Hindutva civilizational populist BJP’s enforcement of digital authoritarianism in India

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Bios

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ABSTRACT

The largest democracy in the world is now moving towards authoritarianism under the Hindutva civilizational populist prime minister Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s rule. This article focuses on digital rights in India that have seen a sharp decline in recent years. It explores the transformation of the internet and social media, from a relatively open and liberal space to a restricted one. This survey of India’s digital landscape finds that the rise of civilizational populist Modi and his eight years long rule have led to an upsurge in digital surveillance and control and has fostered an environment of online harassment and bullying for those who are critical of the BJP’s views and politics. The article uses a four-level framework (Full Network, Sub-Network, Proxies, and Network Nodes) to explore digital authoritarianism by the BJP government. At each of these levels, the Hindutva populist government has closed avenues of open discussion and exchange of views by enforcing new rules and regulations.
The rise of populism has slowly hijacked the digital space as a medium for forming a strong relationship with public opinion. This practice is not particular to authoritarian states or democratic ones as these boundaries are increasingly being blurred by attempts to control and influence the digital space by all governments, irrespective of their ideology or types. Over the decade, the relationship between digital space and politics has evolved from a one-dimensional relation where one endangers or compliments the other to an interplay of different social, political, and economic forces determining the outcome. This essay aims to understand this interplay by focusing on the case study of India analyzing the nature of right-wing populist digital authoritarianism. The inquiry is also useful in understanding how formal and informal changes to cyberspace enable a system where authoritarianism is maintained by the creation of an ecosystem that supports its political survival. Narendra Modi’s eight years rule provides an opportunity to study not only the formal tools of cyber authoritarianism but its justification – a toxic nexus of populism and religion.

Human civilization entered the twenty-first century with a promise of a democratic, liberal global space where digital technologies were seen as tools that would ensure people-centric governance, improve access via e-governance, and foster connections with the citizens (Shirky, 2011). After two decades, the hopes and optimism regarding democratic development, based on the availability and easy access of digital technologies to all, have been dashed to the ground. The increase in the use of digital technologies has been accompanied by concerns regarding the misuse and manipulation of digital tools in the political space, specifically after incidents such as the Cambridge Analytica Scandal. In 2019, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey among 979 technology experts asking them about the impact of the use of technology on citizens, civil society groups, democracy, and democratic representation. Nearly half of the respondents (49 percent) said that the use of technology will mostly weaken core aspects of democracy as the misuse of digital technology to manipulate and weaponize facts will affect people’s trust in institutions and each other, impacting their views about integrity and value of democratic processes and institutions (Anderson & Rainie, 2020).

According to Freedom House’s The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism Report, during 2017-18, 26 of the 65 countries assessed experienced a deterioration in internet freedom. Reductions in half of these countries were related to a rise in disinformation, censorship, technical attacks, and arrests of government critics in the lead-up to elections. Governments in 18 countries have increased state surveillance since June 2017. They have often avoided independent oversight and weakened encryption to gain unrestricted access to data. Thirteen countries have also blocked at least one social media or communication platform due to political and security reasons. There has also been a
rise in governments manipulating social media content with pro-government commentators, bots, or trolls manipulating online discussions and content in 32 out of 65 countries.

These alarming figures from cyberspace are in line with political realities. With growing social and economic pressures democracies around the world are struggling to remain true to their fundamental principles. Populism in its various forms is on the rise and authoritarian and illiberal practices are no longer limited to ‘fragile’ and weak democracies. Western Europe, Europe in general, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) are facing a multitude of challenges on these fronts. India, the world’s largest democracy was a symbol of progression and promise when its founding fathers, including Jawaharlal Nehru and Dr. Ambedkar, framed the construction in a secular and democratic spirit. However, India, like many other countries, is on a dangerous trajectory with its leading party, the BJP, exhibiting clear hallmarks of authoritarianism. This reality is replicated in cyberspace as well.

