




Tech Harms and Human Rights in India's 2024 Elections

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The general elections of India, the world's largest democracy, concluded on June 1 2024, resulting in a renewed term for the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The elections were marked by grave concerns about human rights and democracy, and particularly the role of social media corporations in undermining Indian democratic processes. These concerns add onto a list of pervasive concerns about the independence of India's institutions, including the Election Commission that regulates the elections, and the targeting of human rights defenders, journalists and other critical voices. Social media corporations, especially Meta (parent of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp), Alphabet (parent of YouTube) and X (formerly Twitter), played a pivotal role in contorting political discourse and the public space during the elections, by allowing circumvention of fundamental democratic rules enshrined in Indian law. Social media platforms have appeared to operate outside of regular law, superimposing their procedures onto those democratically put in place over decades in India.

During the Indian elections, Foundation The London Story – an Indian diaspora-led civil society organization – convened a coordination mechanism for likeminded CSOs, diaspora groups, fact-checkers and academics. This served to collaborate in joint work towards human rights accountability in the run-up to and during the elections. This report provides an overview of key findings, supplemented by work published by other human rights groups and researchers.



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INDIA'S ELECTIONS

Over 970 million people – more than 10% of the world's population – were eligible to vote for 545 lawmakers in the Lower House of Parliament (called “Lok Sabha”) for a term of five years. The Lok Sabha represents the legislative branch of India's Government, and is headed by the Prime Minister, who holds executive powers.

With a population of 1.4 billion, thousands of dialects, over 120 official languages, six major religions, and more than 1 million polling stations, the election has been named the biggest democratic exercise in history.

Voting stretched over seven phases, with different states voting at different times. The elections started on April 19 2024 and lasted for 6 weeks. Results were announced on June 4. The voter average turnout for the other phases was recorded at 66.14% (first phase), 66.71% (second phase), 65.68% (third phase), 69.16% (fourth phase), 62.2% (fifth phase), 63.37% (sixth phase) and 61.6% (seventh phase).

THE RESULTS IN NUMBERS

- The coalition of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) barely won India's general elections. The BJP's coalition - the National Democratic Alliance - barely passed the 50% mark needed to form a government, while the BJP itself won only 44.2% of seats. In comparison, in 2019, the BJP alone won over 55% of seats. This is the first time since 1962 that a government is elected to serve a third term.
- The opposition INDIA alliance, which includes Rahul Gandhi's Indian National Congress (INC) party, won 232 seats, with the INC winning 99 of those.
- The BJP lost to the opposition in many of its key constituencies. In Uttar Pradesh state, known as a BJP-stronghold, the opposition alliance (INDIA) received 43.5% of votes, while the BJP's coalition (NDA) received 43.7%.
- Only 24 out of 543 (4.42%) of MPs elected are Muslim, down from 26 last term.
- Only 74 out of 543 (13.62%) MPs elected are women, down from 78 last term.
- Among the 293 MPs from the BJP's coalition, the National Democratic Alliance, none are Muslim, Christian or Sikh, despite these being large minority groups in India.
- Among the Union Ministers appointed, none are Muslim, for the first time in the history of independent India.
- Previous ministers Smriti Irani and Anurag Thakur, who were both known for their Hindu supremacist stances, were not reappointed as ministers.
- On June 9, incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi was sworn in as India's Prime Minister for the third consecutive term.

FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

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Throughout the elections, an Independent Panel for Monitoring Indian Elections provided in-depth summaries of key concerns, documenting irregularities in the context of 1) Electoral procedures 2) Voter registration 3) Political party financing 4) Media coverage 5) the Election Commission of India and 6) a lack of redress.

These concerns were echoed by a joint statement published during the elections by ARTICLE 19 and 9 partner organisations, in which they expressed deep concern over recent actions taken by India's central government against, among others, journalists, political opposition, and media outlets in the lead-up to and during the general elections in India. There were gross irregularities observed during polling, with for instance, reports of CCTV cameras in a voting machine strongroom going blank, videos surfacing of the son of a BJP worker voting eight times, many eligible Muslim voters and voters from other religious communities findings their names missing from voter lists, and discrepancies in votes registered not matching votes counted in almost all constituencies.

