

Authoritative Populism and the Media: Perception Control and Narrative Building in India

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Abstract

The article analyses the interrelationship between authoritarian populism and the media in India. It explores the core question of political authoritarianism under the rule of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and whether it has exercised control on media. The article explores two main questions: First, what are the dynamics of media control in India, if any? Second, whether media control has played any role in the polarisation of the Indian society. The article employs the theoretical framework of authoritarian populism, using content analysis, to explore whether media has any role to play in the recent upsurge of right-wing Hindu nationalism. The article's empirical evidence suggest media's complacent and partisan role, favouring populist political agenda in India. The article highlights that the bulk of Indian media works under the state control, with major newsgroups towing the ruling BJP's line on exclusivists right-wing ideology. Furthermore, the groups which do not comply have faced governmental repression and clampdown for independent reporting and objective journalism. The article's original contribution rests in the analyses of authoritarian populism and right-wing nationalist control of the media and the health of democracy in India.

Keywords: *Indian Media, Concentration of Ownership, Bollywood, Muslims, Right-wing Nationalism.*

Introduction

Media — print, digital and electronic — is one of the most significant sources of information in shaping public opinion in today's world. An

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impartial and free media is the fourth pillar of the state in a secular democracy.¹ As medium of communication, its various types include news media, social media and web media, while earned media, shared media and owned media are some other names used for the media.² Media acts as a watchdog of democracy. It performs the role of a vigilant, holding democratic institutions accountable before the law. In a technologically advanced world, media monitors the functioning of government, acting as an essential source of information for public debate and representation.³ Media has an important role to play as a watchdog in representing the public interest while holding those in power accountable. It allows people to make informed choices from within the different options discussed and represented.⁴ However, behind this apparently over-simplistic role, media is a powerful mechanism of perception control and narrative building in the modern world. A free and impartial media is the parametre of an inclusivist, liberal democracy. Contrarily, lack of media independence, subtle or direct forms of the state control, right-wing ownership or ideological inclination, unequal and partial representation of societal preferences illustrates illiberal disposition of the media in a free democracy.

The article analyses authoritarian populism's rightwing control on media and the health of democracy in India. The article refers to authoritarian populism as the theoretical framework, employing content analysis to explore: first, the dynamics of media control in India; and, second, whether media control has played any role in polarisation of the Indian society. It explores the core question of the interlink age, if any, between right wing authoritarianism and control on the media. The research examines whether right-wing Hindu nationalism's ownership and control of Indian media has contributed to the recent upsurge of

¹ Julianne Schultz, *Reviving the Fourth Estate: Democracy, Accountability and the Media* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 23-47.

² Bernard Cecil Cohen, *Press and Foreign Policy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), 5-14.

³ Edward Anderson and Christophe Jaffrelot, "Hindu Nationalism and the 'Saffronisation of the Public Sphere': An Interview with Christophe Jaffrelot," *Contemporary South Asia* 26, no. 4 (2018): 468-482, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1545009>

⁴ Duncan McDonnell and Luis Cabrera, "The Right-Wing Populism of India's BharatiyaJanata Party and why comparativists should care," *Democratization* 26, no. 3 (2019): 484-501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1551885>

right-wing Hindu nationalism in India. Moreover, it seeks to examine how state control has undermined pluralist representation of Indian minorities in India. The indicators for the present research include such aspects as the impact of right-wing populism on the structure of Indian media (ownership concentration and political affiliations), lack of plurality and diversity; biased and partial reporting; marginalized representation of Indian minorities, politicised or negative portrayal in Bollywood cinema.

Many experts on Indian politics such as Julianne Schultz, Bernard Cecil Cohen, Kalyani Chadha have observed that Indian democracy is facing an assault from right-wing authoritarianism marked by the centralisation of power and curbing of freedoms.⁵ Media's role becomes all the more prominent as a watchdog of democracy in India, given the state's tilt towards Hindu majoritarianism or extreme Hindu nationalism. Empirical indicators of such a tilt include instances of official abrogation of Article 370 and 35A, formulation of divisive and discriminatory laws such as Citizenship Amendment Act (2019), National Register of Citizens in Assam and "Love Jihad" Law (Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance) in 2020.

This paper offers lens for academia and scholarship in addressing a research gap about how state's policies have profound implications for media freedom and democracy in India. Furthermore, the study offers students of media and politics new avenues for research related to Indian media ownership, screen representation of minorities, and corporatisation/market trends of the media. More importantly, the research article throws light on how Indian media shares a complex relationship with the political elite in facing reprisals for working with objectivity and impartiality.

The article is divided into five sections: the first examines the ideational approach of authoritative populism; the second reviews India's authoritarian turn and challenges for plurality and accountability of the media; third analyses concentration of media ownership; fourth

⁵ Anderson and Jaffrelot, "Hindu Nationalism and the Saffronisation of the Public Sphere." *Contemporary South Asia* 26, no. 4 (2018): 468-482, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1545009>

establishes a connection between Hindi cinema and Hindu nationalism; and the last section addresses how authoritarian nationalism and media control has impacted independent and critical reporting today.