In this study, digital authoritarianism in India is explored using a four-level framework: Full Network, Sub-Network, Proxies, and Network Nodes. This framework is based on the research done by (Howard et al., 2011).
In 2022, India’s score dropped further and declined for the fourth consecutive year to 66 (Freedom House, 2022a). While the Indian government decried the report and termed it biased, the Freedom House was not the only organization to document the decline in democratic rights in India (Scroll, 2021). According to the 5th Annual Democracy Report by the V-Dem Institute, India has been downgraded to the status of electoral autocracy (2021). This deterioration has primarily been enabled by the popularity of the right-wing Hindutva.

While it seemingly looks attached to Hinduism, it is more of a political derivative which is roughly equivalent to Islamism. Hindutva, as mobilized by populists, is quite different from the actual faith of Hinduism itself.
Savarkar claimed that Hindus as the rightful and hereditary owners of the land, thus excluding Christians, Muslims, Jews, etc. and degrading them to the status of outsiders and enemies. This transition occurred over time under the influence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a hundred years old religio-militant organization and its various affiliated bodies called the Sangh Parivar which was focused on the revival of the old “Hindu” traditions and encouraging people to adopt the Hindutva way of life. The RSS also builds a successful cultural identity of the group making its members long for a lost glorified Hindu age which came to an end due to “tyrant invaders” such as the Muslims and British.

Hindutva, on the other hand, is an exclusive and closed ideology. The advent of Hindutva comes from V.D Savarkar who wrote a book in the early 1920s, titled Hindutva: Who is a Hindu? which defines a Hindu as someone “who considers India to be his motherland (matrbhumi), the land of his ancestors (pitrbhumi), and his holy land (punya bhumi)” (Tharoor, 2018).

Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world and its followers term their devotion as Sanatana Dharma (translated as eternal order, way, or duty) rather than classifying to a strict Hindu identity. Even traditions, behaviors, and identities that are linked with a Hindu identity such as karma (causality of good actions/ideas leading to good and bad leading to bad consequences), samsara (cycle of life, death, and rebirth usually referring to the seven cycles until the final stage of release), veganism, cow-worship, idol worship, etc are not the key features of what it means to be a Hindu. There are no parameters set by the faith itself or even by the government of India that make a person Hindu on the bases of customs and traditions being practiced, rather the definition of a Hindu citizen by the government of India is one who is born of Hindu parents or who does not identify with other local religions such as Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrian, etc. This makes Hinduism both a pluralist and fluid religion, more so in comparison to the Abrahamic faiths since it is not exclusive and has a centuries-old history of inclusively embracing the edicts and principles of other religions from a higher, holistic perspective (Saleem, 2021). Hindutva, on the other hand, is an exclusive and closed ideology.
Harnessing the multi-layered insecurities, the Modi-led BJP has rooted its politics in Hindutva-driven populism. BJP’s populism is based on Hindutva and embraces not only the Hindus of India but also those living in other countries. It also draws its symbols, heroes, villains, culture, holy books, etc. from ancient Hindu civilization. Therefore, one can argue that BJP’s populism is not national but civilizational. ‘Civilizational populism’ is “a group of ideas that together considers that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people, and society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ who collaborate with the dangerous others belonging to other civilizations that are hostile and present a clear and present danger to the civilization and way of life of the pure people” (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022a; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022b).

Under Modi’s rule, India is becoming highly discriminatory and at times violent towards “the others.” This hostility is manifested in formal authoritarianism enabled by the instrumentalization of state institutions. In this part of the article, the civilizational Hindutva populism propagated by the BJP is explained.

Narendra Modi’s success in India has a lot with his Hindutva populist leadership and BJP’s expertise in digital media. Modi is a classic populist as he divides the nation into two groups of pure and impure people and claims that
the pure people have been victims for centuries as impure people have used their innocence, purity, and good nature to subjugate them. He presents himself as someone that will make the pure people “Vishwaguru” (teacher, guru, or mentor of the world). The distinguishing feature of the pure group of people is Hinduism; impure people are non-Hindus, primarily Muslims (Yilmaz, Morieson & Demir, 2021). This deadly nexus of religion and populism is peculiar to Modi. Hindutva leadership, under various parties (Hindu Mahasabha, Bharatiya Jan Sangh, Bharatiya Janata Party, etc.) had been gradually gaining ground since the 1950s but populism was not part of its repertoire until Modi emerged on the political scene (Saleem, 2021).