There were gross concerns about the ability of the Election Commission of India to enforce the code of conduct and laws related to election campaigning, as documented by the Independent Panel for Monitoring Indian Elections. Therefore, many violations of the Model Code of Conduct and Representation of the People Act on social media remained unaddressed. Civil society groups and academic researchers overwhelmingly perceived the Election Commission of India as acting either in a biased manner, or not at all. A group of 87 former civil servants wrote an open letter to the Election Commission, highlighting the poll panel's "strange diffidence...in dealing with actions that impact the conduct of free and fair elections". In a separate statement, 102 former civil servants again criticized the Election Commission of India for its perceived failures in ensuring a fair and transparent election process during the 2024 general elections.



As noted by the Independent Panel for Monitoring Indian Elections, the “ECI is not an independent body”. Foundation The London Story summarised the reasons in a briefing note: In December 2023, the Government of India enacted the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act 2023, which reformed the process through which members of Election Commission of India (ECI) are appointed. Given the extensive powers given to the Election Commission of India in conducting elections, the law has raised concerns about the free and fair elections in India.

The amendment to the procedures for appointing the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), and the Election Commissioners (EC) allows the Prime Minister potentially two votes out of three for nominating candidates for appointment as CEC and EC: The new amendment states that the three-person committee would consist of (a) Prime Minister (b) Member of the opposition and (c) a Cabinet minister nominated by the Prime Minister. This formation of the nomination committee imparts partisan character to the appointment of the CEC and ECs, making the process permanently open to unfairness.





Hate

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HATE SPEECH AND APPEAL TO RELIGION BY POLITICAL LEADERS

During India's general elections, members of the ruling BJP, elected legislators and ministers actively incited violence against minorities by engaging in hate speech. These incidents are in direct violation of India's electoral laws. Halfway through the elections, researchers from India Hate Lab published an [overview of anti-Muslim hate speech](#) in the election campaigns, noting the prediction that hate speech would spike during the elections had come true. After the Indian election results were announced, [several Indian diaspora organisations](#) concluded that during the elections "the ruling BJP and particularly its leader, Narendra Modi, ran a campaign of undisguised Islamophobia and lies."

Under Section 125 of the Representation of the People Act, political candidates are prohibited from promoting, or attempting to promote, on grounds of religion, race, caste, community or language, feelings of enmity or hatred, between different classes of the citizens of India. The incidents also raise questions about the state's ability or willingness to prohibit advocating religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence ([Article 20 ICCPR](#)). Senior BJP leaders made statements appealing to religion, potentially violating the [Model Code of Conduct \(MCC\)](#). The MCC stipulates: "There shall be no appeal to caste or communal feelings for securing votes. Mosques, churches, temples or other places of worship shall not be used as forum for election propaganda."

Despite this, throughout the elections, as the [India Hate Lab](#) notes, enforcement of laws prohibiting incitement to violence and divisive speech, such as those mentioned above, remained "lax at best and openly biased at worse".

Particularly pervasive were Islamophobic narratives seeking to justify the exclusion of Muslims from the Indian citizenry, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi propagated himself. For example:

EXAMPLE 1

In an election speech on April 21 in Banswara, Rajasthan, Modi said (translated from Hindi):

'Earlier, when their [Congress] government was in power, they had said that Muslims have the first right on the country's assets. This means to whom will this property be distributed? It will be distributed among those who have more children. It will be distributed to the infiltrators. Should your hard-earned money go to the infiltrators? Do you approve of this?'

EXAMPLE 2

On May 7, Modi, reportedly at an election rally in central Madhya Pradesh state, said (translated from Hindi):

'At this important turning point in history, you have to decide whether you will allow Vote Jihad to continue or, vote in support of building a Ram Rajya. Terrorists in Pakistan have launched a jihad against India. And here, the Congress party has announced a Vote Jihad against the BJP and is asking its followers of a particular religion [Muslims] to unitedly vote against Modi.'

