

Article

Who Is the Muslim? Discursive Representations of the Muslims and Islam in Indian Prime-Time News

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Abstract: A cursory look at Indian prime-time news tells us much about the tone and tenor of the people associated with it. Exaggerations, hyperbole, and tempers run wild, and news anchors flail in theatrical rage. News channels and news editors display their ideological affiliations subliminally. These affiliations—a factor of personal political stances, funding bodies, and investors—lead to partisan bias in the framing of news and, in some cases, can easily translate into racial prejudice. In this paper, I examine news coverage related to Muslims in India. I study the coverage of two issues specifically—*love jihad* and *triple talaq*—in prime-time English news of two channels: Times Now and Republic TV. *Love jihad* is a term used to describe alleged campaigns carried out by Muslim men targeting non-Muslim women for conversion to Islam by feigning love. *Triple talaq* is a form of divorce that has been interpreted to allow Muslim men to legally divorce their wives by stating the word “*talaq*” three times. My analysis of the content, tone, and tenor of their coverage shows that these channels propagate associations between Islam and backwardness, ignorance, and violence through consistent employment of the following tropes: “Muslim women need to be saved from Muslim men”; “Hindu women need to be saved from Muslim men”; and, “Muslims are not fully Indian—they are anti-national”. I place this study of news media within the current political climate in India and briefly touch on the conversations it guides and provokes. This is a first step in detailing a problem. It is also a call for further analysis on this subject to examine and evaluate if and how discourse manipulates public conversations and policy decisions.

Keywords: politics of representation; media; Islam; media representation; Muslims; Islamophobia; racism; anti-Muslim racism; love jihad; triple talaq; Muslims in India

1. Introduction

When Edward Said says that he has “not been able to discover any period in European or American history since the Middle Ages in which Islam was generally discussed or thought about outside a framework created by passion, prejudice or political interests” (Said 1981), it rings true for India in the late 2000s, as well. Muslims in India have a complex history—one that has led them to be seen as invaders (Desai 2016), traitors (Rana 2017), backward (Fatmi 2016), and oppressed (Kirmani 2016). Mass media—both television news and, to some extent, the print media—find it easy to play into these tropes and package “the Muslim” into these stereotypical images. In a recent book about Muslim children in Delhi schools, the author finds out how deeply entrenched the association of a Muslim with terror is amongst school students (Erum 2018). The book sparked a host of conversations around raising children in urban India today. It alerted parents to these seemingly innocuous micro-aggressions that children are either subject to or causing. In July 2018, Twitter India saw the hashtag #talktoamuslim go viral as a reaction to the deeply entrenched othering that the minority has been facing in public discourse.

Through this paper, I aim to examine how this racism has been exacerbated by mass media—in this case, specifically by TV news. I shall use the term Islamophobia to indicate the broad range

of prejudices, dislike, and hatred towards Muslims and Islam. Mass media has long been a tool of propaganda with its “reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship, [. . .] without significant overt coercion” (Herman and Chomsky 1988). It is said to “manufacture consent” through a process of repeated representations of certain issues in a particular way. In this specific case, the media also proves to be a powerful source of ideas and imagery about race.

Representations and misrepresentations of Muslims and Islam are complex. Global politics have aggravated their negative stereotyping and the media is critical in this opinion-shaping. Individuals with access to world news are now conscious that these images and lexical expressions associating Muslims with terror carry the weight of Islamophobia. Local politics play into these global superstructures and create localized versions of these images to manipulate audiences in a place like India. Since the rise of Hindutva, a right-wing Hindu nationalist ideology propagated by the ruling party in India since 2014—the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—hate crimes, mob violence and targeted attacks on Muslims have been on the rise. As a minority, Muslims are seen as misfits in the Hindutva definition of a Hindu India. Just as we see in Erum’s (2018) book, these global and local representations affect the lives of ordinary Muslims—from toddlers to adults. Mass media, along with “fake news”, perpetuates the mischaracterization of Muslims as violent terrorists, regressive patriarchs and most importantly, “the other”.

I shall examine how two news channels in positions of power use agenda setting, priming and framing to represent Muslims and Islam, and how these representations may not always be unbiased and objective. Much of what I have found may not be openly racist arguments but, rather, show usage of tropes that incite racist attitudes. They are “apparently naturalized representations of events and situations [. . .] which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned assumptions” (Hall 2003). The minds of viewers are thus, in Hall’s words, “impregnated with unconscious racism” towards Muslims and Islam. Arguably, these programs fall under the “infotainment” category and most, if not all, viewers engage with them aware of the presenters’ bias. However, the stereotypes they perpetrate are retained in conscious memory and often manifest in acts of micro-aggression and in extreme cases, incite violence.