Modi won his first election in his home state Gujarat in 2002 after an anti-Muslim pogrom. Although the Indian Supreme Court acquitted Modi of all charges, there is widespread evidence of Modi’s acts of omission, if not commission, in allowing the pogrom to continue (Jaffrelot, 2003; Ghassem-Fachandi, 2012; Nussbaum, 2009). In November 2022, Amit Shah, the current Home Minister of India, Modi’s right hand man for more than two decades and co-accused in the Gujarat pogrom, gave further evidence of a planned massacre by saying in a public rally, “They tried to create a problem for Narendra Bhai [Modi] but he taught them such a lesson that they have not dared to do anything till 2022” and “But after they were taught a lesson in 2002, these elements left that path (of violence). They refrained from indulging in violence from 2002 till 2022. The BJP has established permanent peace in Gujarat by taking strict action against those who used to indulge in communal violence.” Since Muslims were the primary victims of the 2002 pogrom, it was obvious Amit Shah was referring to Muslims (Hindu Bureau, 2022). The old anti-Muslim message was given a populist twist by Modi in 2010-11 when he started concerted efforts to become the Prime Minister of India. Fortunately, for him, India had already experienced a digital revolution and was ready for a new kind of campaign.

Other political parties were no match to BJP’s successful digital campaign in 2014. Since then, during elections and at other points of political significance, the BJP has used digital alternatives along with the mainstream media (Schroeder, 2018). With extensive outreach, large funding, and little to stop them from airing controversial views, the party has gained significant clout on social media. This clout allows Modi to cultivate Hindutva populism which legitimizes the authoritarian actions of the state and creates a loyal supporter base that is not bothered about the rapidly deteriorating state of democracy and human rights. Gaining a favorable supporter base in cyberspace is important for the BJP as, according to data by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), the total number of internet subscribers in India has risen to 825.30 million while broadband subscribers are 778 million at the end of March 2021 (TRAI, 2021).

The BJP leadership has a long history of hate speeches and propaganda against religious minorities such as Muslims and
since then, with over 30,000 members working in a coordinated way to incite communal hatred, complete with readily shareable images, videos, and forwards to tap into the hate-network effect (Thakur & Meghnad, 2021).

The Hindutva populist message of hatred, oppression, and discrimination embraced and mainstreamed by the BJP has also found its way into the hearts of millions of people. Exposed to these ideas many segments of the public mirror the state’s overt aggression towards “the others” within the cyber realm. There are many instances where things go beyond cyberbullying leading to actual physical attacks taking place due to the spread of news on social networking sites. In India, hate speech, false news, and misinformation shared on social media have been linked to increased violence and hatred towards non-Hindu religious groups. Specifically, WhatsApp users among a section of rural and urban upper- and middle-class Hindu men are predisposed both to believe populist disinformation and to share misinformation about “othered” and “impure” groups in face-to-face and WhatsApp networks. This discrimination culminates in the form of widespread, simmering distrust, hatred, contempt, and suspicion towards Muslims, Dalits, and non-Dalit Hindu dissenting citizens (Banaji & Bhat, 2020).

Similarly, News Laundry reported on the telegram network of Kapil Mishra, a BJP leader, and his ‘Hindu Ecosystem’ network that creates propaganda material and manufactures trends across social media platforms to whip up communal hatred and bigotry, and support for Hindutva (2021). The network began with Mishra tweeting the link to a membership form to join the team. The group was joined mostly by upper-caste Hindu men, growing to around 20,000 members. Mishra asked the members to subscribe to Organizer and Panchjanya, house journals of the RSS boosting the reach of the supremacist group. The Hindu Ecosystem picks up a theme to trend on Twitter each week, ready with mass propaganda and a bunch of fake news with bad aesthetics, to put the Hindutva ideology, along with a bunch of tweets that only had to be copy-pasted by the members to start a campaign. The group has been growing exponentially since then, with over 30,000 members working in a coordinated way to incite communal hatred, complete with readily shareable images, videos, and forwards to tap into the hate-network effect (Thakur & Meghnad, 2021).

