



Article

The Many (Inter)faces of Religious Politics

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An analysis of social media amid religious and political conflict in India

India, one of the largest and most diverse democracies in the world, [faces a turning point](#). The now-infamous 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) included a pathway to citizenship for migrants from neighboring countries—but specifically excluded Muslims from this pathway. This law combined with changes to the National Registry of Citizens (NRC), was widely seen as a way to lay the legal groundwork to one day deprive Muslims of Indian citizenship. The law was criticized throughout the Indian diaspora for explicitly discriminating based on religion and defying the secular spirit of the Indian constitution. Sahana Udupa and Max Kramer write that “students, women, children, nonresidential Indians, public intellectuals, and professionals [took to the] streets and social media, where they demanded immediate withdrawal of the controversial legislation.” These protests demonstrated the power of social media to mobilize and sustain mass movements in favor of fairness and social justice. However, social media was also used as an equally potent tool to organize counter-protests in favor of the legislation and against India’s Muslim population.



Indian students and residents protesting the CAA and NRC. Source: DiplomatTesterMan via Wikimedia Commons.

Rethinking Virtual Spaces

In their article “[Multiple Interfaces: Social Media, Religious Politics, and National \(Un\)Belonging in India and the Diaspora](#),” Sahana Udupa and Max Kramer ask readers to rethink the nature of the Internet. They write, “Rather than the abstraction of the internet as an encompassing technological context or an instrumental understanding of the internet as a conduit, it might be better seen as an arena of ‘multiple interfaces.’”

in-ter-face

a. the place at which independent and often unrelated systems meet and act on or communicate with each other

b. the means by which interaction or communication is achieved at an interface

—Merriam-Webster Dictionary

In other words, the authors of this article suggest that the Internet is not just a tool of communication or a channel through which information flows. It is a place where people and ideas meet, where identities are reinforced or created. It is a meeting space that can be either a common ground or a battleground. In terms of information, it enables the exchange of facts as well as the metastasizing of misinformation. The Internet is a sphere where people interact—and create—in at least as many ways as they do offline. Udupa and Kramer continue:

The generative capacity of such mediated interfaces has opened up new locations, modulations, and means of practice for the political stakes of religion and national belonging.



Photo by Geralt via Pixabay.

Varieties of Online Religious Politics

Udupa and Kramer's article explores how the Internet can be used to fight or uphold discrimination against Muslims during the ascendancy of far-right political groups in India. They theorize that most of these activities can be categorized into a few major groups.

Our key argument is that three clusters of social media practices have been prominent in reconfiguring religious politics in the context of resurgent right-wing nationalism and diverse resistances to its exclusionary discourse. We identify them as piety, surveillance, and fun.

Piety is the performance and expression of the moral and religious self through online interactions. Surveillance involves the regulation of online discourse—as in, which voices and ideas are amplified, restricted—and why. Fun includes informal kinds of meaning-

making and discourse that, “allow majoritarian groups to consolidate power with banal forms of exclusions while raising hopes of transgressive subversion among minoritized groups.”

Udupa and Kramer’s examination of online religious politics doesn’t just reveal how social media engagement mirrors offline political discourse. The multiple interfaces they describe could be the battleground on which the fate of democracy is determined. You can read their article in full below:

[American-Ethnologist_Multiple-interfaces_Udupa-and-Kramer_2023-1Download](#)

The research conducted for Udupa and Kramer’s article is part of a larger project For Digital Dignity, which explores regional and global patterns of online political engagement.

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