Political Manipulation of the Israel-Hamas Conflict on WhatsApp in India

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This study provides a descriptive narrative of how the Israel-Hamas conflict was portrayed and discussed on WhatsApp in India. Even though India is not a direct stakeholder in the conflict, we uncover a substantial, orchestrated campaign disseminating extreme hate speech and misinformation. Our analysis reveals a deliberate use of the conflict to propagate anti-Muslim rhetoric, bolstering pro-Israel and pro-Indian government narratives, likely for political advantage in electoral contexts. The paper digs into the consequences of designing digital platforms that balance privacy with the need to curb harmful content: their lack of moderation, and susceptibility to exploitation by politically motivated actors. We discuss the adeptness of political entities in manipulating narratives, underscoring the far-reaching effects of local narratives in a globally connected environment, and prompting a reevaluation of platform responsibilities and design strategies in the face of evolving digital manipulation tactics.

1 Introduction

This research provides a detailed description of the unexpected and substantial impact of the Israel-Hamas conflict[1] on social media discourse in India, highlighting how a distant conflict has influenced local narratives in a nation not directly involved. Our focus is on WhatsApp, a widely used encrypted messaging platform, where we have identified a substantial, orchestrated campaign spreading hate speech and misinformation. This phenomenon is particularly alarming given the platform's nature, where content remains unmoderated and encrypted, allowing narratives to proliferate unchecked (Banaji et al, 2019; Varanasi, Pal, & Vashistha, 2022).

The importance of this issue lies in its potential to influence social and political perspectives in India, especially significant given the country's considerable Muslim

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[1] In writing about a highly polarized and politically sensitive issue, we have chosen to be as descriptively neutral and analytically consistent as possible. We use "Israel-Hamas conflict" to reflect the discursive language employed in the material we analyzed, as well as the framing observed in digital narratives. We acknowledge that no term is ideologically neutral, and in many cases, neutrality itself can obscure structures of violence and power. However, as researchers, we aim to document and analyze these discourses without reinforcing any particular political stance.

minority (Jaffrelot & Kalaiyarasan, 2022). This situation becomes even more critical considering the global influence of these narratives. India's position as a major player on the world stage, combined with its significant English-speaking population, means that the content generated has far-reaching implications beyond its borders (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023).

Studying the circulation of misinformation on WhatsApp at scale poses unique methodological challenges. The platform's end-to-end encryption, while vital for user privacy, limits the effectiveness of conventional content moderation and algorithmic filtering techniques commonly employed on public platforms. As a result, misinformation can circulate in closed networks without systematic checks or counters. While prior research has made significant strides in examining how misinformation operates within encrypted environments (Banaji et al. 2019; Medeiros and Singh 2022), they also highlight the methodological and epistemological constraints of such research. Much of the broader literature on political discourse and misinformation has focused on open platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), where data is more readily accessible. This paper contributes to the growing body of work on misinformation in closed messaging platforms by developing an approach that is sensitive to the structural affordances and limitations of WhatsApp, rather than treating it as a variant of public social media.

Our analysis builds on data collected by (Garimella & Chauchard, 2025), consisting of over 1,000 WhatsApp groups obtained through a data donation program in India. Using this rich dataset, we obtained 824 viral pieces of content spreading on WhatsApp following the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel. We used a mixed-methods approach to code the narratives present in the WhatsApp conversations. We identified various themes: pro-Israel narratives portraying Israel and India as allies, narratives depicting Muslims in India as internal threats, content that dehumanizes Palestinian suffering, and narratives attacking opposition parties for supporting Palestine. Additionally, we observe propaganda that leverages these narratives to support the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP, the right-wing party in power since 2014) electoral goals.[2] A key component of our research is the analysis of the implications of these narratives on the social fabric of India and their potential global influence.

This study explores the challenge of misinformation on WhatsApp, where encryption both protects privacy and hinders content moderation. In India, this creates a fertile ground for the spread of misinformation, significantly affecting its complex social

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[2] It is important to note that the October 7 attack and its aftermath we observe took place in the period leading up to the National elections in India in April 2024 and should be viewed in that context.

structure. This issue is not confined locally due to the potential global spread of narratives by Indian influencers, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of these effects in our interconnected world.

Our study contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary work at the intersection of communication, political conflict, and technology design. By examining how encrypted platforms like WhatsApp are used to disseminate divisive narratives targeting India's Muslim minority—the third-largest in the world—this paper highlights how global conflicts can be strategically reframed to destabilize domestic communal relations. Building on prior work that documents user-driven moderation efforts in encrypted spaces (Banaji et al. 2019; Varanasi, Pal, & Vashistha, 2022), we argue that platform design must contend with not only misinformation, but also the weaponization of affect and ideology. This calls for a rethinking of platform responsibility in politically volatile contexts, balancing the imperatives of privacy with the urgent need to curb hate-driven manipulation in closed network environments.

2. Communication Infrastructures and Political Narratives

2.1 Encrypted Infrastructures and Platform Affordances

Although WhatsApp is technically a messaging app, in practice it functions as a social media platform in many parts of the world, particularly in the Global South. Unlike traditional messaging apps designed primarily for one-to-one communication, WhatsApp enables the creation and maintenance of large group chats—some with hundreds of participants—as well as the widespread circulation of multimedia content via broadcast lists and viral forwards (Garimella and Eckles, 2020; Banaji et al., 2019). These features replicate core dynamics of social media: persistent content sharing, community formation, and networked public discourse. For millions of users, especially in India, WhatsApp is not simply a tool for interpersonal messaging but a space for consuming news, engaging in political debate, and participating in ideological communities.

The architecture of WhatsApp, particularly its end-to-end encryption, constructs a communication environment that is both secure and opaque. Messages are only accessible to the sender and the recipient, effectively excluding platforms, governments, and researchers from content-level scrutiny. This foundational design protects user privacy, but it also creates what scholars have termed "dark social" spaces—private, virally connected networks with little oversight (Gillespie, 2018). As a result, such

platforms present critical blind spots for moderating misinformation, hate speech, and coordinated propaganda campaigns (Nizaruddin, 2021; Medeiros, Singh, 2022).