Authoritative Populism: An Ideational Approach

This section examines authoritative populism as a political discourse to explore how it works to exert control on working of the Indian media. Populism as a political discourse portrays advancement of a struggle between the ‘the pure people’ on the one hand and ‘the corrupt elite’ on the other.⁶ Dean and Maiguashca see populism as a set of ideas that is merged with other thick ideologies (communism and nationalism) that are more intellectually refined and consistent.⁷ Populism has a more limited ambition and scope. Dutch scholar, Cas Mudde refers to populism as a “thin-centered ideology.”⁸ Populism tends to exhibit both anti-elitist and anti-pluralistic features. Pluralism entails the diversity of various ideas and interests in society, and elitism celebrates the virtues of elites and the fallibility of the masses. Populism has marked a struggle against both.

Populists claim exclusive representation of the ‘real’ people defined by narrow conceptions of national identity, cultural practices and religious norms. Populism tends to favour authoritarian policies to combat threats from the dangerous ‘others’ showing hostility towards immigrants and suspicions towards minorities on identity lines.⁹ Populist leaders assert that “they, and they alone, represent the people.”¹⁰ However, for their anti-elitist bid to establish direct contact with the ‘real’ people, populist leaders create

⁶ Kirk A Hawkins and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “The Ideational Approach to Populism,” *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 4 (2017): 513-528.<http://doi.org/10.25222/larr.85>.

⁷ Jonathan Dean and Bice Maiguashca, “Did Somebody Say Populism? Towards a Renewal and Reorientation of Populism Studies,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 25, no. 1 (2020): 11–27.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13569317.2020.1699712>.

⁸ Cas Mudde, “The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy,” *West European Politics* 33, no. 6 (2010): 1167-1186.<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2010.508901>.

⁹ Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 66.

¹⁰ Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 3.

an unmediated relationship with the people by criticizing intermediary institutions, discrediting unelected experts as part of the nefarious elite, and confronting media and institutions that maintain a check and balance on executive authority and populist policies.¹¹ Therefore, populism in power sees the consistent dissemination of ‘common-sense solutions’ to complex problems with a disregard for experts, portrayed as the enemy of the common people. Common-sense simplification of complex issues helps populists to seek greater political connection with ordinary masses pitted against elite institutions and experts.¹²

Populism, with an anti-establishment platform, frames the elite as corrupt, self-serving, and ignorant of the problems of ordinary people. It develops an unmediated relationship of the populist leader (often charismatic) with the ‘real’ and ‘true’ people defined as homogenous and virtuous, whose primacy must be ensured against the parasitic elite. It oversimplifies reality and proposes common-sense solutions to identify with the common people. Populists with right-wing leanings manifest anti-pluralism in defining the ‘real people’ as they exclude some groups as ‘others’ based on a narrow conception of identity — race, religion, ethnicity, immigration, gender — and claim that they alone represent the people. Authoritarian populists disregard institutions and experts as part of the nefarious elite and show authoritarian impulses towards institutions that limit or check executive power — opposing political parties, legislative assemblies, judiciary, media and civil society.

India’s Authoritarian Turn

This section examines India’s authoritarian turn and challenges for media accountability and plurality. From 2014 onwards, after winning the elections in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of Narendra Modi (followed by a re-election with a thumping majority in 2019) has been making institutional efforts to reconfigure democracy by redefining the ‘people’ in ethno-religious terms. At the government level these efforts have fuelled authoritarian populism under the banner of the

¹¹ “Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.

¹² Hans-Georg. Betz, “Conditions Favouring the Success and Failure of Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Contemporary Democracies,” in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, ed. Y. Mény and Y. Surel, (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

Hindutva project (an exclusionary right-wing religious movement based on exclusive Hindu nationalism) to redefine India as primarily a Hindu nation (of ‘the true people’) while casting religious minorities, independent institutions, and political opposition as ‘others’ or ‘anti-national.’¹³ As French Indologist, Christophe Jaffrelot that anti-pluralistic policies carried out with majoritarian goals is of the opinion have demonstrated the deteriorating health of Indian democracy. Right-wing populism specifically targets Indian Muslims, terming the largest minority as the ‘other,’ leading to erosion of the secular makeup of India’s body politic.’¹⁴

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as manifestation of authoritative populism, identifies himself with the ordinary man. Modi portrays his life mission aimed at serving Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an extremist Hindu nationalist organisation which he joined at the age of six. Modi has portrayed himself as a “common man” fighting a corrupt elitist system. He is often framed as a railway tea-seller in his youth who became a self-made leader without a privileged political background. This is reflected in his first Independence Day speech after taking office in 2014: “I come from a poor family”, and “I am an outsider for Delhi ... I have been quite isolated from the elite class of this place.”¹⁵

Modi’s discriminatory populist practices have marginalised not only state institutions but other segments of the Indian population. The impact is most evident in case of India’s Muslim population, targeted systematically and disregarded as equal citizens of the state. In 2019, for instance, updating of National Register of Citizens (NRC) status left 1.9 million Muslim residents in the state of Assam without legal status, since they belonged originally from Bangladesh. In the same year, while implementing Article 370 and Article 35-A, the BJP government

¹³ Duncan Mc Donnell and Luis Cabrera, “The Right-Wing Populism of India’s Bharatiya Janata Party and why comparativists should care,” *Democratization* 26, no. 3 (2019): 484-501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1551885>.

