

Social Media Strategies and Counter-Narrative of Terrorist Organisations: A case study of India

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Abstract

The significant progress in digital, information and communication technologies are substantial pillars of modern society. Social Media provides multiple platforms to people for contacting others. It is cheap and easily assessable, so everyone uses it for their benefit. The government also governs cyberspace's dynamics to protect society from some anti-social elements that target the community. With the expansion of social media, it has become easy for everyone to share or express their views with large masses without censorship and legal control. Terrorist organizations use social media for several purposes ranging from gaining support, recruitment, financial transactions, radicalization, planning, executions etc.

At the global level, all the nation-states are affected by this problem, so they started to develop a mechanism to counter the radicalization process so they do not get the rise of lone-wolf terrorism in their respective countries as terrorist uses social media to spread their radical Narrative against the nature of Governance system with the motive to destabilize the country. This paper will discuss and investigate the ideas and initiatives taken by the Government of India (GoI) to provide the counter-narratives and maintain the unity and integrity of India as we have 40 organizations registered in UAPA acts as per the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). So, to keep the social and secular nature of a diverse country, it is necessary to develop the counter-narratives of the terrorist organisation.

Keywords: Counter-Narratives, Extremism, Narratives, Radicalisation, Social-media, Terrorism.

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Introduction

India is the second-largest populated country in the world, and more than 18% of the population is young, according to the 2011 census. Indian society is divided into so many different segments, and here every single person has more than 2-3 identities based on religion, caste, class, ethnicity, and gender. In which religious identity prevails over others, and the person is ready to accept things to do without questioning the nature of the act. Social Media expands in India with easy accessibility to the Internet with the policies of Jio Internet and TRAI. It is human nature that it gets influenced by the available information and trends that humans follow in society. According to a report published by Google in 2017, in India, more than 74% of youth believe in the content available on social media and form their opinions and decisions with the help of information available on social media. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2022), social media is defined as “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)”.

Social Media is a platform that is the cheapest and easiest way to reach a large audience to express their views and ideas. Due to the nature of social media, people use it to make new groups and communities based on self-interest and needs. At the global level, social media's emergence is seen as the spread or expansion of democratic ideas and values. It is an impact or uses at a large scale seen after removing some terms and conditions of creating an account on Facebook in 2006. As in that Facebook removed the essential condition that is having enrolment in the university compulsory for creating an account on Social Media applications, which resulted in the sharp rise of users of Social Media, especially Facebook. In India, too, Social Media is considered a tool of democratisation, which is the reason behind along with people, government official and offices creates their profile on social media. Social Media is a tool that people use for democratisation. However, at the same time, it is also being used to subvert democracy through proxy methods to challenge the people in the way of mobilisation against government decisions. In 2012 Delhi faced law and order disturbance just after the viral Nirbhya Rape case. The second example is the Farmer and NRC protests in Delhi after the Modi Government introduced CAA and Farm Laws in 2019 and 2021, respectively.

This paper will discuss Social Media and how Social Media is helpful for terrorists to expand the audience for providing the narratives. Can government control the expansion of

terrorist organisations on social media? What is the significant action taken by the Government of India to deal with the problem and provide counter-narratives?

Social Media and Terrorism

According to Futch (2014), social media is “*a multi-layered complex term which primarily includes three types of socialites like cognition, communication, and community*”. Social Media is an umbrella term that includes all those platforms used by masses for acts like video or image sharing, blogging, uploading posts and statuses, and developing virtual networking. Examples are YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp etc.

The government and establishment section, terrorist organisations, and anti-establishment sections also use the social media platform for their propaganda and recruitment and fund arising, for making the plan along with the execution of the terror incident. Terrorist organisations use Social Media for personal and organisational benefits as it provides them with a large audience and oxygen for sustaining a more extended period. As Martin (2014) in his book discussed, social media in the context of terrorism have five major types of stakeholders.

Terrorism has entered a new phase, known as terrorism 2.0; in this phase, social media become a powerful tool for representing their presence on social media; otherwise, the government will not recognise their existence as a part of a strategy to remove them. The mass use of social media has made extremism's borders insignificant and imposed a more significant threat to global peace. Modern technologies accelerated the radicalisation process and made it difficult to understand the objectives and Modus Operandi of the government. According to Meena (2021)

“With the ease of access to the Internet and affordability, social media has so many active users in India, and the number is getting high every day, as the data shows of Investopedia.com; Facebook has 241 million active users in India.”