Unlike platforms like X, which facilitate virality through broadcast affordances—retweets, trending topics, and influencer amplification—WhatsApp is characterized by a peer-to-peer model of circulation. There are no "verified accounts" or algorithmic recommendation systems that create hierarchies of content visibility. Instead, virality stems from repeated sharing within trusted interpersonal or community networks, which research shows can intensify resonance and reduce skepticism (Trauthig, Martin, & Woolley, 2024). This intimacy and informality of sharing imbue content with emotional credibility, especially when it aligns with existing biases (Trauthig & Woolley, 2023; Gursky et al., 2022).

These architectural affordances have made WhatsApp an especially potent tool for grassroots political mobilization in India. Nizaruddin (2021) and Varanasi et al. (2022) have documented how the BJP and affiliated groups leverage WhatsApp's decentralized model to circulate political messaging within caste, religious, and regional networks. This mode of "organic dissemination" bypasses public scrutiny while mimicking authenticity and spontaneity. The result is a communicative infrastructure where narratives can be seeded top-down but appear to spread bottom-up—what we might call "astroturf virality."

Thus, encrypted platforms like WhatsApp represent a unique challenge for both researchers and policymakers. Their privatized architectures, while ostensibly democratic and privacy-preserving, have enabled what Gillespie (2018) describes as a "lawless" digital space governed by opaque content flows. These platforms are not merely neutral conduits of communication; they are infrastructures of circulation (Larkin, 2008) that structure what stories can be told, who tells them, and how widely they are believed.

2.2 Transnational Conflicts in Local Media Ecologies

While WhatsApp's infrastructure fosters localized narrative spread, the content itself often transcends borders. Conflicts such as the Israel-Hamas war are not only observed but actively remediated within Indian digital spaces, where they are interwoven with domestic political ideologies and identity anxieties. In this study, we show how a foreign war becomes a local political tool, exploited to reinforce pro-government narratives, vilify religious minorities, and heighten communal tensions.

This phenomenon aligns with what Kraidy (2005) describes as "hybridity"—the cultural logic by which global messages are absorbed and rearticulated in local idioms. Hepp and Couldry (2017) further characterize this process as the "mediated construction of

reality," where media infrastructures scaffold how global events become meaningful within specific sociopolitical contexts. In the case of India, the symbolic war between Israel and Hamas is reframed into a proxy narrative about Hindus and Muslims, national loyalty and betrayal, and legitimate versus illegitimate violence.

Studies in conflict and security research shed further light on how groups like Hamas utilize media as strategic tools to engage in psychological and political warfare. Margolin (2019), for instance, explores how Hamas shifts between governance and militancy, leveraging visual propaganda and digital communication to sustain legitimacy, galvanize support, and reframe losses as symbolic victories. These communicative strategies are not confined to Gaza; they reverberate across diasporic and international media ecosystems, where other political actors—such as Hindu nationalist groups in India— repurpose them for local ideological battles. Thus, Hamas's sophisticated media operations provide not just inspiration but tactical models for distant political communities seeking to advance communal polarization.

Empirical studies of digital conflict narratives reinforce this theoretical framing. Seo (2014) found that both Israel and Hamas deployed emotional and thematic frames on Twitter to sway international opinion, with Israeli actors leaning on analytical and unity-based narratives, while Hamas emphasized human suffering and resistance. During the 2014 Gaza conflict, Zhang (2017) noted the adaptability of Hamas's propaganda in response to evolving global sentiment. Zeitzoff (2017) goes further to argue that social media reshapes the very nature of conflict—not just in how it is perceived, but in how it is waged and legitimized.

This dynamic is echoed in the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, where a local crisis in Nigeria became a global cause via social media. Olson (2016) illustrates how networked publics rallied around a humanitarian issue, transforming digital affect into real-world pressure on states and institutions. In our case, however, the inverse occurs: a distant war is "localized" to advance domestic electoral strategies and communal antagonisms.

Ultimately, the Israel-Hamas conflict becomes a canvas upon which Indian political actors project their ideological anxieties and ambitions. This highlights the need to treat social media not just as a site of content but as a site of ideological labor—a space where global events are metabolized into local power structures. By doing so, this paper bridges scholarship in communication, political sociology, and conflict studies, offering a granular account of how global security narratives are strategically realigned within domestic populist campaigns.

2.3 Affect, Framing, and Narrative Spread

Central to the virality and effectiveness of WhatsApp narratives is their emotional charge. These are not dispassionate news reports but affectively saturated frames, designed to provoke outrage, fear, pride, and loyalty. As Papacharissi (2015) argues, contemporary networked publics are shaped less by rational deliberation and more by what she calls "affective publics"—collectives that mobilize around shared feelings and sentiments. These publics are not incidental to political communication; they are its very engine.

In the Indian context, the ideological proximity between Hindutva[3] and Zionist[4] discourses has created fertile ground for emotionally resonant content. Therwath (2012) and Sen (2015) show how both movements center on nationalist exceptionalism and Islamophobia, often drawing on each other's strategies and mythologies. This civilizational framing is not abstract: it appears explicitly in WhatsApp forwards comparing Hamas to Indian Muslims, celebrating Israeli military actions, and glorifying a shared cultural-military ethos between Israel and Hindu nationalism.

In sum, the circulation of narratives on WhatsApp during the Israel-Hamas conflict cannot be understood through content alone. It requires attention to the affective structures that make such content "stick," the ideological histories that make it intelligible, and the encrypted infrastructures that make it unstoppable.

2.4 Our contribution

Together, these three strands—encrypted infrastructures, transnational narrative adaptation, and affective framing—highlight the layered complexity of contemporary political communication in the Global South. While prior research has examined misinformation on social media, this paper advances the literature by demonstrating how encrypted, semi-private platforms like WhatsApp operate not merely as channels of information but as infrastructures of ideological labor. The convergence of technical opacity, affective virality, and geopolitical recontextualization creates a potent environment for manipulating public opinion across borders, languages, and cultural domains.

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[3] Hindutva is a political and cultural ideology that seeks to define Indian culture in terms of Hindu values.
[4] Zionism is a political and nationalist movement that emerged in the late 19th century with the goal of establishing a Jewish homeland. Since the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, Zionism has evolved to encompass the support for the maintenance and development of Israel as a Jewish state. While for many it represents Jewish self-determination and survival, critics often associate certain forms of Zionism with colonialism, displacement of Palestinians, and unequal policies within the region.