An example of such social media-led violence can be found in incidents of lynching of Muslims and Dalits that are fueled by rumors spread on social media.
Since 2015, there have been more than a hundred instances of lynching, targeting individuals from the discriminated groups (Dalits, Muslims, Christians, Adivasis) based on allegations of cow slaughter, cow trafficking, and cattle theft leading to further instances of extreme mob violence and lynching that have resulted in death and trauma. Although these victims are targeted for different reasons, these incidents have in common mobs of vigilantes who use peer-to-peer messaging applications such as WhatsApp to spread lies about the victims and use misinformation to mobilize, defend, and in some cases to document and circulate images of their violence (Banaji & Bhat, 2020).

There is a “thematic alignment” between those who propagate and believe in conspiracy theories and populists. Both do not believe in mainstream media or the government and are paranoid – afraid of minorities, refugees, and other groups plotting against them. Their basic assumption is that the government and media are in cahoots to deceive the majority group, who are the victims (Krasodomski-Jones, 2019). Unsurprisingly, one sees conspiracy theories promoted by the Hindutva against Muslims. During the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories became viral on social media blaming Muslims for the spread of the novel Coronavirus in India. As reported by The Guardian, Mehboob Ali from Harewali was beaten mercilessly by a Hindu mob after a conspiracy theory became viral nationwide that linked the spread of the COVID-19 virus in India to a Tablighi Jamaat gathering in New Delhi. Hundreds of Tablighi Jamaat members were arrested all over India and remained in jail for months before being declared innocent by courts. There was also a concentration of attacks on Muslims in Karnataka state after an audio clip began to be shared widely over WhatsApp, urging people not to allow Muslim fruit and vegetable sellers into their areas, claiming they were spreading the virus through their produce. The hatred reached such a level that some hospitals denied treatment to Muslim Covid-19 patients (Pisharody, 2020).

Similarly, there have been incidents of lynchings and beatings of Muslims after allegations of ‘love jihad’, whereby Muslims are accused of luring/grooming Hindu women to deceitfully convert them to Islam, spread on social media. This conspiracy has been referenced in more than 2000 tweets on social media prompted by Hindu nationalists, fueling violence and unrest since 2013, resulting in the killing of 62 people and forced displacement of over 50,000 Muslims in the northern Indian town of Muzaffarnagar (Dotto & Swinnen, 2021).

The scope and themes of discussion in this Indian, anti-Muslim network hijack global conversations as well. As the conflict in Israel and Palestine broke out, thousands of anti-Islam and pro-Israel messages flooded Indian social media, using the conflict as a vehicle to promote Islamophobia. On May 12, 2021, an open call was launched on social media to get the anti-Muslim #UnitedAgainstJehad trending, accompanied by graphics
with detailed instructions to retweet at least 40 times, alleging that radical Islamic Jihadis were much more dangerous than any pandemic. In a few hours, the likes and shares poured in and by May 13, the hashtag had already appeared over 11,000 times, producing nearly 70,000 interactions on Twitter (Dotto & Swinnen, 2021).

This core support base for Modi and the party aids in creating an environment where authoritarianism inspires vigilantism and supports the extreme formal measures of the state. Cyberspace populated by pro-Hindutva advocates and shaped by the BJP narratives is a highly oppressive place for “the others.” Actual incidents are animated and inspired by Twitter trends and viral videos (Mirchandani, 2018).
DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN INDIA

Despite widespread internet access, internet freedom in India, however, remains compromised. According to Democracy Watchdog by Freedom House, internet freedom in India declined for four consecutive years until 2021. The internet freedom score improved slightly from 49 to 51 in 2022 but India is still designated as 'Partly-Free' (Freedom House, 2022b). During the last five years, the Indian government regularly shut down the internet to suppress protests the Citizenship Amendment Act, scrapping of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir state, Farm laws, and targeted critical voices with spyware. It also pressured international social media platforms to remove content that was critical of the government’s Hindu nationalist/populist agenda (Freedom House, 2021). This signals an increasing effort on part of the government to regulate the digital space and limit, block, and penalize those who question or oppose the party.