As The London Story documented in its report on this Vote Jihad narrative, disinformation surrounding Muslims has been common over the past decades in India – with Islamophobic allegations that Muslims engage in “Love Jihad” and “COVID Jihad” – but the new narrative of “Vote Jihad” poses particular risks to India’s future as a democratic society.

In addition to this new narrative, old narratives such as “Love Jihad” continued to circulate freely until the end of the elections, despite platforms attention having been drawn to such content for years. Additionally, India’s News Broadcasting and Digital Standards Authority already imposed orders months earlier, directing news channels to take down such content.



ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN INDIA'S ELECTIONS

Over 600 million Indians actively used the internet in 2020, with an upward trend. According to the Press Information Bureau of India, in 2021, an estimated 530 million individuals have accounts on WhatsApp, 448 million on YouTube, 410 million on Facebook, 210 million on Instagram and 175 million on Twitter. India is now the largest market for Meta's platforms, such as Facebook.

BACKGROUND

Over previous years, scathing whistle-blower testimonies and extensive reports have brought attention to social media corporations such as Meta, Alphabet, X and others for failing to prevent the spread of illegal content and incitement to violence on their platforms. For instance, Facebook whistleblower Sophie Zhang revealed in 2020 that she worked to remove "a politically-sophisticated network of more than a thousand actors working to influence" the local elections taking place in Delhi in February [2019]. Facebook never publicly disclosed this network or that it had taken it down." Similarly, Facebook's former India head, Ankhi Das, was notoriously exposed in an investigation by the Wall Street Journal for having ties with the BJP and refusing to act on anti-Muslim posts by the BJP and Hindu supremacists. More recently, a 2022 report by Al Jazeera and The Reporters' Collective revealed Facebook's deliberate preferential treatment for the BJP in the lead up to the 2019 elections, through lower advertisement rates, preference in ad placement, tolerance of surrogate advertisers promoting pro-BJP content while taking down competing surrogate accounts, and higher return on investment through advertisement views.

Yet, social media corporations have shown blatant failure to act on such content, even when they are alerted to it, and have failed to invest in adequate resources for the Indian user market. Especially Meta has failed to disclose the results of its India-focussed Human Rights Impact Assessment. Instead, platforms have aided political candidates in violating the Model Code of Conduct of Indian elections.

Researchers from academia and civil society widely observed disinformation and hate speech content on all major social media platforms and messaging apps before and throughout the seven-phase elections. There was a noticeable shift in what kind of harmful content circulated during the elections. In the first phase of the elections, observers noted a spike in hate speech, including by the Prime Minister of India. This content largely followed patterns identified by researchers before, such as in this report by Foundation The London Story, where hate speech circulated in livestreams and with caricatures and accompanying captions. Some observers noted a sporadic use of deepfakes, but predominantly did not observe 'sophisticated' disinformation techniques.

Failure to interpret risks in accordance with ground-situation and domestic laws in India

Overall, social media corporations failed to moderate content in accordance with their own content rules, as well as Indian domestic law. It is unclear why this is the case, as it is not made public how social media corporations escalate content, i.e. how they decide which content is "high risk" and must therefore be treated more urgently than other content. Under [Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code](#) which prohibits promoting enmity between different groups, there is no requirement of an imminent threat of violence. The lax response to such content suggests that Meta's triaging, escalation and response to risks is not grounded in the specific context of India. Therefore, even when platforms reacted to harmful content, they took down content late in the election cycle, or after the elections had ended.

Before the elections, the Indian government had issued a [deepfake advisory](#), which obligates platforms to clearly inform users that posting deepfakes can lead to criminal prosecution under the law. However, it appears that platforms nonetheless failed to clearly label content, therefore showing apathy for India's domestic legal system.

Going ahead, given the lack of clarity around whether and why content is removed, with removed content not being archived for researchers to access in posterity, it is crucial that social media corporations share: 1) the reasons for content takedown 2) the amount of advertising blocked and 3) a library of all content that was taken down.

Advertising

For years, India's ruling Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the opposition Congress Party have had digital armies to push political messages. However, the digital army of the BJP has been the most prominent and active, also in the recent election. Between January 1 and April 11, the BJP had spent over Rs 39 crore (more than 4.3 million Euros) on 81,874 political advertisements on Google, data from Google's Ads Transparency Center showed. This accounted for 32.8% of the total funds spent on political advertisements on Google in India so far that year.

