



Rumour mongering in social media: A study in context of Muzaffarnagar riots, 2013

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Abstract

Social media is a platform open to all and there is no regulation or self checking mechanism there. So, on one hand it is useful in getting information quickly, the other hand it is prone to misuse by unscrupulous elements of society for their hidden agenda. With the fast growing smart phone market and lowering cost of high-speed internet data pack services by telecom companies, people are more networked to each-other irrespective of their geographical locations. In recent times, it has been seen that social media is blamed increasingly in every social disharmony. Rumours spread very fast on social media and the time its authenticity is checked, it cause much damage to social fabric. The objective of the study is to find out whether social media had initiated rumors during Muzaffarnagar communal riots, 2013. In our investigation it was found that rumors were flying high on social media during riots and it was used to create division on communal lines to gain political mileage.

Keywords: social media, communal riots, rumors, internet

Introduction

Social media is gaining popularity worldwide due to its unique feature of connecting to our friends, relatives and acquaintances in no time. People are even sharing their day-to-day activities on social media networks. Smart phones have changed the information sharing system and we are getting information of even remote areas very quickly. In fact smart phones are working as a one point system where one can shoot or record any incident and share through social media. In the last few years, social networking sites like face book, Twitter and Instagram have changed the way of communication. Time spending on social media sites has increased due to decreasing prices of smart phones and lower rates of data plans of telecom companies. By the beginning of 2017, 3.7 billion people on the planet were online, which is nearly half of the world's population. According to a report of InMobi, e-marketeer.com and MMA research average Indians are spending four hours on smart phone for access of internet. The report of Ericsson mobility states that presently Indians are consuming 3.9 GB data every month which will be increased to 18 GB per month by 2023. It was mere 70 MB per month till 2014.

These networking sites are being used to personal communication as well as group and mass communication. In terms of online connectivity, sharing views on different issues, it is useful but in recent times social media has been misused by many unscrupulous persons in times of social disharmony. During Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013, many quarters of society as well as politicians had blamed social media as main reason behind the riots. A report of Hindustan Times said that during Muzaffarnagar riots, 2013, communal polarization moved from word of mouth to online. This report points that social

media proved to be hatred mongering tool which triggered serious violence. According to official statistic of West Bengal police administration in June-July month of 2017, seven communal flare-ups happened in West Bengal and all triggered by social media. A senior police official of West Bengal claimed that every month they receive at least 300 complaints of offensive posts on social media and apart from that there are many WhatsApp groups where videos, audios and images of rioting are circulated. Many communal incidents in recent times like Chhapra (Bihar) riots, 2016, Basirhat communal conflict, 2017 have suggested that it all were triggered by social media. So, we want to look into whether rumour mongering on social media had led to the large scale communal violence in Muzaffarnagar in 2013.

Muzaffarnagar Riots, 2013

Muzaffarnagar district of western Uttar Pradesh falls under Saharanpur division whose total population 41,43,512 out of which 23,82,914 are Hindus and 17,11,453 are Muslims. Hindus constitute 57.51 percent of the total population whereas population of Muslims stands at 41.3 percent. (Census 2011) ^[11]. In August-September, 2013 Hindu and Muslim communities of the district clashed each-other which were described as the worst in India in a decade. The trouble started on August 27, 2013 when a girl belonging to Jat community was harassed by a Muslim youth in Kawaal village of Jansath tehsil of the district. (BBC news, September 2013). The brothers of the girl allegedly killed the Muslim youth in his village and hours later the villagers of Muslim youth killed the brothers of the girl in a retaliatory action. The trouble started from this very incident which resulted in the death of 62 people in which 42 were Muslims and 20 were

Hindus. In riots 93 people injured and more than 50,000 people were displaced. (Wikipedia, 2013) [6]. In protest of killings of Hindu youths a panchayat was organized on August 31, 2013 by Jat community in which action against culprits were demanded. Muslims also had a panchayat on August 30, 2013 in Khalapar area of Muzaffarnagar town after Jumme ki Namaz. Also on September 7, 2013 a Mahapanchayat was called by Khap panchayat. During these panchayats and Mahapanchayat rumours flared high and riots spread from city to village areas of district. A video surfaced on YouTube on August 29, 2013 in which two Hindu youths were shown lynched by a Muslim mob and it was claimed that video was of Kawaal village. This again aggravated the situations in already communally charged atmosphere. But later this video was found from Pakistan.

Objectives

The main objective of the study is to explore – (A). Had social media initiated rumor mongering during Muzaffarnagar riots, 2013 and (B). Were posts on social media during Muzaffarnagar riots, 2013, politically motivated or not?

Methodology

To find out the problems, researcher interviewed in-depth the cyber experts, academicians, lawyers who represented riot victims, journalists who covered Muzaffarnagar riots and social workers who were active in riot victims’ welfare. To maintain the impartiality equal numbers of experts were interviewed from both Hindu and Muslim communities, so that we can investigate whether both communities were using social media for similar purposes and were they affected in the same way or were there any differences? For the purpose of finding objectives, ten Hindu and ten Muslim experts have been interviewed in this study.