Sahana Udupa (2018) argues that the Hindu nationalist BJP was the first major political party to have a social media campaign strategy. During the 2014 national election campaign, the BJP used numerous new mobilization tactics on social media that were not seen before. The branding on social and print media projected Modi as a “populist messiah of New India.” His complicity in the 2002 Gujarat massacre was downplayed. After winning the elections, the BJP established an IT cell that is the envy of other parties. Amit Shah, the then BJP President, claimed in 2018, that “it is through social media that we have to form...
governments at the state and national levels, by making messages going viral" (Basu, 2019).

Swati Chaturvedi (2016), in her book “I am a Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP’s Digital Army” gives useful insights into the workings of the social media cell of the BJP led by Arvind Gupta, the same BJP official who was responsible for leading BJP’s 2014 election campaign. The cell runs from BJP’s headquarters located at 11 Ashoka Road in New Delhi and comprises members who ensure that certain hashtags, decided by the head, are made to trend on social media on a particular day. Each day has a different tweet agenda that is sent out to a large network of social media workers across India, mostly standard PR containing tweeting routine addresses by PM Modi, Amit Shah, and BJP Chief Ministers or creating the BJP or Modi-related trend topics. Over the years, the BJP has built a reservoir of thousands of dormant Twitter accounts to be used when needed for synchronized tweeting, along with bots controlled by the party’s central IT cell which tweet out identical messages simultaneously.

The following section explores India’s digital authoritarianism using the four-level framework.

FULL NETWORK LEVEL GOVERNANCE

Full network governance refers to a complete internet shutdown or substantial degrading of the internet (e.g. from 4G to 2G or 3G) in a region. Between 2014 and November 2022, there were 680 government-imposed internet shutdowns across India, resulting in the highest number of internet blocks in the world.

In 2021, there were 101 forced internet shutdowns in India. This is a significant increase from only six and 14 shutdowns in 2014 and 2015 respectively (Internet Shutdowns, 2022). The worst example of an internet shutdown in India was the internet shutdown in Kashmir, for almost a year, after the stripping of its special status on August 5, 2019. This was done ostensibly to end violence, militancy, and online extremism in the region, however, according to most observers, it was clearly done to stifle criticism and dissent against the highly unpopular decision. Internet shutdown was imposed despite objections from human rights organizations, civil society, political parties, and even retired security officials (Shah, 2020). The shutdown continued despite concerns raised by many residents on the additional challenges it posed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SUB-NETWORK OR WEBSITE LEVEL GOVERNANCE

When it comes to Sub-network level governance, the government has introduced a panoply of digital surveillance measures, normalizing the shift from targeted surveillance to mass surveillance (Mahapatra, 2021). This has been justified on the account of rising terrorism in India, especially after the Mumbai attacks of 2008. The most recent development in this realm has been the induction of a Central Monitoring System (CMS). The CMS is a surveillance system that monitors most of electronic and other communications, including
phone calls on landlines and cell phones, text messages, and social media engagement. It was primarily introduced post the 26/11 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, after which a need was felt for a greater coordinator between law enforcement and security agencies. This system puts the privacy of the public at risk as a person will not know if and when their data has been intercepted and when turned into a mass surveillance practice. Large groups of people will have their data intercepted without a valid reason (Internet Freedom Foundation, 2020).

Other than CMS, in the past few years, police have routinized the use of fingerprint and facial recognition technology (FRT) to stop and screen people on grounds of suspicion, without any evidence. Such digital surveillance enables dragnet surveillance, which makes everyone a suspect. Secondly, it also leads to datafication of individuals, turning the identity and activity of human beings into quantifiable data for governance and business purposes (Mahapatra, 2021).

The next level of analysis is the sub-network level where websites and webpages are banned by governments. In India, websites are blocked by the central government, under Section 69A of the IT Act and the 2009 Blocking Rules, which allows the reasons for the ban to be kept confidential too. There has also been an upsurge in the number of websites blocked. A total of 6096 websites were blocked in 2021. This is low as compared to the 9849 websites banned in 2020 but considerably higher than to 633 websites banned in 2016. (Qureshi, 2022). It is worth noting that censorship and digital surveillance in India are not only limited to blaming and censoring Muslims. During the Farmer Protests, hundreds of Indian Twitter accounts that voiced support for the farmers were suspended as India’s Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology directed the company to take down accounts that had used “incendiary” hashtags during the January 26 violence, raising questions about the neutrality of Twitter when it comes to free speech in India (Rej, 2021).