Research conducted before and during the elections discussed in the table below identified that surrogate[1] and shadow[2] social media advertising pose a real risk to election integrity in India. However, social media corporations and the Election Commission of India did not tackle such advertisement. It is possible that beyond the officially disclosed numbers in the ad transparency centre, political parties could have exceeded the legal maximum of campaign expenses using shadow ads. The lack of enforcement of rules and general insufficiency of social media rules contributed to this.

Additionally, advertisers clearly circumvented key rules and requirements when advertising on social media. Key concerns included:

- While Meta announced it would require identity verification for advertising related to political and social issues, advertisers were frequently found to have used single-use phone numbers that they then turned off. The requirement for government ID verification did not address the prevalence of shadow advertisements.
- While Google announced that it would follow the Indian legal obligation to have political advertising pre-certified by the Election Commission before running, ads wrongly self-declared as non-political appear to have been able to circumvent this requirement.

Going ahead, given the prevalence of shadow advertisers, it is crucial that social media corporations share revenue share data, i.e. data on how much revenue is shared with which publishers. This is key to ensuring full campaign finance transparency, as there is a legal limit on campaign expenses by political parties.

[1] Surrogate ads are used by actors who cannot legally market their products as it is illegal, and instead advertise related products with their logo.

[2] Shadow ads are ads that promote a partisan narrative without disclosing the source of the money. Such ads can leave voters uninformed about the intentions of the advertiser, and obscure conflicts of interest.

Use of AI and deepfakes

Overall, platform policies and measures aimed at combatting deepfakes and other AI-generated harmful content did not necessarily address the most prevalent harmful content, nor did they prove effective in the first place.

While deepfake content was among the content used to circulate disinformation, it was not as destructive as initially feared. Instead, such deepfake content was primarily used for “trolling”, e.g. to create videos of politicians dancing. However, political candidates engaged in “regular” hate speech and disinformation, without the help of generative AI or deepfakes, which was circulated widely.

This is not to say that AI generated deepfakes were not posted at all. Following a [civil society letter](#) in April, the Election Commission of India on May 6, 2024 released [guidelines](#) for “responsible and ethical use of social media platforms” during the election period, with a specific focus on deepfakes. The guidelines were aimed at political candidates, directing them to remove existing deepfake content, and cited provisions of Indian criminal law. They did not include obligations for platforms, who were directed to remove content only sporadically and after complaints. Additionally, the guidelines only addressed content explicitly posted by political actors, and did not address content posted by third actors on behalf of or in favour of political actors.

Given the lack of clarity on content fact-checking rules on Meta, with confusion expressed by partner fact-checkers of Meta themselves, it is crucial that Meta unambiguously clarifies the rules and processes for enforcing those rules, including automated processes. For instance, despite fact-checkers being told that Meta does not “allow ads that contain content debunked by third party fact checkers”, debunked content reappeared in ads, raising questions about rules and processes.

OVERVIEW OF IN-DEPTH CIVIL SOCIETY RESEARCH WARNING ABOUT TECH HARMS IN THE INDIAN ELECTIONS PRIOR TO THE ELECTIONS

Meta: WhatsApp



In February, the Mozilla Foundation examined how WhatsApp is used as a tool to influence elections, even ahead of the elections. The report recommends that “messaging platforms like WhatsApp...take steps to acknowledge how their features are providing the infrastructure for propaganda, disinformation and hate speech, particularly during elections.” It also recommends that platforms “do more to open up metadata and other information available with them that may be useful for researchers”.

https://assets.mofoprod.net/network/documents/India-Case-Study_2019_Elections.pdf

For five months ahead of the elections, Rest of World, in collaboration with Digital Witness Lab analyzed activity across BJP-affiliated WhatsApp groups in Mandi in order to understand the app’s role in the BJP’s 2024 election campaign. Of the 142 groups part of the WhatsApp “community” created by the BJP, Rest of World joined 18. The results show that while BJP members were admins in some groups, smart campaigning meant that these groups were not recognised as “political”. Therefore, political parties, by blurring the lines between political and private, were able to circulate content outside of official electoral laws, contorting the level playing field.