¹⁴ Anderson and Jaffrelot, “Hindu Nationalism and the ‘Saffronisation of the Public Sphere” 468-482. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1545009>

¹⁵ Narendra Modi’s First Independence Day speech: Full text,” India Today, updated September 17, 2016, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/narendra-modi-independence-day-speech-full-text-red-fort-204216-2014-08-15>

abrogated the special status of Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority state in Indian polity.¹⁶

In late 2019, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was passed to provide citizenship to refugees from neighbouring countries — with the sole exception of Muslims, who are systematically disenfranchised.¹⁷ Under Modi's rule, India has seen a rapid rise in religious intolerance with cow vigilantism and campaigns against the so-called 'love Jihad' (a conspiracy theory that Muslim men marry Hindu women to convert them to Islam).¹⁸ Such an exclusive conception of the people based on a religious divide is reflected in the BJP's Chief Minister of Haryana, Manohar Lal Khattar's statement in 2015: "Muslims can live here, but in this country, they will have to stop eating beef."¹⁹

Populist tendencies are also evident in Modi's tension with other institutions, which maintain a check on executive powers, particularly the media. Writing about India's illiberal shift, political scientist, Rahul Mukherji, mentions that a distrustful relationship with the media is obvious as "Modi has held virtually no formal press conferences open to the public view."²⁰ The Indian populist leader instead chooses social media to communicate directly with his followers in an unmediated manner. Modi and his senior party members have targeted the press for its 'elitist' makeup, manipulated and corrupt "paid news."²¹ Demonstrating lean towards right-wing Hindu nationalism, the concentration and ownership of major media

¹⁶ "Article 370: What Happened with Kashmir and Why It Matters," *BBC News*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-49234708>.

¹⁷ "Citizenship Amendment Act: India's New 'Anti-Muslim Law' Explained," *BBC News*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-50670393>

¹⁸ Ashutosh Varshney et al., "Populism and Hindu Nationalism in India," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 56, no. 2 (2021): 197-222. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-021-09335-8>

¹⁹ Varinder Bhatia and Nirupama Subramanian, "Muslims can Live in this Country, but will have to Give up Eating Beef, says Haryana CM Manohar Lal Khattar," *Indian Express*, October 16, 2015, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/muslims-can-live-in-this-country-but-they-will-have-to-give-up-eating-beef-says-haryana-cm-manohar-lal-khattar/>.

²⁰ Rahul Mukherji, "Covid vs. Democracy: India's Illiberal Remedy," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 4 (2020): 91-105. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0058>.

²¹ Paula Chakravartty and Srirupa Roy, "Mr. Modi Goes to Delhi: Mediated Populism and the 2014 Indian Elections," *Television & New Media* 16, no. 4 (2015): 311-322, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476415573957>

outlets/houses has jeopardised independent journalism, impartial representation and news coverage in India. In the World Press Freedom Index of 2023, issued by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), India finds itself on the rank of 161 among 180 countries.²² Modi’s contempt for unelected institutions, usage of social media and his widespread discrimination of the minorities show how authoritarian populism defines Modi’s exclusionary politics in India.

Core Features of Populism: Narendra Modi’s Practices in India

Anti-Establishment and Association with the ‘People’	Anti-Pluralism and Narrow Conception of the ‘Real People’	Contempt for Institutions and Checks and Balances
Modi Portrayed himself as a common man; an outsider to New Delhi with a modest background; and a pious leader associating himself with the Hindu majority	Exclusive Hindu nationalism deems Muslims as others; the government introduced NRC and CAA; and revoked article 370 in Kashmir	The Modi government showed disregard for judges who protested against executive conduct; displayed distrust for media seen as ‘elitist’; and placed curbs on media freedom

Source: *Authors’ own research findings based on data analysis.*

Populist Control on the Indian Media: Concentration and Political Ties

This section examines the interrelationship between populism control on the media in India. It argues that the fundamental tenet of a vibrant and free democracy is an informed and well-aware public regulated through a free media. A democratic polity demands various and impartial information sources, which help the people decide for themselves.²³ To

²² “2021 World Press Freedom Index,” Reporters Without Borders, accessed May 3, 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/2023-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-threatened-fake-content-industry>. .

²³ Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, “What Democracy Is... And Is Not,” *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 3 (1991): 75-88, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1991.0033>

evaluate how political control on media impacts the state of democracy in any country, we need to configure: first, who owns the media and what is the nature of media ownership/viewership? Second, what is the kind of relationship, which media owners share with the public and elite/power structures?

Diversity of the sources of information can help establish diverse opinions based on multiple perspectives. Concentration of media ownership jeopardises the likelihood of different perspectives and multiplicity of representation.²⁴ Moreover, the study of media ownership and viewership allows us to examine how regulated or market-inclined media outlets are and what is the spirit that guides them: public awareness or corporate interests. Media ownership serves as a clear indicator of the relationship media houses share with those in power. Media groups' political connections/ideological affiliations reduce the chances of credibility/ accountability which is a fundamental aspect in case of a free democracy. Hence, understanding the structure of media ownership is critical to comprehend if media actually depicts freedom of the press; if ownership is concentrated in a few hands having political ties; the role of independence of journalism and accountability and the health of democracy.²⁵

In India, there are nearly 900 satellite channels, out of which half are news channels. ²⁶ Television is the most accessible form of media consumption for 210 million households in India.²⁷ Of the more than 550 radio stations, there is only one licensed news radio station in India. *Akashvani* (formerly known as *All India Radio*) is the only station with the

²⁴ C. Edwin Baker, *Media Concentration and Democracy: Why Ownership Matters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 6-16.