**PROXY OR CORPORATION LEVEL GOVERNANCE**

The next level of analysis is proxies and corporations, especially social media websites or intermediaries, all while keeping in mind India’s powerful position as having the third-largest Twitter users in the world (behind the US and Japan), the largest number of Facebook users in the world, and largest WhatsApp market in the world (Buchholz, 2021). Such a big consumer base puts India in a dominant position in the international market, forcing intermediaries to accept its advice even if it goes against their rules and individual privacy.

Under the recent restrictive Information Technology Rules 2021, social media platforms’ freedom to operate and immunity from prosecution (because of what someone has written or posted on their websites) have been greatly reduced. Social media intermediaries are now required to remove content identified as illegal by the government within three days. They are also required to provide user information to law
enforcement officials. For this, they need to increase their data retention period to 180 days, increasing the costs of noncompliance for these global firms, thereby putting end-to-end encryption at risk.

Pal (2021) elaborates that the intermediaries are required to appoint three officers: a) a Chief Compliance Officer who shall be responsible for compliance with the Information Technology Act and the rules framed there under, b) a Nodal Contact Person who shall be responsible for communication with law enforcement agencies, and c) a Resident Grievance Officer who shall be responsible for the grievance redressal mechanism. All these officers are required to be residents of India. Another obligation cast upon these intermediaries is to enable the identification of the ‘first originator’ of any information on their platform. Simply put, this means that an intermediary, like Facebook or Twitter, would be open for liability if a third-party user posts unlawful content on their platforms (The Wire, 2021; Pal, 2021).

Apart from endangering the privacy of users, these rules directly put the users' freedom of expression at risk. These rules also restrict companies’ discretion in moderating their own platforms and create new possibilities for government surveillance of citizens, threatening the idea of free and open internet (Rodriguez & Schmon, 2021). The 2021 Rules also require all intermediaries to remove restricted content within 36 hours of knowing of its existence by a court order or notification from a government agency, with noncompliance resulting in penal consequences (Rodriguez & Schmon, 2021).

The manifestation of this law can be seen in the following examples. During the COVID-19 crisis in 2021, the Indian government made an emergency order to censor tweets criticizing the government for its negligence and inefficiency in combating the virus. This specifically referred to a tweet from a politician in West Bengal holding Prime Minister Modi directly responsible for Coronavirus deaths, and from an actor criticizing PM Modi for holding political rallies while the virus raged, raising concerns about the government’s obsession with political supremacy and censorship during a public health crisis (BBC, 2021). Such requests by the government to block content on Twitter peaked in the aftermath of the revoking of Articles 35A and 370, related to Kashmir, as already discussed, with Modi’s government issuing its highest-ever number of monthly blocking orders to Twitter, with all of the censorship requests aimed at Kashmir-related content. On August 11 and August 12, 2020, Twitter was asked to take down eight accounts, including some Pakistani and Kashmir-based accounts claiming that they were “circulating fake news” and that the language used was a “clear indication” that they were either being run by the ISI or the Pakistan Army” (Srivas, 2020). The tensions also escalated due to the recent mass protest movement by farmers against three farm laws that renewed criticism of Modi’s regime, to which the government responded with hundreds of takedown orders to Twitter. The platform initially resisted, but later complied with many of the requests and blocked
some 500 accounts permanently (Christopher & Ahmad, 2021).