<https://restofworld.org/2024/bjp-whatsapp-modi/>



Meta: WhatsApp



In March, fact-checkers from BoomLive published a report warning about a shadow-network of pro-BJP pages spending millions of rupees on Meta advertisements since November, including on newly created pages. This included ads showing the gruesome killing of a Hindu tailor by two radical Muslim men in Udaipur the year before. Notably, these “shadow ads” published advertising that supports the BJP, without being officially linked to them, creating opacity about the campaigning expenses by parties that must comply with a legal limit.

<https://www.boomlive.in/fact-check/facebook-instagram-meta-political-ads-bjp-narendra-modi-misinformation-lok-sabha-elections-24567>

In April, Global Witness and Access Now submitted 48 ads in English, Hindi, and Telugu all with content breaching YouTube’s advertising and election misinformation policies. Although the platform claims that it reviews all ads prior to publication to identify potential content violations, YouTube approved all the ads. The researchers then deactivated the ads before they could go live.

<https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/youtube-disinformation-ads-india-election-2024-en/>





In April, the London Story, Ekō and India Civil Watch International found that Meta allowed a coordinated network of pages sharing content, hashtags and ad payments, which amassed 10.53M interactions over 90 days and appears to have breached Meta’s ad transparency policy. This included 36 ads potentially breaking Indian election laws pushing hate speech, Islamophobia, communal violence, and misinformation amassing between 65-66M impressions. Ads included content depicting Muslims as sexually violent invaders and calling for India to be a “country for Hindus” only and content depicting the BJP opposition as a “virus”, “demon”, and “poisonous snake” alongside violent rhetoric to “break their spine”.

https://thelondonstory.org/report/slander_lies_incitement/

These findings were all published ahead of the elections, with civil society actors and researchers seeking engagement with social media corporations to ensure that they can put in place measures to protect election integrity. However, platforms failed to learn from the findings of the report, and harms continued to be perpetuated on the same platforms.

As India election underway, Meta approves series of violent, inflammatory, Islamophobic AI-generated ads targeting voters

Meta approves 14 ads calling for the killing of Muslims, execution of a key opposition party leader, and pushing stop-the-steal-style narratives during the official election 'silence' period.

Meta's failing to detect and block ads containing AI-generated images promoting hate speech, election disinformation, and incitement to violence, recent research by corporate accountability group, Ekō, in collaboration with India Civil Watch International has found.

These alarming findings emerge in the midst of India's critical elections. Researchers have already [uncovered a network](#) of bad actors weaponizing Meta ads to spread hate speech and disinformation to millions of voters in India, with Meta directly profiting. During this second phase of the investigation, which coincided with phases 3 and 4 of India's 7-phase election and encompassed 189 constituencies, researchers targeted ads to highly contentious districts that were entering a "silence period". This silence period requires a pause on all election-related advertising. The experiment exposes Meta's failure to potentially comply with Indian election laws, which impose restrictions on advertisements at different phases of the electoral process. It also reveals that Meta is unequipped to detect and label AI-generated ads, despite its new policy committing to do so, and its utter failure to stamp out hate speech and incitement to violence - in direct breach of its own policies.

Between May 8th and May 13th, Meta approved 14 highly inflammatory ads. These ads called for violent uprisings targeting Muslim minorities, disseminated blatant disinformation exploiting communal or religious conspiracy theories prevalent in India's political landscape, and incited violence through Hindu supremacist narratives. One approved ad also contained messaging mimicking that of a recently doctored video of Home Minister Amit Shah threatening to remove affirmative action

Ekō and India Civil Watch International (ICWI) created inflammatory and Islamophobic political ads and submitted them to Meta's ad library. They submitted 22 ads in English, Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati and Kannada, of which 14 were approved within 24 hours. The groups then withdrew the ads. The ads were approved between May 8-13 during the official election "silence period", which mandates a pause on all election-related advertising before polling begins and extends until voting concludes in each phase of India's elections. This also raises questions about whether Meta is upholding its own bare minimum commitment to label and moderate AI-generated ads.