This paper contributes to ongoing debates in communication scholarship about the interplay between media technologies, political discourse, and global-local flows. By foregrounding WhatsApp's role in translating the Israel-Hamas conflict into communal narratives within India, we show how transnational conflicts are not only observed but actively reauthored to serve domestic political objectives. In doing so, this study extends theories of mediatization, affective publics, and platform governance to the underexamined context of encrypted messaging in the Global South.

Moreover, we suggest that understanding misinformation and hate speech on encrypted platforms requires a shift in focus: from fact-checking discrete messages to examining the relational and infrastructural dynamics that shape narrative virality. Our findings urge communication scholars to treat private messaging platforms not as peripheral or intractable but as central terrains in the study of digital propaganda, political mobilization, and transnational media ecologies.

3 Dataset

The dataset utilized in this research was shared by Garimella et al. (Garimella & Chauchard, 2025) and was collected through data donations on WhatsApp from 379 users in rural India, corresponding to 1,094 WhatsApp groups. Garimella et al.'s sampling method aimed to gather a convenience sample, capturing diverse demographics to ensure a representative cross-section of the population. The median size of the groups was 104, indicating that most of them were large groups which discussed issues around political and religious identity, caste, region, etc. Please refer to the original paper (Garimella & Chauchard, 2025) for more details on the dataset, like the sample make up, the anonymization and the ethics protocols followed to obtain the dataset.
To find messages relevant to the Israel-Hamas conflict, a comprehensive search within the dataset for specific keywords related to the conflict, including 'Israel,' 'Hamas,' 'Palestine,' 'Gaza,' 'Hezbollah,' 'Netanyahu,' and their Hindi counterparts. This method allowed for a focused examination of relevant communications circulating within WhatsApp pertaining to the conflict. The dataset spanned over 3 months, starting on October 7, 2023. Figure 1A (Appendix)[5] shows the timeline of content in our dataset.

3.1 Annotation

The annotation was conducted by a journalist with deep expertise in the Indian media landscape, particularly in fact-checking and misinformation. Fluent in Hindi and

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[5] The appendix is available at https://bit.ly/ijoc-submission-appendix

embedded in the region's cultural and political context, the annotator was well-positioned to interpret nuanced or symbolic messaging within WhatsApp groups. While this expertise added valuable depth, we acknowledge that positionality may shape interpretation. Given prior research showing disproportionate misinformation from the ruling party and its affiliates (Nizaruddin, 2021), we remain transparent about the potential for bias in the coding process.

We also made a deliberate decision to rely on a single expert annotator, rather than using a team of crowd workers or multiple coders. This choice was driven by both practical and epistemological considerations. The complexity of the content—often steeped in cultural nuance, political dog whistles, religious references, and coded language—requires a deep familiarity with the discursive ecosystem of Indian WhatsApp groups. Training non-experts to reliably annotate such content would not only have been resource-intensive but also risked compromising the validity of the labels due to gaps in contextual understanding. In this sense, we prioritized expertise and contextual knowledge over inter-coder agreement metrics, recognizing that this trade off offers a richer, if interpretive, account of the dataset.

To facilitate the annotation process, special software was developed specifically for this project. This software was designed to not only search and retrieve content relevant to our study but also to display this content within its original context. Given the conversational nature of WhatsApp, viewing messages in their full context was essential for understanding the implications and intent behind the content, which might otherwise be missed or misinterpreted if viewed in isolation.

Throughout the annotation process, the journalist worked closely with the research team. Any ambiguities or uncertainties that arose during the annotation were discussed collaboratively, ensuring a comprehensive and informed approach to data interpretation. The coding of the data was conducted using an inductive approach. Initially, categories were developed based on emerging themes and patterns observed in the data. As the analysis progressed, these categories were continually refined and merged, allowing for a dynamic and responsive coding scheme that accurately reflected the complex and evolving nature of the content. Each piece of content could belong to multiple categories. We ended up with 7 major themes for the content in our dataset (shown in Figure 2). We also annotated the groups in which the content was shared. The categories of groups we found is shown in Figure 2A (Appendix). The code book and justifications for the coding categories are presented in the Appendix. The raw coded data from this study is available at https://bit.ly/israel-whatsapp-data (for peer review) and will be made publicly available upon the publication of our findings.

4 Narratives

We uncovered a sustained campaign on WhatsApp that involved multiple narratives, suggesting a strategic, top-down push to shape public opinion. This campaign was characterized by the persistent use of fear speech (Saha, et al., 2023), which played on the anxieties of Hindu recipients. The messaging tactics employed were sophisticated, using fear as a lever to galvanize support and manipulate public sentiment. A striking aspect of the data was the overwhelming skew towards pro-Israel sentiments (over 70% of the messages), with less than 1% of the content expressing pro-Palestine viewpoints. This distribution highlights a significant bias in the narratives being propagated, indicating that the messages were not just spontaneous expressions of individual opinions but part of a coordinated effort to steer public perception in a particular direction. Please note that the following text may include references to violence and dehumanizing language. In some instances, the original Hindi text has been translated and paraphrased to mitigate explicit content and reduce the depiction of violence. We discuss the rationale behind documenting and presenting such violent text in Section 5.