Further, the web desk in 2019 reported that “*WhatsApp has crossed more than 400 million monthly active users in India. NITI Aayog CEO Amitabh Kant revealed the stats at an event in New Delhi.*” Google-owned YouTube announced that India was its most significant and fastest-growing audience in the world, with more than 265 million monthly active users (Hindustan times, 2019). “India is now our biggest audience and one of our fastest-growing audiences worldwide. YouTube today has become the first stop for users to consume content,

whether they are looking for entertainment or information,” said Susan Wojcicki, YouTube's CEO, at the company's annual flagship event, “Broadcast.” According to News 18 in 2019:

“India has 71 million active users of Instagram. Twitter's quarterly monthly active user (MAU) count rose to 9 million to reach 330 million marks from the previous quarter. At the same time, analysts, on average, had expected 318.8 million, a loss of 2.2 million users, according to IBES data from Refinitiv”.

Social Media and Narratives

Extremist Narrative is a significant concern at the global level for all the international actors in their fight against terrorist beliefs and actions, often called Counter narratives or alternative narratives (Russell,2018). At the same time, Toguslu, in his paper, discussed that the Narrative is a way of presenting the story on the basis "by organising the world around them based on coherent narratives rooted in credible sources, they construct preferred ways of life.” Homolar, Pablo & Merino said that:

“narratives are discursive systems of meaning-making that are linked to the material world surrounding us, and people rely upon narratives to make sense of the world, to reduce its complexity, and to comprehend new information.”

Based on the above definition, we can conclude that a Narrative is a “spoken or written account of connected events; in the form of a story.” So, without such constructed narratives of terrorist groups, these events become irrelevant and unintelligible; terrorist organisations are no more a threat to society, so they will be able to achieve success in fulfilling their objective. Nowadays, Social Media is beneficial for terrorist organisations as it provides their story in front of people in a way that makes people emotional and sympathetic towards them. Before the arrival of social media, it was complicated and almost impossible for terrorist organisations to provide a story as they wanted. Media earlier used to provide oxygen or a public platform to the terrorist organisation, but it goes through the process of censorship and scrutiny before reaching to large scale.

Terrorism

The following individuals make up the terrorist environment, every one of them rely on them mass media and social media to help them tell their story plus acquire the allegiance of large numbers of individuals (Weimann & Winn,1994).

a. The Terrorist

Terrorists used to start violent political events or spread terror for political gain and full fill the objective. Martin () 2014 said that terrorists used to justify the incident in the name of religion or war against the oppressive opponent. In 1992, Paletz stated that insofar as terrorists seek to attract attention, they target the enemy public or uncommitted bystanders. For them, the terrorist incident is legitimate to act as they do to get freedom from foreign rule, which is their fundamental right. Terrorists earlier used the media and now use social media to provide their Narrative to the world to gain support and more foot soldiers and funds.

b. The Supporter

They are the patron of terrorism and deal with providing a supportive environment and attention to the world. Supporters refer to terrorists, freedom fighters, and human rights activists for suppression. Supporters always justify or rationalise using force as the demand of time and misguided youth or hopeless people who took the weapon in hand for a better life. They have access to almost every single platform for providing the narration of terrorists as a story of the victim of state brutality.

c. The Victim

They are the survivor of political violence and hybrid warfare. They are not sympathisers of terrorists but act as a messenger of terrorists. They spread the word about terrorists regarding their brutal attacks and the damage caused by terrorism. It acts as a wake-up call for the large public and creates fear in the minds of large masses. If govt do not fulfil the demands of terrorists, they will come back or create more damage to us. At the same time, they used to gain more support or create pressure on the government to provide them with so many things for a better life.

d. The Targets

Targets are symbolic in the case of terrorism. It can be the property of humans, depending on the situation. If the target is human, the media or supporters provide a reason behind selecting the target, which helps gain the masses' support or sympathy. "Targeted person can significantly impact public opinion and government policy along with investigation process."

e. The Onlooker

They represent a sizable audience for the terror attack. Scenes may have a direct impact on them, or media coverage or social media may have an indirect impact. The Internet is beneficial for expanding the range or scale of the terrorist incident, which terrorist ideally uses.

The Onlooker will decide the success rate of any terrorist incident by joining the sides because of available narratives. They are the real target of terrorists for gaining validity and funds, foot soldiers and supporters.

f. The Analyst

They are the most crucial participant in any terror incident. They create different perspectives, interpret incidents, or label the participants. It includes many people, from academicians, experts, politicians, and the media. With the advancement of Social Media, terrorists minimise the role of Analysts by posting their narratives and incidents videos on a public platform which directly enables the onlookers to decide or interpret the incident.

The Narrative is mainly used to radicalise young minds against the government for using them as foot soldiers and executors of a terrorist incident. Every single terrorist organisation has a narration of every single term or event, including the objects of the world. In 2014 Burhan Wani posted a video on Twitter on his handle which talks about creating Kashmir as Heaven because of the best person or lovely person who lived in that region, so I duty of Every single Kashmiri Muslim to pay tribute to Allah in the form of making it free form Violence and remove the Indian Soldiers from the land.