²⁵ Steven Barnett, "What's Wrong with Media Monopolies? A Lesson from History and a New Approach to Media Ownership Policy," *MEDIA@ LSE Electronic Working Papers*, no. 18 (2010),

<http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/mediaWorkingPapers/ewpNumber18.aspx>.

²⁶ "India Media Guide," *BBC News*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12557390>.

²⁷ "TV-Owning Households in India Grew 6.9% to 210 Mln in Two Years: BARC," *Business Standard India*, April 15, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/tv-owning-households-in-india-grew-6-9-to-210-mln-in-two-years-barc-121041500923_1.html

license to broadcast news and current affairs program.²⁸ In print media, 118,239 registered publications exist in India, which demonstrates that the country is one of the biggest media markets in the world.²⁹ However, the immense size and a huge number of media outlets do not illustrate the diversity of ownership and plurality of viewership. Such concentration is sharp at the national level and becomes even greater at the regional level. The regulatory frameworks to ensure media pluralism are weak in India. For instance, to explore the nature of media ownership and audience concentration in India, Reporters Without Borders in collaboration with Data LEADS (a New Delhi-based digital media company) analysed 58 biggest media outlets in the latest study on Media Ownership Monitor in India.³⁰

The project illustrated that the trends of media concentration have put media pluralism at risk. The top eight media outlets have more than 70 per cent of media audience.³¹ Research showed that the readership concentration is very high in the print media market, with four Hindi language outlets at the national level — *Dainik Jagran*, *Hindustan*, *Amar Ujala* and *Dainik Bhaskar*— capturing 76.45 per cent of the readership.³² It depicts that readership becomes more concentrated at the regional level. According to this study, half of the readership shares are concentrated among the top two newspapers. In the radio segment, readership and ownership cannot be less concentrated, as there is a complete state monopoly of control over radio news. There is only one radio news channel — *Akashvani*, previously *All India Radio*, owned by

²⁸ Mochish KS, “Democratise Radio News in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 22, 2022, <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/democratise-radio-news-india>.

²⁹ Nalin Mehta, “India and its Television: Ownership, Democracy, and the Media Business,” *Emerging Economy Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 50-63, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2394901514562304>

³⁰ Chhetria Patrakar, “Who Owns India’s Media?,” *Himal Southasian*, December 30, 2019, <https://www.himalmag.com/who-owns-indias-media-rsf-dataleads-2019/>.

³¹ “Media Ownership Matters,” Media Ownership Monitor, India, accessed Feb 24, 2020, <https://india.mom-rsf.org/en/>.

³² “Is Regional The New National?,” *Media Ownership Monitor*, India, <https://india.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/nationalandregionalmedia/>

the state — with private radio channels restricted from producing news.³³ According to the research, audience concentration in television channels is also very high with the top four owners have an audience share of more than 50 per cent. Moreover, another underlying aspect that demonstrates a concentrated image of media ownership is cross-media ownership. This phenomenon of cross-media ownership is when a single media producer owns different channels of communication with political ties. This results in concentration of media ownership and media content. The Media Ownership Monitor report illustrated that the top eight media owners possess more than 70 per cent of the market share along with several political ties.³⁴ For example, four out of five major television media groups are owned by individuals affiliated with the ruling political party: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).³⁵ Co-owner of *Zee News*, Dr. Subash Chandra, got elected as an independent member of Rajya Sabha with the help of the BJP.³⁶ Rajeev Chandrashekar, who initiated *Republic TV*, is a member of the BJP in the Rajya Sabha and the Minister of State for the BJP government. BJP's national vice president and official spokesman Bajjayant Jay Panda is the co-owner of *Odhis TV*.³⁷ Owner of *News Live* Rinki Bhuyan Sarma is the wife of a BJP Chief Minister of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma.³⁸

This is not a surprise when we see the weaker state of regulatory frameworks against cross-media ownership and ownership transparency.³⁹ Regulatory laws are not implemented to ensure the diversity and plurality of Indian media. Instead of establishing a balance between regulation and freedom in ownership, one can see intense state intervention with political

³³ "Radio News Monopoly," Media Ownership Monitor, India, <https://india.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/radionewsmonopoly/>.

³⁴ "A Delicate Handshake," Media Ownership Monitor, India, <https://india.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/politicalaffiliations/>.

³⁵ Media Ownership Monitor: Who Owns the Media in India?" Reporters Without Borders, India, <https://rsf.org/en/news/media-ownership-monitor-who-owns-media-india>

³⁶ "Media Ownership Monitor."

³⁷ "Media Ownership Monitor."