The narrative evolution on WhatsApp during the conflict followed a clear pattern of escalation. Initially, messages focused on shock and sympathy for Israel, reflecting global reactions to the October 7 attacks. However, by the second week, messaging shifted toward India's internal politics—featuring increased anti-Muslim rhetoric, linking Hamas to Indian Muslims, and targeting opposition parties. This transition indicates a strategic use of the conflict to reinforce Hindutva ideology and advance domestic political goals. Quantitative analysis of our dataset confirms this narrative shift. We can see in Figure 1 that in the first week (October 7–14), "News on Israel" comprised 15% of the messages, reflecting a strong focus on external developments. By the second week (October 15–22), that category dropped to just 8%, while categories like "Hatred against Muslims," "Propaganda to influence Hindus," and "Propaganda against the opposition" saw marked increases.
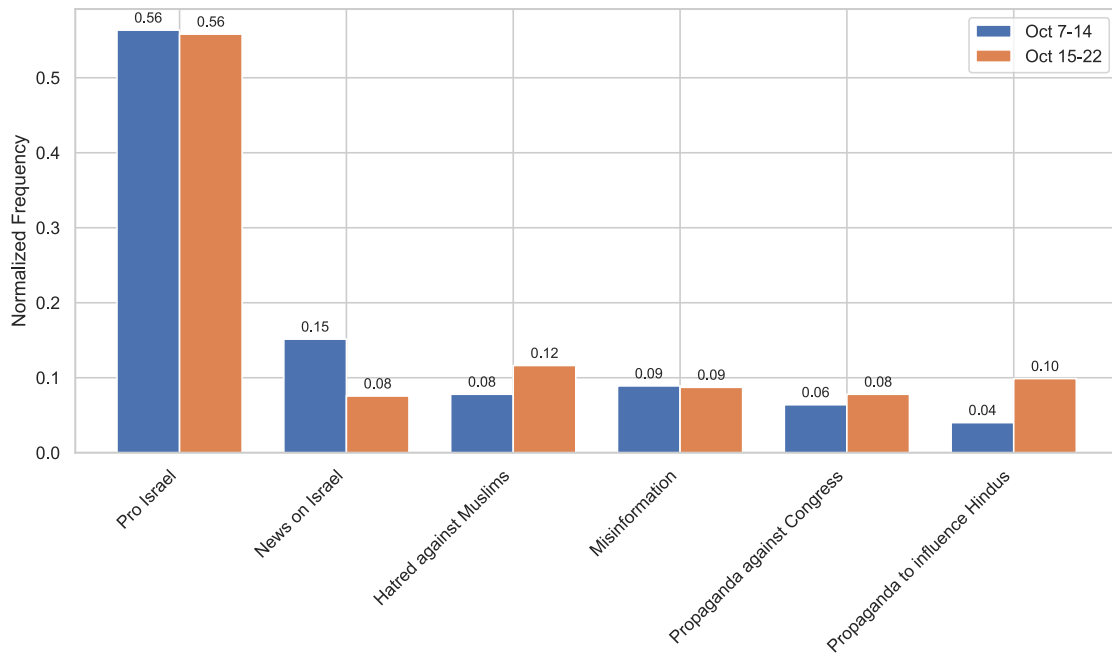
Fig. 1. Categories of information first and second weeks of the conflict. We can clearly see how the narrative shifted after week 1.

Next, we offer a detailed analysis of the prevalent narratives along with some examples of messages from our complete dataset. Figure 2 shows a summary of the top categories in our dataset.
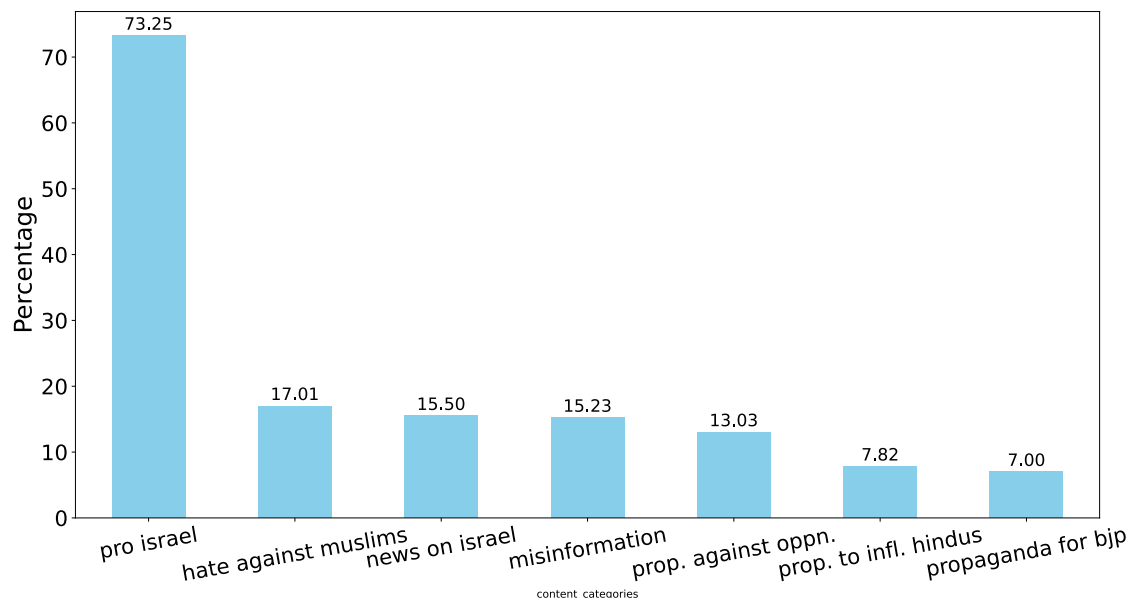
Fig. 2. Categories of content in our dataset. The numbers do not add up to 100 because the categories could be overlapping (e.g. pro israel content could contain misinformation).

4.1 Pro Israel

Historically pro-Palestine, India has shifted toward Israel since Modi came to power in 2014, driven by shared concerns over Islamic extremism and an ideological convergence between Zionism and Hindutva (Blarel, 2021). The content disseminated on WhatsApp has played a crucial role in shaping this supportive stance, as can be seen from Figure 2, with over 70% of the messages belonging to this category. Messages and videos often draw parallels between India and Israel, framing both nations as victims in a broader conflict against Islamic countries. Influential media figures such as popular TV personality Sudhir Chaudhari and various right-wing YouTube influencers have been pivotal in this dissemination. Their narratives frequently capitalize on sensational events to bolster pro-Israel sentiment. Many narratives spread by popular, mainstream journalists focus on graphic and heinous acts allegedly committed by Hamas but was not substantiated by any evidence. These narratives received over 10 million views on X, with possibly a bigger reach on WhatsApp.[6] Such emotive content, effectively stirring

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[6] Tweet by a prominent television personality with over 10 millions views on X: https://archive.is/THT5s Content viral on WhatsApp has to be forwarded at least five hops from the source. Five hops could potentially mean that millions on people were exposed to the content, though the exact number varies based on the structure of the network.

strong pro-Israel feelings among those previously less familiar with the nuances of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

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"Hamas has proved that every terrorist in the world
is worse than cannibalistic monsters. Israel will
give them the right treatment. India should strongly
stand by Israel and support them. If they are not
treated soon, they will become an issue for us too."
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This wave of support for Israel has also intertwined with domestic political ideologies, particularly regarding secularism and national identity. Viral messages on WhatsApp have criticized secularism, claiming that it has hindered India's decision-making, similar to criticisms faced by Israel. Comparisons are often drawn between historical and contemporary political actions of both nations, such as the speed of controversial demolitions. Such discussions not only promote a strong pro-Israel viewpoint but also align it with a nationalist agenda, suggesting that true national strength, akin to Israel's, requires uncompromising positions against perceived internal threats.

