases of intolerance and lynching with a religious angle are unfailingly linked to Hinduism, and the Hindu society is demonized on the basis of random, stray incidents of communal violence.

Secondly, such Left leaning portals are full of negativity towards Hinduism. The discourse on Hinduism is limited in its approach through which they comment on select aspects and attempt to tarnish the religion and the society as a whole. Focus of the reportage is excessively on caste as well as other fault-lines within the Hindu fold. Reportage on forcible religious conversions and communal violence promotes one-sided narratives in which Hindus are always the perpetrators and Muslims are always victims.

Third, according to the interviewed experts, among the many reasons for the emergence of ideologically driven digital news portals is a shift in India’s political landscape since 2014, rise of a strong government and leadership at the center, a thriving right-leaning ecosystem on social media, availability of inexpensive internet access, increasing social media use by the Indians, intention to resist established narratives, more supply and demand for ideologically driven news, attempt to appropriate the idea of independent journalism (read anti-government discourse), and a declining trust in mainstream media.

Four, to report on Hindus and Hinduism various left leaning digital news portals repeated use some loaded keywords such as *communal, divisive, casteist, intolerant, patriarchal, oppressive, superstitious, Brahminical patriarchy, fascist, genocide/genocidal, dictators, Islamophobia, Nazis*, etc. It presents Hindus as culprit and oppressors even when facts point otherwise. Making arguments devoid of verifiable references, context, and evidence; indulging in rhetoric and hyperbole; and exaggerating the threat to minorities by Hindutva groups; bringing a caste angle even in reporting random crimes where it is not at all any motive; one-sided coverage of communal clashes;

silence about crimes committed by minorities; using old or false photographs with the reporting of an incident; and emphasis on caste and communal angle in crimes are some of the frequent features on the Left leaning portals.

Five, according to the experts, the government can play a role to ensure fair representation of communities and communal issues in media. Besides, a systemic change is also needed in education, research, academia, policy and governance to provide fairness to Hindu aspirations in media.

## Conclusion

From the analysis above it is evident that left leaning news portals (many observations may be extended to several other news platforms also) attempt to always link Hindu issues of any kind to politics, esp. with the BJP. It tends to equate Hinduism with the BJP and denies common Hindu aspirations, losses, grievances, identity, and assertion of any social feelings. Thus, to criticize and help defeat a political party, such news portals consistently and unfairly attack Hindu values and ethos. To constantly demonize a party, a leader, and a particular government the common Hindu society and its Dharmic consciousness are undermined. Knowingly or unknowingly the people of India are presented in various divided, even in inimical terms. The discourse pits different communities against each other and pushes a limited, binary understanding of their relationship. Hindus are by default presented as 'privileged perpetrators' whereas Muslims are always portrayed as 'hapless victims'. This explains the scant attention to offenses committed by one side against the other, mostly in the name of minority rights<sup>10</sup>.

The results of such coverage lead to perpetuation of stereotypes, increase in hate crime, and mainstreaming as well as legitimizing of Hinduphobia in public life. The nature of headlines and the tone of discourse employed by the portals are rhetorical, accusatory, inflammatory, critical, negative, sermonizing, aggressive, politically motivated, and biased. Majority of the claims made appear like emanating from fixed political preferences and ideological motivations<sup>11</sup>. There is negligible use of evidence, facts, and data to support the reporting or most opinion pieces. Instead, the portals rely on hyperbole, exaggeration, and emotional appeals by using harsh or offensive words. The portals attempt de-culturization, and de-legitimization of Hindu aspirations and legitimate, democratic, humane political choices. News frames suggest that Hindus ought to sacrifice their normal social, cultural, and political interests, keep proving their loyalty to the Constitution, secularism, and the 'Idea of India' whatever it may be. They see it as the

duty of only one community to ensure India's integrity and act as custodians of democracy, federalism, and pluralism, irrespective of what other communities may choose to be doing.

An assessment of the discourse on the portals needs to be made on the basis of what is missing from their coverage. While there are innumerable references to Hindu dominance and majority communalism, there is stoic silence on non-Hindu aggression and violence. This is done by selectively ignoring the crimes committed or by not naming individuals belonging to other communities in incidents of initiating violence. But a completely different standard is adopted in the case of the Hindu community. Similarly, while Hindu festivals are mocked, sought to be analyzed using sociological, anthropological, environmental, etc. lenses, to ridicule and chastise, the same standard is not applied to the celebration of festivals of other faiths or the conduct of their members while celebrating their holydays. Again, while Hindus are expected to take the onus for their actions, the same is not expected of other communities. Hindu consolidation of votes finds repeated mention but others voting as a bloc is not an issue. Not only the textual terms, but also the use and presentation of imageries are biased and devoid of a single standard. Finally, a lack of historicity, sensitivity to context, and use of generalized tropes on Hinduism is apparent in the digital news coverage emerging from the Indian left leaning media space.

## Notes

1. Religious institutions own weekly or monthly publications to disseminate religious messages. They also make use of broadcast media for religious activity and increasingly, religious organizations also have a growing digital presence.
2. Media determinism is the belief that media technology is the principal initiator of societal transformation. The concept is attributed to the American Sociologist Thorstein Veblen and his arguments on the link between society and technology (Hauer, 2017).
3. Operational definition: Left leaning media in the Indian context is the media ecosystem that supports leftist, socialist, communist groups or political parties; believes in and promote narratives about social justice, gender equality, caste annihilation; stand as anti-thesis to conservative political values, oppose ordinary nationalism and are well-entrenched in the establishment, bureaucracy, academia, policy-making, culture-art and other aspects of Indian life.
4. See Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural Violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, 27(3), 291–305. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/423472>

5. See - The historical perspective of Americans of Asian Indian origin 1790-1997 - [https://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/h\\_es/h\\_es\\_korit\\_histical.htm](https://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/h_es/h_es_korit_histical.htm)
6. "If religious nationalism becomes a dominant identity that unites or perhaps divides the country and if secularism has fallen by the wayside" (*The Quint*, 16 May 2019).
7. "If the hegemony of Hindutva continues, it will destroy and damage us." (Ramachandra Guha on Rise of Hindutva & four reasons behind 'Jingoism', *The Quint*, 19 December 2019).
8. "The Ayodhya Judgment in India's Enveloping Darkness", *The Wire*, 10 November 10, 2019).
9. Though the article carries a neutral headline and tagline, the representative image used in the article targets Hinduism for land encroachment by employing the photo of a roadside Hindu shrine with a tree tied with Kalawa string and photos of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Such an image gives the impression that only Hindus indulge in encroachment of public places (<https://thewire.in/urban/delhi-encroachments-pavement-temples-religion>).
10. "When the perpetrator is a Hindu upper caste, you find their religion (or/and their names) mentioned in the report. If the perpetrator is from any other section or faith, then they are reported as just 'miscreants' or 'criminals'. (Expert interviewee – Educationist).
11. The researchers also attempted to investigate the profiles of the authors who contributed the select articles and it was found that they had a consistent history of writing opinions and commentary which is anti-BJP, anti-government in general.