³⁸ "The Sarma Family," Media Ownership Monitor, <http://pakistan.mom-gmr.org/en/owners/individual-owners/detail/owner/owner/show/the-sarma-family/>

³⁹ Media Ownership Monitor: Who Owns the Media in India?" Reporters Without Borders, India, <https://rsf.org/en/news/media-ownership-monitor-who-owns-media-india>

leverage on the one hand and sheer concentration and cross-media ownership on the other: the presence of a single radio news channel owned by the state with no regulation of media markets exhibiting monopolies in television and print media, prove the point. Hence, such trends affecting plurality of ownership and diversity of opinion challenge democratic accountability, freedom of the press, and a multitude of information sources. Ultimately, this leads to control of content and public opinion — a grave danger to democratic Indian polity, where a mix of diverse cultures, ideas, and faiths require pluralist sources of representation.

Factor of Bollywood Cinema

The Indian film industry — Bollywood is the largest film industry in the world in movies production per year and the number of audiences.⁴⁰ Also known as Hindi cinema, Bollywood has an audience that spans six continents and produces more than 1000 films per year.⁴¹ Bollywood film industry is one of the largest media industries which play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and perception building. It has large viewership, with intense communication and interaction with enormous content in Indian Hindi cinema.

Consequently, the Indian film industry also shapes the attitudes of large masses about minorities — especially Muslims, who are the largest minority in India. Muslims are regularly portrayed in negative leading roles in many films. In a democratic society as diverse as India, the impartial representation of minorities as equal citizens is crucial to uphold the spirit of democracy, equality and justice. Discrimination against Muslims in portrayal of stereotyped roles in the largest media industry has serious consequences for the diversity of the Indian polity. Muslim portrayal in the world's largest film industry exhibits a bias in favour of nationalist

⁴⁰ Hariqbal Basi, "Indianising Hollywood: The Debate over Copyright Infringement by Bollywood," *UCLA Ent. L. Rev.* 18 (2010): 33, <https://doi.org/10.5070/LR8180027138>

⁴¹ Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 2-4.

discourse, showing signs of intense polarisation.⁴² This misrepresentation is characterised by the portrayal of Muslim characters as terrorists and anti-national; imagining Muslim roles in a stereotypically negative way; and constructing vilified images of Muslims as ‘others’ and those linked with ‘arch-enemy Pakistan.’ This trend has seen greater intensification after the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism under the Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Although there have been limited attempts by some filmmakers to uphold secular principles and champion the message of communal harmony, Hindi cinema has frequently portrayed Muslims either as non-modern feudal characters or as anti-national, terrorist, villain, or anti-social characters.⁴³ The urge to propagate the idea of narrow nationalism with communal overtones using cinema has further made Bollywood a controversial site. Indian Hindi cinema, in its objective to promote Indian nationalism, has equated Indian nationalism with Hindu nationalism on exclusive terms. It has deliberately excluded Muslims and represented them as distrustful people and antagonists; the Indian film industry overwhelmingly links Islam and Muslims with terrorism.⁴⁴ In most of the films where Bollywood has tried to promote Indian nationalism, it has done so on majoritarian terms while constructing the image of Muslims as ‘others’; a similar kind of motive is evident in the hate campaign against what is referred to as ‘love jihad in the intent to mobilise, polarise and communalise citizens.⁴⁵ Marks of anti-Muslim trends have been present in the Bollywood cinema even before, prior to Modi and his BJP government. However, Modi’s populism is guilty of exacerbating the dangerous polarisation directed against the Muslim minority of India.

⁴² Sanjeev Kumar, “Constructing the Nation’s Enemy: Hindutva, Popular Culture and the Muslim ‘Other’ in Bollywood Cinema,” *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2013): 458-469, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2013.785340>

⁴³ Maidul Islam, “Imagining Indian Muslims: Looking through the Lens of Bollywood Cinema,” *Indian Journal of Human Development* 1, no. 2 (2007): 403-422, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0973703020070208>

⁴⁴ Salma Umber, Muhammad Junaid Ghauri and Hassan Nawaz, “Exploring the Image of Muslims in India,” *South Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (2018): 475-490, <http://journals.pu.edu.pk/journals/index.php/IJSAS/article/viewFile/3178/1355>.

⁴⁵ Nadira Khatun, “Love-Jihad and Bollywood: Constructing Muslims as Other,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 22, no. 3 (2018): 8, <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol22/iss3/8/>

For instance, research published in *the Pakistan Journal of Islamic Research* examined the portrayal of Muslims in Indian cinema from 2002 to 2008. The study analysed the content of 50 Indian movies to judge whether the content presented Muslims as favourable, unfavourable, or neutral. Results illustrated just 4.4 per cent images of Muslims as favourable, 65.2 percent as unfavourable, and 30.4 per cent neutral. The study concluded that Muslim images were highly distorted — the Indian film industry greatly emphasised Muslims as terrorists.⁴⁶ Moreover, the representation of Kashmiri Muslims in Hindi cinema has not been much different. Muslims are characterised by stereotyped representation as synonymous with terrorism. For example, a study of how Bollywood represented Kashmiri Muslims with special reference to three films — *Roja* (1992), *Mission Kashmir* (2000), and *Haider* (2014) — concluded a pre-Modi trend, which continued in the BJP government, portraying Muslims in a binary of good nation vs. the bad Muslim terrorists, thereby dehumanising Muslims.⁴⁷