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"How it took us 500 years to demolish the disputed
Babri Masjid but for Israel, it took just 10 days to
demolish 50 such structures. The reason it took so
much time is because we are a secular country."
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Moreover, the narrative extends into cultural parallels between Hindu and Jewish communities, emphasizing shared values and mutual support in geopolitical contexts. This narrative serves to reinforce the alliance not just on a political or military front but as a deeper civilizational linkage. It is evident that WhatsApp has become a significant battleground for shaping public opinion on this issue, leveraging both nationalistic sentiments and international geopolitical perspectives to foster a strong pro-Israel alignment within India.

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"*We waited 500 years to demolish a structure.!*
*Israel leveled the ground by demolishing more than
1,000 structures in just 32 days...*"
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('structure' referring to Mosques).

"This is the status of these naked pigs of Hamas 🔥

Israel, you keep feeding, we are with you 🚩🚩"

"We will go to Ayodhya Dham only after eliminating the traitors, traitors present inside India and Somalia, Houthi, Palestine, Hamas, Al Qaeda, Jaish-e-Mohammed,

Lashkar-e-Taiba. 🙏🔺🚩🚩 Jai Jai Shri Ram"

"BREAKING Fearing Israeli army I.D.F in the battlefield, Hamas's impotent terrorists ran away peeing in their pants 🇮🇱🇮🇱🇮🇱"

"Someone tell the ICC people. Please postpone the (Cricket) World Cup a bit. At the moment Israel's shots are more entertaining ‼️😁😁 Stand With Israel 🇮🇳🇮🇱"

4.2 Muslims in India as a threat

The narrative framing Muslims as a significant threat permeates a significant portion of the messages analyzed, which underscores a stark and confrontational portrayal. Approximately 17% of the messages specifically target Muslims, constructing a narrative that their presence poses a direct existential threat to Hindus. These messages often stereotype Muslims as barbaric, prone to terrorism, and as aggressors against women and children, suggesting that extreme measures, including violence, might be necessary for self-preservation.

"Of course, many Jihadi thinking Muslim fundamentalists or should we say, hidden snakes amongst ourselves, have come out of their holes and started hissing after Israel's retaliatory attack... 🧕🐍🔪🐍🧕"

The narrative extends to portray all Muslims as inherently untrustworthy and dangerous, trying to instill fear among Hindus (Saha, Garimella, et al, 2023). This is exemplified in the sharing of videos and messages featuring ex-Muslims who criticize Islamic support

for Palestine, painting it as part of a broader, innately violent Muslim culture.[7] Such messages often include spurious claims designed to incite fear and justify preemptive aggression, as seen in a shared news article about a hate crime against a Palestinian child, which was twisted to suggest a broader societal endorsement of violence against Muslims.

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"The way our Muslims are supporting Hamas today, it
is proving that Muslims never belong to anyone
except their own community in India. Modi government
should send these people to Palestine."
"Muslims understand that because they are Muslims,
they are supporting Hamas. But why are these Hindus
roaming around with Hamas as their brother-in-law?
🤔🤔🤔"
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The narratives also exploit genuine fears and grievances, as seen in messages that react to real-world events with escalated rhetoric, suggesting that Muslims, by virtue of their faith, endorse violence, as evidenced by the unverified and sensational claims of Hamas committing atrocities.

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"These are not just terrorists, they are also
monsters; Israeli children were burnt to death by
Hamas. Remember, this could happen to you."
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The overarching message is alarmingly clear: Muslims are portrayed not just as outsiders, but as an insidious internal threat, likening the situation in India to Israel's geopolitical position surrounded by hostile territories. This narrative suggests that just as Israel is besieged by external enemies, India is infiltrated by internal ones, equating the local Muslim population with a fifth column within the nation. This is accompanied by warnings that the support for Palestine among Indian Muslims could indicate potential treason in the event of a conflict with Pakistan, drawing parallels between local support for Palestine and potential support for India's long-standing rival. More importantly, there are calls for action, including avoiding buying from Muslim during festivals.

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[7] ex-Muslim refers to Muslims who have converted to Hinduism. There is a trope on the right in India that most Indians were once Hindus who got converted to Islam by Muslim invaders.

> "While shopping during the upcoming festivals, keep
> in mind that the shopkeeper should not be a
> supporter of Hamas and shop only from Sanatanis!"

These messages exploit historical tensions and current events to reinforce fear and division, painting a grim picture of a society on the brink of religious and cultural warfare, where Hindus must be vigilant against a portrayed existential threat from their Muslim compatriots. This narrative not only sow's division but also potentially incites violence, indicating a disturbing trend in the use of social media platforms like WhatsApp to amplify and spread hate-based ideologies.

> "There is Gaza Strip in every city of India and
> there is a group like Hamas." "*Israel is capable,
> it will deal with it...* *You tell me, Hindus, how
> will you survive because the people here have also
> read the same book...*". ('book' being a reference to the Quran).

4.3 Propaganda targeted towards Hindus

In conjunction with hate against Muslims, we observed a persistent campaign to leverage and fuel fears among the Hindu population in India. These messages employ alarmist language and scenarios suggesting dire consequences for Hindus if there are political shifts in India. For instance, a particularly potent narrative claims that the removal of Prime Minister Modi from power would lead to the genocide of Hindus, citing a broader conspiracy involving various international and domestic political forces against Hindus and used to validate fears of a looming threat mirroring the violence observed in Israel.

> "An attack like Israel can happen in India any time.
> 😮 *As soon as Modi ji steps down, Hindus will be
> massacred: From the pen of American journalist Janet
> Levy."
> "We were concerned about Palestine and supported
> them. We are not even aware of being second class
> citizens in our own like our temples being

`destroyed"` - a message showing the destruction of a Hindu temple which was revived under Modi.

Another recurring theme in these messages is the potential for attacks similar to those in Israel, with explicit warnings that the same could happen in India if there is a change in government. These messages starkly frame the political discourse in terms of physical survival, using the fear of violence to influence political opinions and electoral outcomes.