Twitter and other intermediaries have faced increasing pressure, many call it intimidation, from the Indian government to comply. In a November 2022 article, Time magazine called it “Twitter’s India problem.” There have been raids, court cases, and the threat of arrests. Twitter has tried to walk a thin line in India. It has increased its compliance but has also tried not to become too servile. Since the implementation of new rules, it has deferred to Indian government “requests” for the removal of posts, blocking of accounts, revealing user information, etc. According to Twitter’s transparency report, it complied with only 9.1 percent of requests to remove the content in the six months before the new rules came into force. Since then, Twitter has complied with 19.5 percent of requests, more than double the previous percentage. During the same period, Twitter became much more amenable to revealing user data. It complied with almost ten times as many government requests for private information. However, Twitter has also tried to remain independent by filing a lawsuit in July 2022 against the demand of the government to remove 39 tweets and accounts (Perrigo, 2022). In 2022, the Indian government has also come up with a new Digital Personal Data Protection Bill that further increased the government’s power on the transfer of data and virtual communications (Saran, 2022).
Coming to individual-level internet governance in India, the primary targets are journalists and social media activists resulting in arrests under terror or treason charges. India’s rank on the World Press Freedom Index has decreased from the 133rd position in 2016 to the 142nd position in 2021 and the 150th position in 2022 (The Quint, 2022). India is among the countries categorized as “bad” for journalism and is considered one of the most dangerous countries for journalists (Kaushik, 2021). In July 2021, India was engulfed in the Pegasus spyware scandal. Pegasus is a spyware, made by an Israeli company, that was used to spy on journalists, political opponents, foreign leaders, military officials, etc. It was sold only to governments to supposedly control terrorism and other illegal activities. However, Modi’s government, like many other governments, bought this spyware to spy on anyone it considered a threat (Basak, 2022).

Journalists, particularly Muslim journalists, are under consistent threat of arrest and courts have provided constitutional protection in a few cases. National and state governments regularly file cases against Journalist Rana Ayyub for disturbing communal harmony when she exposes BJP’s Hindutva cadres’ excesses. In June 2022, Delhi state police arrested Zubair, owner of Alt News,
a prominent fact-checking website, over a four-years old post. Siddique Kappan was arrested in October 2020 when he was trying to cover a murder and rape case. After struggling through lower courts for two years, he was granted bail by the Supreme Court of India but before this verdict, the state filed another lawsuit, and he is still in jail (Freedom on the Net, 2022; Mamta, 2022). In March 2022, three Kashmiri students remained in jail for five months under sedition charges for allegedly sending anti-India WhatsApp messages after Pakistan’s victory in a cricket match. They have been granted bail, but their future remains precarious as the case is still to be decided (Jaiswal, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The article analyzed and examined the law, rules, and regulations which the BJP government uses to control cyberspace. This was carried out by using the four levels of network analysis. In India surveillance, blockage, censorship, and legal actions for cyber activities are all regulated under legal frameworks that have been tailored to support the BJP’s undemocratic transgressions. The article focused on analyzing the multifaceted and layered populist usage of cyberspace by the BJP in India and its impact on their Hindu base as well as on “the others.” We find that civilizational authoritarian populism in India has spread like wildfire which makes it quite a volatile society both offline as well as online. Both these spaces intersect and influence each other. The once democratic and plural country has transformed into a breeding ground for extremism, repression, and violence.

Targeting religious minorities has now become the most dominant theme on Indian social media. As discussed, the virtual hate, propagated by the BJP, eventually transcends into real life in instances of violence targeting these groups. The state-led cyber oppression emboldens many to not only embrace these narratives online but also to be violent against “the others.” This violence or vigilantism is not limited to online harassment but frequently results in the death of the intended targeted communities.

Overall, our analysis has shown that civilizational populist digital authoritarianism in India has recently become more prominent. Since Modi’s ascend, India has experienced a decline in internet freedom and has also lost its status as a vibrant democracy. Modi has built a strong digital presence around the country in four main ways:

The BJP has established a top-down, organized social media presence model, controlled by the BJP IT Cell in New Delhi. The IT Cell commands thousands of paid and unpaid volunteers and bots who share posts and tweets. These posts/tweets follow specific themes that are decided by the party leaders and involve targeting political opponents, harassing religious minorities, and spreading propaganda and fake news.

The BJP government has introduced a set of rules and regulations to increase its digital oversight which augments its control over social media networks
and coerces the latter into complying with the government’s narrative if they are to thrive in India. Some recent developments in this regard include the introduction of the Central Monitoring System (CMS) and the new rules Information Technology Rules, 2021.

As India has one the largest number of social media users in the world, the BJP government enjoys preferential treatment from social media platforms that have a history of giving in to BJP’s concerns and removing content that is undesirable to the BJP.

As a spillover of the BJP authoritarianism, the Hindutva voter base has also accepted and enacted the state’s populist authoritarianism in both online and physical space.

Emerging from these factors, the digital landscape in India has become increasingly intolerant.
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