2. Methodology

To study the representation of Islam and Muslims, I identified the top four English news channels in India (by viewership averages¹ across a period of 1 year). I then picked the prime-time evening shows for these four channels and examined their headlines to identify two key issues in the depiction of Indian Muslims on TV between 2014 and early 2018. The issues that stood out were: the *triple talaq* and *love jihad* debates. I chose these by assessing the coverage the cases received and the public conversations they sparked. It was striking to see how jargon from these cases seeped into popular parlance. It was often that I would experience friends and colleagues, as well as strangers on social media, using *love jihad* and *triple talaq* in jest while conversing with Muslims. Evidently, both these cases had visible impact on the depiction of Muslim men and women in India.

Triple talaq is a form of divorce that has been interpreted by certain Islamic lawmakers and Muslims in India to allow Muslim men to legally divorce their wives by stating the word “*talaq*” (Arabic for “divorce”) three times in oral, written, or electronic form. *Love jihad* is a term used to describe alleged campaigns carried out by Muslim men targeting non-Muslim women for conversion to Islam by feigning love. There is no official evidence supporting claims of such a phenomenon (Khalid 2017).

Using semiotics, media theory, and critical discourse analysis as methods, my research was led by two research questions (RQs):

¹ Source: <http://www.indiantelevision.com/television/tv-channels/viewership/republic-tv-leads-english-news-aaj-tak-tops-hindi-news-ranking-180201>.

- RQ1: Are there differences between the presentation of issues related to Muslims, and those concerning other communities? Are “Muslim issues” specifically framed in terms of the religion and its problems, as opposed to other issues?
- RQ2: Are there specific meanings intended to be created in the presentation of Muslims and Islam?

As initial research resulted in an affirmative answer to the first two questions, it led me to investigate further:

- RQ3: What are the tropes that emerge in these representations?
- RQ4: What stereotypes do these tropes play into?

Breaking this down further, using [De Saussure’s](#) (1966, p. 65) framework of the signifier and signified, I asked specific questions of the content to analyze what the representations imply:

- Who are the anchors/hosts and what do they say? What is the vocabulary, tone and tenor they use?
- What does the accompanying text tell us? What do the vocabulary, font size, highlights, and other visual cues tell us?
- Who are the guest speakers invited onto prime-time news panels? Who is chosen to represent the stakeholders?
- What do the headlines say? Do they have an inherent bias?
- Is all news covered with equal ferocity? What do the inclusions and omissions tell us?

After spending hours watching episodes of the four shows²—“The Newshour Debate” on Times Now, “The Debate” on Republic TV, “The People’s Court” on India Today and “Left, Right and Center” on NDTV 24x7—I noticed specific objectivity with the latter two. All four shows involve an anchor and a panel of guests to discuss daily headlines. It serves to note that these programs select a particular news item from the daily news to feature as a longer segment or debate. The hosts, henceforth referred to as anchors, are the presenters of these debates. The shows on NDTV 24x7 and India Today reported in an unbiased manner, and their anchors constantly disassociated personal opinion from the channel’s opinion and made sure that the debate was held in peaceful, neutral ways. Their shows devoted fewer episodes to these two issues³ (*triple talaq* and *love jihad*) and also focused on other news-making headlines. They raised questions from both sides of the debate. Their panels had diverse representation, showing that their panel selection was balanced and, more importantly, not set up to perpetuate stereotypes. The episodes of Republic TV’s “The Debate” and Times Now’s “The Newshour Debate” were markedly different in their treatment of the issues of *triple talaq* and *love jihad*. Therefore, through the process of research my focus shifted exclusively to evaluating objectivity and studying the representations and discourse generated by these two channels: Republic TV and Times Now.

Objectivity and Representations

Media constructs a reality with language as a device. Objectivity for the media, then, is a responsibility they shoulder. [Westerståhl](#) (1983) notes that it is essential for news reporting to be factual and impartial in order to provide a foundation for independent and rational decision-making. Parameters for evaluating objectivity in journalism, he notes, include non-partisanship and neutral presentation. He also notes that in mass media, editors push certain opinions through their selection of sources, topics, and perspectives to showcase a certain aspect of the news. Anchors and editors hold the power to influence public opinion and mold discourse. Whether they treat this power with responsible objectivity in the episodes analyzed is a question I raise.

² See Appendix A.

³ Times Now devoted eight episodes to *triple talaq* and eight to *love jihad* since 2017; Republic devoted seven and three, respectively. In comparison, NDTV 24x7 discussed *triple talaq* in three episodes and *love jihad* once, whereas India Today covered *triple talaq* three times and *love jihad* five times.

Representation is the production of meanings through language (Hall 1997) and objectivity can be evaluated by studying these representations. What constitutes an image is as important as studying how and why it circulates, since “the question of the circulation of meaning almost immediately involves the question of power” (Hall 1997). Studying representations and the politics of imagery is thus useful in examining racism.