A large section of Scholars advocates that Islam is a religion and is not concerned with violence or terror. However, at the same time, people used the writing of writings of Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyah of 1263, in which he issued a fatwa against the Mongol ruler for securing the land. Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, in the 16th century, with the alliance of local tribal leader Muhammad Bin Saud issued a fatwa against the Ottoman empire and made it illegitimate or apostate so Jihad could be done against them. This ideology is known as Wahhabism, and the violent fold of Islam is too fundamental.

In India, Imtiaz Ahmad argues that India Islam has existed since the 7th century in the form of Sufi Culture, which is known worldwide as a liberal form of Islam, and it talks about co-existence which does not provide any threat to the state or society. Nevertheless, in the late 18th century, Indian Islam faced significant changes in dividing Islamic Fold into two different segments: Deobandi and Barelwi. The Barelwi group is based on the writings of Ahmad Riza Khan, and he argued that the Deobandi group is associated with Wahhabism, so they destroy the culture of Indian Muslims, which has a unique space or place in the world.

According to McCauley and Moskalenko (2008), radicalisation is done with the help of narrative aspects. It is divided into three subcategories 1. Micro, 2. Meso, 3. Macro. Micro

deals with an individual-level mechanism that focuses on *personal grievances* and, for their solution person indulges in *Unfreezing* activities. Meso deal with *group grievances* and community identity. Furthermore, they joined terrorist or extremist groups. The last one is macro, which deals with global aspects and is used to aspect the person's decision and reaction to the issue or situation. Based on this, terrorists radicalise the people by providing the victim's Narrative and marginalise or discriminate along with perceived injustice which causes them to become angry and filled with hate against the government. At the same time, these three subcategories are also understood in terms of communication and justify the Narrative by the terrorist organisation. In this article, we will discuss ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

Sageman in his book *Leaderless Jihad* (2011) rejects the view that terrorism is the responsibility of society or a flawed individual. Instead, he argued that any person could become radical by providing Narrative, in which he talks about four steps. Furthermore, any person becomes a jihadist after getting regular feeding and the same experience from the environment in a chat room in the online and offline world. So, jihadism is wholly based on the close connection to several followers. If these followers get away as a means of discontent, jihadism has come to self-termination.

Social Media and Terrorist Organisation

- **ISIS**

ISIS is known as the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" and has a presence on social media and is the first group at the global level to use the virtual world and Internet to express words and views. Since its creation, IS members have taken advantage of online platforms to promote the ideology. Islamic State encouraged the sympathisers for the lone-wolf terrorist attacks. Moreover, ISIS alone maintains more than 150 websites for providing content to its cadres. ISIS uses social media as a successful tool for rebranding the jihadi content as stardom and developing the subculture with rap videos, memes, political humour, or content which attracts and radicalises young minds.

ISIS openly projected India as a natural enemy and threat to the Islamic world in his online magazine *Dabiq* by discussing the condition of Muslims and CAA in his May 2019 issue. The May 2020 edition of "The Supporters Security" IS talks about using social media and online platforms with complete safety measures and without getting noticed by Indian Security forces. This 24-page magazine discussed using smartphones and computers against the government for personal benefit. It also talks about following the orders given by senior ranks regarding the attack and plan execution in Jammu and Kashmir.

The Voice of Hind is another magazine of IS which orders its cadres to attack the Covid-19 pandemic while keeping its security and safety from viruses. Mid Day Report claims that over the course of the last two years, the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) has been able to deradicalize more than 60 adolescents and discover the six keyways that they radicalise Indian youth. These are the following steps.

1. Online Recruitment team
2. Monitoring Online
3. Direct Messages to Preaching
4. World Tour and Job Opportunity
5. Radicalise and Indian Handler
6. The path to Syria

- **Al-Qaeda**

It is a transnational extremist Salafist militant organisation founded by *Osama Bin Laden* in 1988. It is also known as Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), a military unit formed on September 3, 2014. Furthermore, it separately deals with Indian Subcontinent only. The senior commander of the organization claims that just because AQIS hasn't had much of an impact beyond the Pakistan and hasn't launched a serious strike on Indian soil, it is incapable of carrying out its true mission(Joscelyn,2015).Unlike its rival in the country, IS, the group has not been able to acquire any traction in India (North,2014). At the same, the group cannot gain much support in the region due to democratic dispensation in India or ideological differences between Indian Muslims and organisations for the strand of Wahhabism and the creation of the Caliphate (Olmstead,2014). In 2016, a group called for the killing of the Indian Prime Minister as it was the main target for the safety of Indian Muslims and Kashmir. So many times, the group appealed or urged to wage war against India for Kashmir and appealed to Kashmiri to take weapons in their hands to take revenge and own land. AQ always projected that if Indian Muslims do not come on the road, they lose their religious and cultural identity.