Data Analysis and Findings

In our investigation, 80% Hindu respondents’ opined that posts circulated on social media during riots were filled with rumors. They said that even incidents of past times were posted on social media during Muzaffarnagar riots, 2013 which were presented as real but it was difficult to establish their authenticity. Then bureau chief of Daily Hindi newspaper Hindustan who belongs to Hindu community told the researcher in a personal interview that during Muzaffarnagar riots rumours were flying high from morning of September 7, 2013, the day Mahapanchayat was organized in protest of Kawaal incident. Rumours spread that many Hindu jats were killed when Muslims attacked on them on Jolly Nahar when they were returning to their homes after Mahapanchayat. It was also word of mouth that leaders of Jat community were killed by Muslims in Gathwala and Bawdi villages. Rumours on social media was spreading continuously that many people were killed and administration is concealing the facts. 10% Hindu respondents said that they didn’t see any posts that were rumour spreading. They opined that all posts were related to real incidents those occurred during riots. A professor of Delhi University in a personal interview to the author opined that of course the things posted on social media or WhatsApp have their own importance but if they are the cause of communal riots, then it could be spread

to the whole nation not limited to a particular region. 10% Hindu respondents were not sure about nature of contents on social media. All the Muslim respondents (100%) suggested that posts circulated on social media were rumors mongering. They said that most of the posts on social media at that time were blaming Muslims as only culprit for the whole episode of riots. For example, a professor of Psychology in Faculty of Social Science, Jamia Milia Islamia University, New Delhi opined in a personal interview to the researcher that social media is rumourising things and rumours are the powerful instrument for bringing any kind of change. Though they are false information and false information are so fast. Rumour is the most powerful instrument that was used during Muzaffarnagar riots through social media.

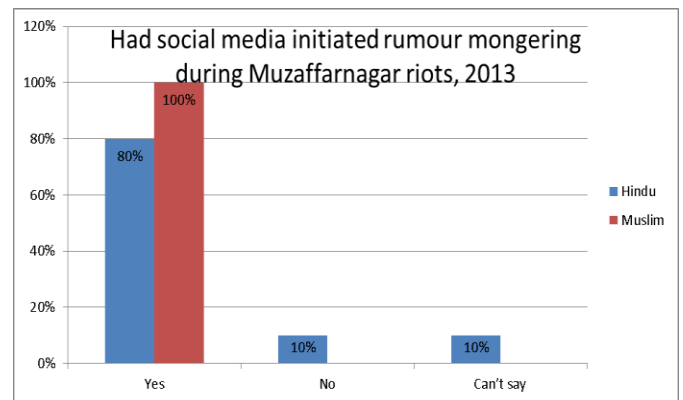


Fig 1

60% Hindu respondents mentioned that in the social media posts during riots, issues of eve-teasing and harassment of the girls and women were mainly described. 30 % Hindu respondents considered that posts on social media at that time were circulated by communally frenzied people with an intention to polarize on communal lines to gain political mileage. 10% Hindu respondents were not sure about the intentions of these posts. 70% Muslim respondents said that such posts were circulated with an aim to gain political mileage for upcoming elections. 20% Muslim respondents said that the main intention of circulating such posts were to malign the image of Muslim community as aggressors of the riots. 10% Muslim respondents were not sure about the intentions behind such social media posts.

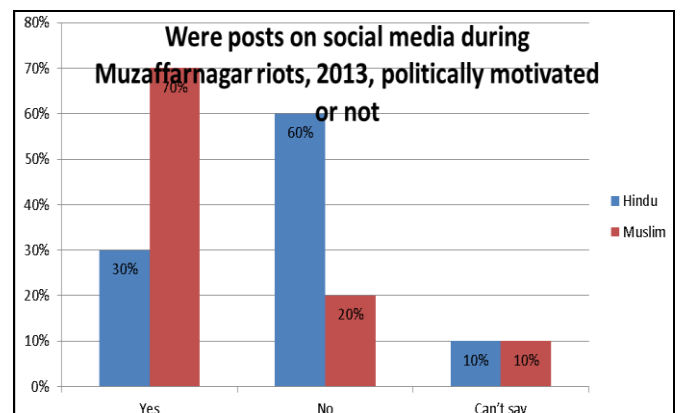


Fig 2

Conclusion

It can be concluded on the basis of above findings that social media which is otherwise a very participatory media can create havoc by fanning sensitive issues like communal clashes and due to which it can be converted in to a big riot. Social media in such cases does the negative job of rumour mongering which is evident from the above findings. Hence, there is a very impulsive need to keep a check on social media, especially when riot like atmosphere is emerging in any area. Some people can be fooled by rumour mongering of social media whereas some other can intentionally use it to cook their political agenda.

Limitations of the Study

- Since it was a very sensitive matter, people didn't like to comment on it, especially in official or formal discussions. So, it was difficult to even interview such number of experts.
- Some of the interviewees were rejected because they didn't respond to many important questions.
- Some of the experts only gave diplomatic answers.

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