Furthermore, the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism, substituting Indian nationalism with Hindu nationalism under Modi's rightwing populism further aggravated the trend of dismal portrayal of the Muslim community in India. The Bollywood industry — after the rise of BJP as India's biggest political party in 2014, in its apparent attempt to promote Indian nationalism — has, in reality, championed Hindu nationalism even more in a progression to distort the image of Muslims in India. A study involving the content analysis of four top-rated Hindi movies in recent years involving nationalistic content — *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), *Padmaavat* (2018), *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019) and *Tanhaji* (2020) — showed that these movies were characterised by a high level of

⁴⁶ Muhammad Ashraf Khan and Syeda Zuria Bokhari, "Portrayal of Muslims in Indian Cinema: A Content Analysis of Movies during (2002-8)," *Pakistan Journal of Islamic Research* 8 (2011): 1-15,

https://www.academia.edu/download/29241362/eng1ashrafkhan_zuria.pdf

⁴⁷ Mohammad Ameen Parray, "Bollywood and Kashmir: A Study of Stereotyped Representation of Kashmiri Muslims with Special Reference to *Roja*, *Mission Kashmir* and *Haider*," *International Journal of English: Literature, Language & Skills* 7, no. 1 (2018): 20-38, <https://www.ijells.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/August-2018-.pdf#page=20>

encouragement for Hindutva along with a negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims.⁴⁸

Under the influence of rightwing populism, Bollywood is increasingly becoming a source of damaging the pluralist orientation of Indian society. It's taking part in the exclusive construction of Indian Muslims as 'others' linking them with terrorism, extremism, conservatism, and anti-nationalism. Bollywood is producing more films aligned BJP's Hindu supremacism. For instance, *The Kashmir Files* — a movie, which according to *Time*, villainises Muslims, liberal intellectuals and past secular governments — made major box office success.⁴⁹ In addition, a considerable proliferation of Islamophobia has been observed in Bollywood films featuring noble Hindus resisting devilish Muslim rulers. Such portrayal of past Muslim rulers in black and white with no shades of grey highlight Bollywood's increasing inclination toward BJP's narrative of Muslims portrayed in bad light.⁵⁰

Different newspaper reports have cited BJP's pressure on Bollywood owners' and mutual connivance in building Hindu nationalism favouring Modi's electoral agenda.⁵¹ Impartial representation of minorities — especially Muslims, who feel more vulnerable in today's India is essential, and no other media industry can play as vital a role in ensuring this as Indian Hindi cinema. Such impartial and inclusive characterisation of Muslim characters and roles, however, is not on the horizon. Rather, the Indian film industry prompts further polarisation by displaying a distorted image of Islam and Muslims. In shaping the views and attitudes of the people towards minorities, Bollywood cinema's large

⁴⁸ Noman Ahmed Ansari and Osama Shafiq, "Hindutva in Bollywood Exploration of Hindu Nationalism and Image of Muslims in Hindi Cinema," *Al Tafseer-Biannual Journal* 36 (2020): 87-107, <https://al-tafseer.org/index.php/at/article/view/193>

⁴⁹ Debasish Roy Chowdhury, "How Bollywood Rolled over to Hindu Supremacists," *Time*, January 26, 2023, <https://time.com/6250414/bollywood-hindu-supremacists/>.

⁵⁰ Meghnad Bose, "Here's Why Tanhaji Is Bollywood's Latest Islamophobic Period Film," *The Quint*, January 10, 2020, <https://www.thequint.com/opinion/tanhaji-the-unsung-warrior-bollywood-islamophobia-ajay-devgn-saif-ali-khan#read-more>.

⁵¹ Sabyasachi Karmaker, "Why is the BJP so Angry with Bollywood," *Business Standard*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/why-bjp-so-angry-bollywood-327145>

viewership and great potency can play a crucial positive role for the state of democracy in India.

Media's Link-up with State Narrative: State Control and Repression

The political environment in India under the flag of the Hindutva project, right-wing Hindu nationalism, has turned increasingly towards right-wing Hindu majoritarianism in India. This development has also been observed in mainstream news media, which has either been sliding towards the promotion of a state-sponsored version of Hindu nationalism or has been the victim of state reprisals and restrictions when acting as a critical watchdog. The media's representation of Gujarat's then chief minister, alleged of compliance in the Gujarat riots (2002), to a completely different portrayal of a rebranded Narendra Modi in 2014, and showed how the media's objectivity has experienced a change. As the Chief Minister Modi has been found guilty of compliance in the Gujarat riots. Moreover, with the passage of time, media dynamics reflected a change of stance, as BJP affiliated politicians started to own large media houses, exhibiting jingoist sentiments with hyper-nationalism against Pakistan. Furthermore, Hindutva ideology inspired the people in using social media to contribute to BJP's electoral efforts in both the 2014 and 2019 elections. Purchase of Indian media by BJP affiliates helped in bringing Modi's image transformation in the ideological contest.