<https://www.eko.org/media/meta-fails-to-stop-violent-and-inflammatory-ai-generated-ads-targeting-indian-voters/>

Bellingcat published an investigation into the sources of financing for four Hindu supremacist websites (OpIndia, Hindu Existence, Hindu Post and the Jaipur Dialogues). The investigation notes that it appears the websites cleverly circumvent existing laws on donations and funding. Notably, PayPal is instrumental in the financing chain of three of them, despite [PayPal's Acceptable Use Policy](#) which outlines that PayPal service may not be used for "the promotion of hate, violence, racial or other forms of intolerance that is discriminatory."

<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2024/05/28/how-hindu-nationalist-far-right-india-websites-money/>



How Four Hindu Nationalist Websites Make Their Money

Open sources reveal how four far-right Indian websites receive foreign currency donations.

■ bellingcat | May 28



Foundation The London Story's report examines how political actors – including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP's official Facebook account with 19 million followers – seek to justify the erasure of Muslims' democratic rights as Indian citizens. The researchers examined content posted by a sample of 812 Facebook pages and 15 Facebook groups between March 1 and May 10, 2024. In the random sample, they identified at least 21 posts in March and 33 posts in April that contained content seeking to promote enmity between Hindus and Muslims by promoting disinformation narratives. The report cautions that political outrage and denial of the Muslim right to vote through the 'Vote Jihad' narrative is a manifestation of wider trends within India.

<https://thelondonstory.org/report/vote-jihad-the-continued-weaponization-of-a-jihadi-narrative-to-disenfranchise-indian-muslims/>

An investigative report by CheckMyAds documented that Google continued to monetize the Hindu supremacist website OpIndia, despite its repeated violation of Google's policies on incitement of hatred and disinformation. Google had imposed an ad pause on OpIndia in the past, following its amplification of hate speech.

<https://checkmyads.org/google-opindia-india-elections-disinformation/>



Google is helping to fund one of India's worst disinformation outlets — during elections

As India holds its elections, Google is monetizing one of the country's biggest propaganda and disinformation outlets. OpIndia is a Hindu nationalist media site with a reputation for publishing Islamophobic...

checkmyads.org / May 22

YOUTUBE'S PARTNERSHIP WITH SUDARSHAN NEWS

Revenue Sharing from Hate Speech and Misinformation



Dalit Solidarity Forum, Indian American Muslim Council,
India Civil Watch International, Hindus for Human Rights,
Tech Justice Law Project

JUNE 2024



A report by Dalit Solidarity Forum, Indian American Muslim Council, India Civil Watch International, Hindus for Human Rights, and Tech Justice Law Project highlights 26 YouTube videos published by the Hindu supremacist news channel Sudarshan News that appeared to contain hate speech and misinformation, 17 of which were published during the polling phases. All of these videos were able to be monetised, i.e. the publishers could receive money from advertising placed in the videos, in violation of YouTube's monetisation policies.

<https://www.boomlive.in/decode/sudarshan-news-youtube-channel-islamophobia-hate-speech-misinformation-25591>

SOCIAL MEDIA CORPORATIONS' FAILURE TO REACT TO CIVIL SOCIETY FINDINGS

Especially the [Global Coalition for Tech Justice](#), a coalition of over 150 civil society organisations, has pushed for social media corporations to publish context-specific election plans.

By March, only Meta and Google published blogposts about their election plans for India; however, these were largely the same as the status quo measures for other contexts (identical to measures during other Indian elections, and non-election periods in India). For instance, [Meta's India election plan](#) announced measures that appeared to be identical to the status quo, such as that it would have content moderators in 20 languages (no change from status quo).