`"10 Hindu 🕉 Students beheaded by Islamic Terrorists Hamas in Israel 👹"`

`"There is 1 Gaza Strip in Israel and 300 in #India."`

This type of propaganda serves multiple purposes: it strengthens in-group solidarity among Hindus under the BJP, portrays the party as the sole protector of Hindu interests, and paints opposition parties and their supporters as threats to Hindu safety and well-being. By continually associating the opposition with external threats and historical antagonists, these messages seek not only to discredit political rivals but also to instill a deep-seated fear of any alternative political leadership, effectively using the crisis in Israel-Palestine to bolster nationalist sentiments and the current government's position.

4.4 Dehumanizing Palestinian suffering

The narrative aimed at dehumanizing Palestinian suffering has manifested powerfully in various memes and messages circulated on WhatsApp, showing a deep disregard for the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The tone and content of these messages reveal an attempt to trivialize and mock the deaths and suffering of Palestinians, often by invoking religious imagery in a derogatory manner.

One prevalent trope features memes and jokes on the supposed backlog in heaven due to the number of Palestinians being killed, suggesting that the virgins promised in certain Islamic belief[8] are overwhelmed – implying that Israeli actions are doing a service by hastening Palestinians to their spiritual rewards. Another similar meme sarcastically praises the precision of Israeli bombings for leaving staircases intact, supposedly to facilitate Palestinians' quicker ascent to heaven, further trivializing the destruction of life and property.

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[8] These narratives invoke a distorted reference to hadiths that mention spiritual rewards—such as virgins—for male martyrs, though such beliefs are not universally accepted and are not found in the Qur'an.

"Don't know why But when Hamas and Palestine are defeated Then one experiences divine joy. The mind becomes happy. #Israel"

"Considering the way Israel is attacking Hamas, I am worried as to how so many

'Virgins' will be managed." (referring to a hateful trope of 72 virgins in heaven).

These narratives extend to outright mockery of religious practices and dire situations. Messages celebrating the destruction of mosques and comparing Israeli military actions to the festival of Holi or Diwali not only dehumanize Palestinian suffering but also culturally appropriate and distort Indian festivals, associating them with violence and conquest. The grim depiction of Gaza as a place ready for a historical film set, devoid of modern amenities and reduced to ruins, further strips away the gravity of the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

"🐍 What is real Diwali? Ask the people of Israel. They are burning more bombs in 1 hour than we would have burnt in 50 years. That too without pollution. Happy Diwali to the people of Israel. 🐍😬"

The narratives paints all Palestinians with a broad brush, accusing them of inherent barbarism and justifying extreme measures against them. The overarching theme in these messages is clear: the celebration of Palestinian deaths as a righteous punishment for their Muslim identity, with a disturbing disregard for the innocent, including women and children in hospitals. These narratives, deeply infused with bigotry and misinformation, contribute to a dehumanized view of the Palestinian people, effectively desensitizing the public to their suffering and framing the conflict in dangerously simplistic religious and cultural terms.

"The scoundrels have started the victim card, the pigs have started harassing women and girls like Gaza Strip. And the most motherly... the women of their house are the ones who throw the stones first 😠😾☝️"

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"Now there is no country named Palestine. If there
is then show its map. Therefore, stop repeatedly
using words like Palestine, Palestinian people, and
use the word terrorist Hamas."
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4.5 Attacking the Opposition

The portrayal of opposition parties in India in relation to the Israel-Hamas conflict has
been particularly sharp and contentious. Support for Palestine among opposition parties
in India is often harshly criticized and linked to support for Hamas. These narratives
aggressively vilify these parties, suggesting that any empathy for Palestine is tantamount
to endorsing the actions of Hamas, thereby painting these political entities as
sympathizers of terrorism.

This rhetoric extends to personal attacks and historical analogies. For instance,
opposition leaders are derogatorily labeled as "Jihadi pigs" and accused of spreading
"like cancer," dehumanizing terms that are designed to incite fear and hostility.
Furthermore, the narrative draws a parallel between the Congress party's stance on
Palestine and an implicit endorsement of the events of October 7, thus attempting to
equate diplomatic or humanitarian support for Palestine with support for acts of violence.
This tactic seeks to undermine the credibility of the opposition by framing their foreign
policy perspectives within a binary and extremist viewpoint.

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"Even Hamas is not feeling that much pain due to
Israel's attack....as much as the children of those
terrorists growing up in India are feeling. ‼️🙁🙁🙁
"

"*Who stand with Palestine today* *Tomorrow they will
stand with Pakistan.* *#staystrong #Israel*"

"Has there been any statement from any opposition
leader or his henchmen on the attack on Israel by
Hamas?"
```

Many of these messages often include sarcastic comments about unrelated issues, such as
environmental concerns during Hindu festivals like Diwali, suggesting a hypocritical
stance by opposition parties who are portrayed as overly focused on international
conflicts like those between Russia and Ukraine or Israel and Palestine, while allegedly
neglecting local cultural practices.

Overall, these narratives serve to polarize public opinion, framing the opposition as not only anti-national but as direct threats to national security, akin to external enemies. This strategy not only stifles meaningful discourse on international issues but also deepens internal divisions, leveraging the emotive power of social media to reinforce a divisive political agenda.

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"*The real face of the students of AMU was exposed-*
*AMU students, famous for raising anti-national
slogans, raised slogans in support of the terrorist
organization Hamas whereas India has already talked
about standing with Israel on this issue.*"
"This is the youth of the country who is justifying
the terrorism of Hamas. *We are sitting on a pile of
gunpowder*"
```
(Referring to a protest by students in support of Palestine civilians).

4.6 Misinformation

A common thread across all the above narratives is the extensive use of misinformation during the conflict. A comprehensive effort by Indian fact-checker Boom resulted in close to 100 fact checks,[9] highlighting the pervasive nature of misinformation related to this topic. Their report indicates that a staggering 92.6% of the misinformation were sensationalist in nature, and 13% involved the use of AI-generated content, deepfakes, or video game footage[10]. Moreover, the research found that 65% of the X[11] accounts spreading these fact-checked claims were verified, with over 40% of these accounts being based in India (Chowdhury, 2023).