Firstly, Indian media was highly critical of Modi during his tenure as the Chief Minister of Gujarat for being a proponent of extreme right-wing Hindu nationalism. This description slowly began to change as nationalism and populism found more space in the Indian political environment along with a massive increase in Modi's popularity. Referred to as the 'Butcher of Gujarat' on mainstream media and often held guilty by civil society, media, and opposition for being complicit, media owner's ideological orientation and party affiliation played a great role in Gujarat's former chief minister's image re-evaluation in Indian media. Henrik Berglund of the Stockholm University has argued that Modi's capabilities as an administrator and political leader were increasingly emphasised while his guilt in the anti-Muslim violence was

downplayed.⁵² According to Berglund, Modi was able to enjoy full support from RSS and Indian business community simultaneously for the first time. Along with his solid background within the RSS, Modi “strengthened his relations with Indian business community, both within India and with Indian expatriates,” writes Berglund. The donations to his campaigns in 2014 were estimated to be more than U.S.\$500 million.⁵³

Secondly, social media platforms played an equally significant part in reshaping BJP’s prime ministerial candidate’s image before the 2014 elections: BJP – with a new group of Hindutva sympathisers – utilised social media more than any other party in 2014, and this approach of Hindutva supporters seeking new spaces for influence got a new name, neo-Hindutva.⁵⁴ As Sahana Udupa, a research scholar, on the Hindutva group’s use of social media has established that BJP became the first party to use social media strategies for electoral gains.⁵⁵ Marked by intense mobilisation, these strategies transformed Modi’s image from a tainted leader accused of complicity in Gujarat riots into a messiah of ‘New India.’

Thirdly, India’s media ownership structure also demonstrates how the owners of major news media outlets share political ties with BJP or are members and leaders in the party.⁵⁶ As shown above, media ownership is highly concentrated, state-owned, and politically affiliated

⁵² Henrik Berglund, “Media and Nationalism in India: Reflections on the Narendra Modi Government,” *Asian Politics & Policy* 7, no. 3 (2015): 502-505, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12194>

⁵³ Amy Kazmin, “Narendra Modi Rode Wave of Money to Indian Victory,” *Financial Times*, May 19, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ce68abf0-df3f-11e3-86a4-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3UZlcBRdl>

⁵⁴ Edward Anderson, and Arkotong Longkumer, “‘Neo-Hindutva’: Evolving Forms, Spaces and Expressions of Hindu Nationalism,” *Contemporary South Asia* 26, no. 4 (2018): 371-377, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1548576>.

⁵⁵ Sahana Udupa, “Enterprise Hindutva and Social Media in Urban India,” *Contemporary South Asia* 26, no. 4 (2018): 453-467, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1545007>.

⁵⁶ Subir Sinha, “Fragile hegemony: Modi, Social Media and Competitive Electoral Populism in India,” *International Journal of Communication* 11, no. 2017 (2018): 4158-4180, <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/24533/6/sinha-fragile-hegemony-published-version-IJC.pdf>

with the ruling party. Our study has shown that business conglomerates are taking over media outlets and have close ties with the ruling government. Owners of pro-government media outlets are concentrating media ownership. For example, *NDTV's* acquisition by Gautam Adani, a controversial conglomerate seen as being close to Narendra Modi, has seen founders and critical voices like Ravish Kumar leave the media house.⁵⁷

Fourthly, Indian news media's coverage in recent years has been characterised by enormous rousing of narrow nationalist feelings in the audience by anti-Pakistan rhetoric, propaganda, and false reporting. Shruti Pandalai argues that the Indian media, in its blind conformism with national discourse, has blurred the lines between national interest and jingoism while exacerbating hyper-nationalism against Pakistan.⁵⁸ Its crucial role in mobilising public opinion, according to Shruti, has made it an agenda-setter with a greater inclination towards warmongering. This tendency was explicitly evident after the 2019 terrorist attack in Pulwama and the subsequent Balakot incursion by the Indian air force, where the Indian media provoked jingoistic sentiments, stirred warmongering, and helped Modi get electoral benefits by demanding and appreciating a muscular response from New Delhi.⁵⁹ (Arnab Goswami, one of the leading news anchors and director of *Republic TV* – who knew about the Indian incursion into Balakot a couple of days before the actual incident, as shown by police probe in

⁵⁷ Shalu Yadav, "With Raids, Arrests and Hostile Takeovers, India Press Freedom Continues to Decline," *NPR*, April 3, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/03/1167041720/india-press-freedom-journalists-modi-bbc-documentary>.

⁵⁸ Shruti Pandalai, "Truth vs Hype: Media, Hyper-Nationalism and Impact on Perceptions in India-South Asia Relations," in *The Role of Media in Promoting Regional Understanding In South Asia*, ed. Priyanka Singh (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2016) 154-177.

⁵⁹ Rida Ansari, and Sadia Riaz, "Construction of 'Anti-National': Framing and Othering Discourse in Indian Media," *Global Media Journal* 18, no. 36 (2020): 1A-8A, <https://www.globalmediajournal.com/open-access/construction-of-antinational-framing-and-othering-discourse-in-indian-media.pdf>

TRP Scam⁶⁰— was watched demanding on national television: “We want revenge... not condemnation... It’s time for blood.”⁶¹

Lastly, in BJP ruled India, critical voices in the media are consistently suppressed while objective reporting is referred to as anti-national, even treasonable. Journalists and media persons are more vulnerable in today’s India as a clampdown on free media continues. Vindictive actions, lawsuits, threats, and complaints against unsympathetic voices to the government are increasing considerably. According to *Reporters Without Borders*, journalists risk the possibility of life imprisonment due to vague sedition charges. Journalists or media outlets that question the national-populist ideology of the incumbent prime minister are branded as targeted with lawsuits, defamation and online trolling.⁶² Research published in *Policy Perspectives* maintained that journalists and reporters are facing severe reprisals, which have also been a concern for *Amnesty International* and other transnational agencies.⁶³