For other measures Meta announced during the Indian elections, the findings from the reports above show that the platform was not able or willing to enforce these. For instance:

- Meta [claimed](#) it would “require advertisers globally to disclose when they use AI or digital methods to create or alter a political or social issue ad in certain cases”, which fact-checkers and researchers demonstrated was not enforced.
- For certain pledges more tailored to the Indian market – such as Meta’s [pledge](#) to remove “false claims about someone from one religion physically harming or harassing another person or group from a different religion” – it is clear looking back at the evidence of harmful content circulating freely that Meta was not capable or willing to enforce this.
- Similarly, Meta’s [pledge](#) to remove content that violates community guidelines, “whether it was created by AI or a person”, was also clearly not enforced.
- Meta [claims](#) that it does not “allow ads that contain content debunked by third party fact checkers”. However, advertising containing content debunked by fact-checkers reappeared without labelling, raising questions about the exact processes among the fact-checking community.

Overall social media corporations blatantly failed to take systematic measures, even if they did address the harms flagged. Worse, they failed to even enforce the existing rules for content and advertising that apply during non-election times. If platforms took action, it was sporadic and piece-meal, providing no holistic solution to address their human rights impact.

For instance, in response to a follow-up by the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre about the report by Foundation The London Story, ICWI & Ekō, Meta disclosed that it took action “against the Ulta Chashma and Meme Express pages and the violating ads on them”, and “against 14 accounts and admins, which can no longer run ads without fulfilling additional identification requirements.” However, it only took action in regard to the identification requirements, thereby not providing a solution that would address political disinformation being circulated in violation of Indian electoral laws. Additionally, Ulta Chashma had already been flagged by previous research, with no response.

Similarly, YouTube in response to a report by several civil society groups on hateful advertising by the partisan news channel Sudarshan News removed a video, and demonetised several videos for violating the advertiser-friendly content guidelines. However, this again suggests a ‘whack-a-mole’ approach by YouTube, in that it does not put in place safeguards for the future.

Given platform failure to respect its obligations to address its human rights impact, Foundation The London Story alongside Indian diaspora activists on April 17 blocked Meta’s headquarters in London, sealing the office off as a “crime scene against democracy”:



Photo by Maja Smiejkowska

KEY DEMANDS TOWARDS SOCIAL MEDIA CORPORATIONS

Given the clear lack of efficacy of the measures social media corporations announced themselves, and the clear ‘whack-a-mole’ approach, 38 Indian diaspora organisations and allies communicated a 10-point-plan, that would help social media corporations comply with their corporate human rights obligations. Meta, with whom many of the signatories were in direct contact before, did not respond to the letter.

Meta did not clarify whether it had readjusted its measures for India’s elections after hearing of the findings; the last edit to the India election measures page took place on April 3, far before the elections began on April 19.

The 10 points were overwhelmingly ignored, as the comparison below shows:

Demand	Action by Meta
1 Adopt an election silence period.	Meta disregarded the legal obligation for a silence period, and allowed candidates to engage in political speech during this period.
2 Ensure transparency by vetting who they are receiving money from.	Meta refused transparency by allowing surrogate and shadow advertisements. Advertising disclaimers did not reliably work, and the requirement to verify identity was easily circumvented using single-use phone numbers.
3 Ban shadow advertisers.	
4 Allow fact-checking of ads.	Meta failed to clarify its rules on fact-checking of ads, giving fact-checkers contradicting statements.
5 Ensure fact-checked information is correctly labelled in all languages.	Meta failed to recognise the linguistic diversity of India by not applying the fact-checking label to different languages.
6 Ensure that dehumanizing, caricaturing, demonizing of minorities is checked properly.	Meta failed to do so, allowing content dehumanizing, caricaturing, and demonizing of minorities to circulate freely.

Demand	Action by Meta
7 Proactively act to restrict re-spawning pages.	Reports showed that pages respawned.
8 Remove the political exemption.	Meta continued to allow hateful and disinformative content by politicians to circulate freely, claiming that this is in the public interest.
9 Allocate resources proportionately to the user market.	<u>Meta's India election plan</u> released on March 19 did not indicate any measures that went beyond the status quo, suggesting that resources continued to not be allocated proportionately to the Indian user market. For example, Meta provides content moderation for only <u>20 languages</u> – while there are over <u>121 languages</u> in the country.
10 Shut down the recommender system and make algorithms open for audits.	<u>Meta's India election plan</u> released on March 19 did not provide any changes to the recommender algorithm or to public disclosure of algorithms.