We observe a similar trend on our WhatsApp dataset too, playing a significant role in shaping public perception and political narratives making up around 15% of the narratives in our dataset. This misinformation predominantly supports pro-Israel sentiments and often targets the Indian opposition party, Congress, by inaccurately linking it to Hamas and its actions. For instance, one widely spread false claim suggested that Congress openly supported Hamas at a press conference, distorting the party's actual stance on Palestine to suggest an endorsement of terrorism. Such messages are crafted to

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[9] https://www.boomlive.in/tags/israel-hamas-conflict/

[10] https://www.boomlive.in/boom-research/october-was-rife-with-misinformation-about-the-israel-gaza-war-boom-monthly-report-23531

[11] Previously known as Twitter. Twitter was rebranded as X in July 2023.

polarize opinions and consolidate support by portraying the opposition as allies of widely condemned actions.

> "In Israel, Hamas Jihadis beheaded 10 Hindus and in India, the entire I.N.D.I.Alliance gang including the Congress Party has declared support for the deadly murderer rapist terrorist Hamas."

Misinformation techniques include the use of shocking content, such as videos and images taken out of context or from unrelated events in other countries like Sudan or Syria. This content is then presented as evidence of current events in the Israel-Hamas conflict, with claims such as Hamas militants committing barbaric acts, which are completely fabricated. The shock value of such content ensures its rapid dissemination, reinforcing fear and outrage. Moreover, the use of advanced misinformation tactics, including AI-generated content and deepfakes, further complicates the ability of users to discern real events from fabricated ones (see Figure 3 for an example).

This strategic spread of misinformation not only misleads the public but also stokes communal tensions, exploits political divisions, and manipulates public discourse on sensitive international issues. The pervasive nature of such misinformation on platforms like WhatsApp, where content moderation is more challenging than on public platforms
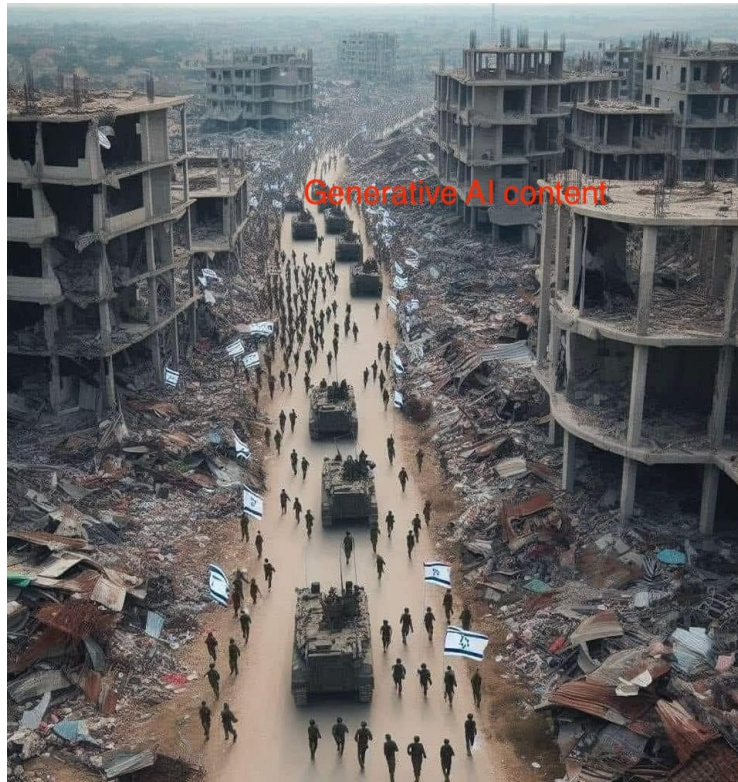
Fig. 3. Generative AI content showing Israeli victory parade in Gaza. The label in red text was added by the authors.

like X or Facebook, underscores the critical need for vigilant media literacy and robust fact-checking mechanisms to counteract these influences.

> "Thousands of people stood in long queues at the military recruitment center in Israel to join the army. People want to join army even without salary. This is the spirit of patriotism. The most important thing in India is old pension. zero work" (referring to an old image taken out of context claiming to be a line to join the army).

5 Discussion

In this section, we reflect on the motivations and considerations underlying our research into the narratives circulating within WhatsApp groups during the Israel-Hamas conflict. A critical question we confronted was the ethical implications of reproducing the distressing content shared in these groups. Could the act of documenting these narratives serve to inadvertently amplify them?

After careful deliberation, we concluded that the documentation of these communications is crucial. While our academic focus is on the communicative dynamics of conflict—how narratives are produced, circulated, and weaponized—it would be deeply irresponsible not to acknowledge the scale of human suffering this conflict has produced. With tens of thousands of lives lost, including civilians, children, and journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2024), this is first and foremost a humanitarian crisis. The fact that such mass violence is being actively rationalized, trivialized, or even celebrated in digital discourse is not only troubling—it is inhumane. The legitimization of civilian deaths through memes, propaganda, and misinformation reflects a moral erosion that we believe must be documented and understood. We hope this study serves not only as a scholarly analysis but also as a witness to the rhetorical strategies that enable and normalize such atrocities. As researchers, we see it as our responsibility to critically analyze these communicative patterns in the hope that our work can inform both ethical media practices and conflict prevention efforts.
Another pivotal question we addressed is the relevance of examining the opinions expressed by villagers in India regarding a conflict thousands of miles away. This inquiry is crucial because it sheds light on the global reach of digital narratives and their ability to influence public opinion across different cultures and communities. The rest of this section tries to address this concern on why studying WhatsApp, in India is important and relevant to the conflict in Gaza. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing more effective communication strategies that promote peace and understanding across borders.

We focus on four areas which make this study particularly important and have broader consequences:

5.1 Role of encryption

WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption, while essential for user privacy, poses major challenges for moderating content. It enables misinformation to circulate repeatedly and virally, often stripped of context and reframed to support various narratives (Kamara et al., 2022; Banaji et al., 2019; Nizaruddin, 2021). Encrypted platforms like WhatsApp shield this content from oversight, allowing easily debunked claims and graphic materials to spread unchecked—fueling fear, polarization, and, at times, real-world violence.
Misinformation on encrypted platforms is not only persistent but also typically reshared out of its original context, making it prone to misinterpretation. Despite often being

easily debunkable, these narratives gain traction and spread quickly across user networks, shielded by encryption from any form of external review. Furthermore, violent and graphic videos are shared within these closed networks, exacerbating tensions and fear without any immediate repercussions for the distributors.[12]

Political actors have become increasingly adept at exploiting these closed networks to craft and distribute strategic narratives. The combination of technical opacity and viral affordances makes encrypted messaging apps fertile ground for agenda-driven propaganda. This raises urgent questions about how to balance the right to privacy with the need to curb harmful misinformation in encrypted digital ecosystems.