AQ has more than 3000 Twitter handles which work to find out the potential candidate in India alone(Gupta, 2020). Al-Qaeda is different from IS in terms of attracting the Indian Youth to local incidents and statements of local leaders. AQ also use the debate or episode of an Indian news agency with some modification and alternation according to need. According to al-Zawahiri and Asim Umar,

“the goals of AQIS are to initiate violence against the U.S., free Indian Muslims from persecution, establish Shariah law across South Asia, revive the Islamic Caliphate in the Indian Subcontinent and defend Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban against foreign aggression”.

In 2017 group issued a “Code of Conduct”, a 20-page issue that talks about the carry-out plans of several attacks against the region with the help of available information on online platforms and social media. This group always project Indian Muslims as the victim and is discriminated against by the government and consistently raises the issue with the help of international supporters on the name of human rights and victim cards. They always bring the issue of Kashmir on a global level. IDSA Social Media pointed out so many videos created by the group as fake and fabricated.

These groups play their Narrative in significant categories, which can be understood in the following areas.

1. The search for a better world narrative
2. Social work narrative
3. Saviour or freedom narrative
4. Marriage narrative
5. Honey trap narrative
6. Hero or warrior narrative

Social Media and Counter Narratives

In the Indian Context, the Counter-Narrative is provided by Tech companies along with the government. However, it can get successful because terrorists mainly use the Arabic language for communication with the candidate. In contrast, in tech companies and governments, only some people understand the terms of the Arabic language, so they cannot provide the proper solution.

In the last few years, after the Burhan Wani Episode Government continued to provide a significant counter-narrative in Kashmir with the help of media and local priests to bring young minds back into the mainstream fold (Bhatt,2018). Government-run several programs for securing the people and de-radicalise them from terrorist traps through any means (Routray,2016). Tripathi (2015) stated the first counter intelligence programme of Indian intelligence agencies, codenamed ‘Operation Chakravyuh’. This operation came into existence in 2015. Under this operation, Intelligence hires some person who has some understanding of Islam and Terrorism then they create some fake accounts on social media. They work to lure

potential candidates who are vulnerable to joining the terrorist outfits, according to security intelligence. They gain their faith or trust through building a repo and then the call to join the mission. After that, these people were taken for counter-radicalisation operations or counter-narrative programmes.

Sheer Diversity

First, it is indispensable to understand that people in India who become radicalised are from different backgrounds and join the group for different reasons, so particular case patterns cannot be applied to de-radicalise the people and provide the counter-narratives of terrorists. So, it is crucial to understand the basic social Faultline to understand the system.

Religious Counter Narratives

Sometimes, government officials think that people who join the terrorist group are from Islamic Fold, so they get radicalised due to the line of interpretation of Islamic text, so they provide a powerful counter-narrative through religious leaders; this is very helpful but not final as every single person does not need to get radicalise due to religious narrative. In the Indian context, whoever left to join ISIS did not understand Islamic text well.

In India, the government is following the Singaporean model of counter-narrative, which mainly focuses on religious interpretation and skills to radicalise a person (Singh,2018). In this model, officials also take the help of family members and friends to make the person understand that it is a peaceful society (Yuit,2017). The government tries to provide a sense that they are not discriminated against on any basis within the society and nation.

In 2017 government established a different division in the Ministry of Home Affairs, known as CTCR, and deals with a counter-narratives approach. Now government officials hire people who use to work on social media with the help of algorithms to identify potential candidates for terrorist organisations and then take them under their camp for de-radicalisation.

In the current regime, this program is understood as a Counter-narrative or counter-radicalisation approach instead of counter-violent extremism as in previous governments.

These are the following actors who are involved in the counter-narrative task.

- The government official act as an actor for formal communication and messages within the rule of law framework to provide the secular views and stand of government regarding the people.
- Semi-actors are youth workers or social workers, and medical practitioners. They are involved one in one conversations and provide social aspects.

- Religious actors are involved in religious text interpretation and message of god, and the meaning of religion and person.
- Role model actors with good social respect and look young so the person can easily attach himself to him and move further.
- Former extremist actors left the group for any reason and provided an accurate picture of terrorist organisations and issued related promises made by the terrorist organisation.
- Family and friends' actors are involved in providing a sense of belongingness and unity with the society and peer group.

Conclusion

Terrorist organisations get the content very quickly for providing their narratives, using statements and videos from across the globe or within the country as majorities give such statements which compel to think that minority does not have space to live with dignity in this country. Terrorists use single incidents with different names and locations. The government is trying to curb the problem with the support of state ATS and different bodies. Now social media tech companies too joined the hand in the fight against terrorist organisations by rejecting the Narrative of terrorist organisations.

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