Image from Manipur poll violence. Source: Reuters

ELECTION VIOLENCE

As extensively documented by [Varshney \(2005\)](#), Indian elections have always been ripe with violence. In the recent Indian general elections, there were ample recorded instances of election violence. For instance:

On April 19, violent clashes took place in three parliamentary constituencies in West Bengal. The Trinamool Congress and BJP later filed 80 and 39 complaints, respectively, related to poll violence, voter intimidation, and assaults on poll agents. Violent incidents include:

- One voter reportedly sustained injuries in his eye after leaving the polling booth after voting.
- A BJP supporter reported being attacked with sickle as he was going to vote.
- There were also reports of “crude bombs” being placed outside the house of a BJP booth president.
- Videos aired by local television channels showed people throwing stones and pushing and shoving one another.



On April 19, violent clashes took place in the conflict-torn state of Manipur, leading the Election Commission to announce that re-polls would take place in 11 booths. Incidents reportedly include:

- Two people being assaulted at Arapati Maning polling station, requiring hospital treatment.
- A group of unidentified people firing at a polling station from a car in Moirang Kampu.
- Unidentified people opening fire at Wangoo polling station in Kakching.
- Unidentified people firing nearly 30 rounds at a polling station in Bishnupur.
- Several incidents of vandalism.
- Armed people threatening voters not to come out of their homes.
- An armed group voting by proxy for around 100 people.
- Four incidents of damaging electronic voting machines.

Other incidents of polling violence include (listed chronologically):

- On 7th May, police allegedly “lathi-charged” (beat with sticks) voters in four Muslim-dominated villages in Uttar Pradesh’s Sambhal, injuring hundreds at polling booths.
- On 13th May, violence erupted during Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh, with involvement of the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) and opposition parties, mainly the TDP. YSRCP’s Tenali Assembly candidate was caught on video slapping a voter, leading to clashes. Polling was briefly stopped in Kuppam constituency due to YSRCP-TDP altercations. Electronic Voting Machines were reportedly destroyed in Dalwai and Macherla, causing disruptions.
- On 16th May, tensions escalated in Ganjam district, Odisha state, as a BJP worker was allegedly hacked to death in Khalikote. The clash began when BJD workers attacked BJP workers when they were pasting posters at Krushna Saranpur village. Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik condemned the violence, urging swift action against perpetrators. Chief Election Officer Nikunja Behari Dhal directed authorities to restore peace, affirming zero tolerance towards election violence.
- On 21st May, there was a violent altercation between the Yadav and Rajput communities (castes within the Indian social hierarchy) in Badi Telpa village, resulting in the death of Chandan Yadav, a local resident and leaving another individual critically injured amid reports of gunfire. Locals allege attempts to disenfranchise marginalized voters. Despite initial pacification efforts, tensions flared anew the following day, culminating in renewed violence. Authorities have since apprehended two suspects in connection with the incident.
- On 21st May, there was a violent clash between BJP and Rashtriya Janata Dal workers in Bihar’s Chapra, where one person was killed and two others injured. The clash erupted near a polling station, post which District Magistrate Aman Samir deployed sufficient police to control the situation. In response to the unrest, the district administration ordered a two-day internet shutdown. Blanket shutdowns violate the freedom of expression under Article 19 ICCPR.
- On 25th May, violence and unrest marked the sixth phase of polling in West Bengal’s eight Lok Sabha constituencies. The Election Commission received 954 complaints, mainly about malfunctions of Electronic Voting Machines and polling agents being obstructed. Clashes erupted in Ghatal between Trinamool Congress (TMC) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) supporters. Further, unidentified assailants reportedly killed Trinamool Congress worker Sheikh Moibul in Mahishadal, Purba Medinipur district.
- On 1st June, political party workers and security personnel clashed during polling in the Basirhat constituency, West Bengal state. The West Bengal government then imposed a ban on public assembly in 17 areas.
- On 1st June, after polls closed, unidentified assailants shot and hacked to death a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) worker in West Bengal state.



This dossier consolidates work by diverse researchers and civil society organisations on hate speech and violations of human rights during India's 2024 elections. Please consult the original sources cited for a full picture.

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