5.2 Importance of Misinformation

Misinformation, while only a fraction of the narratives disseminated in our dataset, plays a crucial role as a tool in shaping public perception and influencing political landscapes. The strategic use of misinformation is not about the volume of false content, but rather its potency and the psychological impact it can have on its audience. WhatsApp is particularly susceptible to the spread of misinformation because users tend to trust and believe the content they receive, predominantly from friends and family. This perceived reliability makes the platform a significant vector for the dissemination of unverified information, which is a crucial concern (Gursky, et al., 2022).

5.3 Demonizing Muslims

The utilization of WhatsApp for the dissemination of narratives that demonize Muslims aligns with broader political strategies but raises significant ethical and societal concerns. There is a deliberate effort to link the actions attributed to Hamas with the broader Muslim community in India, suggesting that similar violent acts could be perpetrated by Indian Muslims. This strategy not only stokes fear and suspicion but also serves to align public sentiment with the BJP's political agenda, which has been criticized for its handling of communal relations.

 The continuous stream of such content, especially narratives originating from conflict zones and tailored to incite fear, suggests a systematic approach to influencing public perception. The content often includes dubious claims, such as the use of child actors by Hamas, which are particularly designed to provoke emotional reactions. The persistence

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[12] Compared to other platforms like Facebook or X where repeatedly sharing violent content could get an account banned.

of these narratives and their widespread propagation on platforms like WhatsApp are perplexing, especially considering their reception among rural Indian populations who might not otherwise be engaged with Middle Eastern geopolitics.

The real-life implications of such targeted misinformation are profound. India's Muslim community, which is the third-largest in the world at approximately 200 million people, already faces widespread Islamophobic sentiment (Maizland, 2024). The relentless association of this community with global terrorism and militant groups like Hamas exacerbates existing prejudices and can lead to discrimination, social ostracism, and even violence. Muslims in India find themselves in a precarious position, often feeling compelled to disassociate from and condemn terrorist attacks globally, despite having no connection to these events (Vats, 2023).

5.4 Impact on the Conflict

The digital response to the Israel-Hamas conflict from India—driven largely by the BJP-aligned ecosystem of influencers, content creators, and state-friendly media—has far-reaching consequences that extend well beyond national borders. What began as domestic political signaling has evolved into a powerful force that shapes global perceptions, weaponizes affect, and strategically positions India as a key ideological and geopolitical ally to Israel in the global information war.

India's right-wing digital infrastructure, honed over a decade of electoral propaganda and anti-minority mobilization, has proven adept at realigning its messaging to support international allies. In the aftermath of the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack, Indian influencers rapidly generated and spread pro-Israel narratives, framing the conflict through tropes of "Islamic terrorism" and Hindu solidarity. Hashtags like #IndiaStandsWithIsrael trended globally on X, triggering public gratitude from Israeli state institutions (Times of India, 2023, Middle East Eye, 2024). This was not an organic groundswell but a coordinated campaign by state-aligned influencers and bot networks that reflects what Sevencan (2023) describes as "one of the most formidable purveyors of propaganda in the world."

These narratives serve dual purposes. Domestically, they bolster the BJP's nationalist agenda and deepen communal polarization by framing Muslims as aligned with global terrorism. Internationally, they amplify Israel's narrative of moral clarity and victimhood in the global public sphere. Israeli institutions have actively embraced this support—reciprocating with praise, diplomatic engagement, and even orchestrated influencer visits

to conflict zones. NGOs like Sharaka and think tanks have turned Indian influencers into ideological allies, who repackage Israeli talking points for South Asian and diasporic audiences in multiple languages including Hindi, Urdu, and Arabic (News Arena India, 2025).

India's massive internet user base—over 700 million strong—and its prominence in English-speaking digital spaces give it unmatched influence in the Global South. Unlike Western media, Indian right-wing accounts often reach South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Muslim diaspora populations in ways that circumvent traditional media gatekeeping (India Today OSINT Team, 2024). Israeli disinformation and messaging campaigns have come to rely on this Indian amplification, as seen in cases where pro-Israel accounts reshare Indian political content or cite Indian social media trends in lobbying Western lawmakers (Tablet Magazine, 2024).

What emerges is a portrait of India as a "disinformation superpower"—not in the sense of state deception alone, but through a decentralized, multilingual, digitally agile network of nationalist actors operating across encrypted and public platforms. Their efforts do not simply mimic Western disinformation tactics—they reshape them, embedding transnational conflicts like Israel-Hamas into local identity politics and exporting these reframed narratives back into global circuits.

7 Conclusion

The discussion surrounding the Israel-Hamas conflict on platforms like WhatsApp in India unveils a deeply woven tapestry of political manoeuvring and public engagement. This paper sheds light on a sustained effort by a political party to harness this international issue for domestic electoral gains, presenting a complex scenario where the party, while not directly involved in the conflict, capitalizes on the situation to fortify its position within the Indian electorate.

The analysis reveals that the dissemination of specific narratives related to the Israel-Hamas conflict is not confined to political groups but pervades regional and caste-based groups, indicating a grassroots level traction for these narratives. This organic spread, even if initially seeded by political entities, suggests a bottom-up support that transcends the mere top-down dissemination approach often associated with political propaganda. This phenomenon underscores the nuanced ways in which political narratives can embed themselves within the fabric of everyday communication among diverse demographic groups.

The question of why rural Indian users would engage with the Israel-Hamas conflict might initially seem perplexing. However, the implications of such engagement are profound. Firstly, it highlights how international conflicts can be localized through social media platforms, influencing public opinion and potentially swaying electoral dynamics. Secondly, it raises concerns about the reach and impact of misinformation and the capacity of localized narratives to shape political landscapes far from their origins.

Although it is challenging to conclusively prove coordination or a deliberate top-down push behind these narratives, the visible participation of pro-BJP accounts and the pattern of message dissemination suggest a strategic alignment of these narratives with the party's broader political objectives. This scenario is indicative of a new era of digital politics where global events are repurposed for local political agendas, leveraging the viral mechanics of social media to amplify selected narratives.

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