The media outlets that do not fall in line are seeing their independent spaces to operate being receded by the BJP government. The latest casualty in this regard has been the *BBC* for making a documentary showing an inquiry report by the British government that called Modi “directly responsible for a climate of immunity” that led to massive violence during the Gujrat riots (2002).⁶⁴ Firstly, the government took down the online links of the documentary titled, *India: The Modi Question*. Later, the Indian tax authorities raided *BBC*’s offices in

⁶⁰ “Goswami knew about Balakot 3 Days before it Happened, Police Probe in Ratings Scam Suggest,” *Dawn*, January 16, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1601852>

⁶¹ Deepanshu Mohan, “Brexit to Balakot, What is Fuelling the Anger in You and Who is Responsible,” *Print*, March 7, 2019, <https://theprint.in/opinion/brexit-to-balakot-what-is-fuelling-the-anger-in-you-and-who-is-responsible/202208/>.

⁶² “Narendra MODI | RSF,” *Reporters Without Borders*, July 5, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/protagonist-narendra-modi>

⁶³ SheikhTajammul-ul-Islam, “Is Indian Media Free from State Control? An Appraisal,” *Policy Perspectives* 16, no. 2 (2019): 27-40, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.13169/polipers.16.2.0027.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Tarushi Aswani, “In India, the State Challenges Independent Media,” *The Diplomat*, March 28, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/in-india-the-state-challenges-independent-media/>

Mumbai and Delhi for questioning the staff and scanning documents. *BBC* is not the only media outlet targeted and being made to survive such pressure.

In July 2017, another media house critical of the Modi government, New Delhi Television, *NDTV*, faced government's wrath with offices being raided for a "bank fraud." The BJP government is frequently seen of attempting to muzzle the network while calling *NDTV*'s advertisers and sponsors to back off.⁶⁵ Similarly, Bobby Ghosh, Editor-in-Chief of *Hindustan Times* resigned from his position in 2017 for the persistent political pressure after launching a database of hate crimes in India — *Hate Tracker*.⁶⁶ As critical voices are suppressed, journalists peddling the government narrative have consistently got away with broadcasting and publishing material targeting minorities.⁶⁷ As much of mainstream media is seen as uncritical, *Freedom House* reminds that "India is also sending signals that holding the government accountable is not part of press's responsibility."⁶⁸ Although online spaces are more difficult to censor, government control is more evident in mainstream television news where media personnel are pressured, scrutiny is tightened and advertisers and sponsors are asked to back off.

Indian media has established a harmonious association with state narrative evident from its framing of Narendra Modi's right-wing Hindu nationalism, and ownership linkage with BJP affiliated politicians. Moreover, the mainstream media in India has demonstrated a greater urge for inspiring jingoistic and extreme nationalist feelings in audiences during moments of crisis with Pakistan. However, critical voices in the Indian media, which have been working with objectivity and impartiality, have faced repression and accusations of being 'anti-national.' One part of mainstream media, therefore, instead of holding

⁶⁵ Vindu Goel, Jeffrey Gettleman and Saumya Khandelwal, "Under Modi, India's Press Is Not so Free Anymore," *New York Times*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/world/asia/modi-india-press-media.html>.

⁶⁶ "After Editor's Exit, Hindustan Times Pulls down Controversial 'Hate Tracker,'" *The Wire*, October 25, 2017, <https://thewire.in/media/hindustan-times-hate-tracker>.

⁶⁷ Soutik Biswas, "Why Journalists in India Are under Attack," *BBC News*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55906345>.

⁶⁸ Sarah Repucci, "Media Freedom: A Downward Spiral," *Freedom House*, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-and-media/2019/media-freedom-downward-spiral>

the powerful accountable, is in line with state narrative, while the other part of Indian media is facing a clampdown and restrictions.

Conclusion

Media houses in India exhibit a great concentration of ownership, with media outlets confined to a few corporate hands. This ownership is marked by media outlets owned by people having close affiliations with the ruling party and state ideology. The concentration is also seen in viewership, thereby greatly undermining the prospects of diverse and democratic Indian media. In the media's portrayal of the largest minority, i.e., Muslims, misrepresentation, stereotyped depiction, and discrimination is observed consistently. Bollywood's depiction of Muslims is identified with many linkages of Islam shown with terrorism and extremism with the vilification of Muslim roles in acts of violence and barbarism. With the large extent of Bollywood's viewership, such divisive characterisation of Muslim characters and roles influences public opinion and leads to greater polarisation and divisions occurring on religious lines. The role of Indian media before and after the rise of Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister of India's largest political party — Bharatiya Janata Party — has become increasingly controversial, taking in a nationalist turn to demonstrate a convergence between media reporting and state narrative. However, there remains a group of critical and impartial voices in Indian media which faces severe crackdowns and accusations. All of this, consequently, has led to the suppression of free, democratic, political and journalistic space. Although a large segment of journalists and media persons are still committed to objective and impartial reporting in India, the centralisation of power, concentration of media ownership, and increasing right-wing nationalist tendencies of Indian media are threatening the pluralistic attributes of Indian society.