I use Van Dijk’s approach to critical discourse analysis for studying representations. Van Dijk’s approach in analyzing discourse is useful because it differentiates itself from formal linguistic analysis and places language in a context of active social structures and political problems. It examines equations of power in discursive representations and takes a stand by enforcing responsibility. The approach guides my study and position on the abuse of power these large media organizations exert by manipulating the attitudes (Van Dijk 2018) of viewers and reproducing racism. His proposed theoretical framework involves observing the following: opinion and emotion words, as well as volumes of intonation; global topics and semantic macrostructures; speech acts including the intention of the participants; metaphors—especially negative and manipulative; and, ideological polarization of using in-group and out-group markers (“us versus them”) by emphasizing good versus bad.

Van Dijk sees discourse analysis as a discipline of study rather than a methodology (Van Dijk 1993, 2000). Keeping in line with this, I will also combine his theoretical framework with that of media theorists’ concepts of agenda setting, priming, and framing to analyze the content. Agenda setting refers to the ability of the mass media to signal to the public what is important by virtue of choosing what to cover and how much to cover (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Priming, closely related to agenda setting, is the process of invoking certain images in the memory of a viewer through a semantic process—giving them an interpretive frame to recall specific associations with respect to certain issues in their thought process. Finally, framing is the process of communicating select aspects of an argument “to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman 1993). Framing focuses more on content than priming and agenda setting. A frame can be a phrase, image, analogy, or metaphor that a journalist uses to communicate the essence of an issue or event. These tools of studying representation provide a theoretical framework, alongside semiotics, to critically analyze the discourse.

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) argue that the media “does not alter reality” but “changes and shapes perceptions by presenting an issue in a particular context (framing) and positioning it by the act of highlighting and association (priming) thereby influencing judgment.” In this paper, I study how the stance the media takes may direct and affect the perception of the viewer.

3. Headlines: What Is the Agenda Set and How Is the Audience Primed?

Van Dijk has emphasized the textual and cognitive functions of headlines (Van Dijk 1991b). Their main function is that the information or, in this case, the opinion, in the headline is used as a frame to process the information that comes after it (Van Dijk 1991a). In the digital age, where all information is online minutes after being aired on TV, headlines play the dual role of framing opinion as well as serving as anchor text for search tools. The words used in headlines, therefore, are key triggers for the thought process that follows in activating relevant dormant associations in peoples’ memory.

In a list of over 2000 episodes of “The Newshour Debate” on Times Now, content with the words “Hindu” or “Hinduism” appears 31 times in the headlines, while the word “Islam” appears 14 times. The words appearing alongside “Hindu”, “Hinduism” and “Islam” however, are telling of how the argument is framed:

“The Newshour Debate”—Times Now

- Hindu—mentioned 31 times
- Hindu is accompanied by the following words: Congdivideshindu, jobless Hindus, Hindu haters, *asli* Hindu [real Hindu], being Hindu a disadvantage, don’t Hindu girls have rights, Hindu’s don’t count, Hindu *Rashtra* [Hindu Nation], minority Hindus denied home, Hindu refugees, training to saving Hindus, Hindu *Swabhimān* [Hindu Pride]: Train kids to fight and shoot.

- Islam—mentioned 14 times
- In each of these cases “Islam” is accompanied by the following words: Islamist Hate, Islamophobia, stop giving “Islamists” a free run, Islamist radicals, brutality, sickening depravity, Islamic Caliphate, Islamic rage, Terror in the name of Islam, Islamists threaten.

An analysis of these headlines from Times Now tells us that most of the headlines related to Muslims and Islam use words of antagonism, whereas for Hindus, associated words signify victimhood. If these headlines were to be believed, the Hindus are hated, jobless, at a disadvantage, denied rights, and so on. Islam, on the other hand, has a free run, is replete with brutality, sickening depravity, rage and terror. This can have serious repercussions on the view of Muslims in the mind of the audience. It primes one to unconsciously treat Muslims with suspicion and, consequently, more likely to believe rumors about them.

Most headlines in Times Now and Republic TV prime the audience to think of Muslims as criminals, or hatching some conspiracies undercover. These headlines include words like “EXPOSE”, “CAUGHT”, “BAN”—all in uppercase. These negative predicates, associated with the headlines, identify Muslims and Islam as agents of crime. Here, the moral agent is the vigilant media and the patient is the stealthy, criminal Muslim. Some examples as follows:

- Triple Talaq BANNED—Celebrations For Indian Women (Republic TV)
- Arnab Goswami EXPOSES Love Jihad (Republic TV)
- BAN “Nikah” Sex Racket in Hyderabad (Republic TV)
- CAUGHT: ISIS Converting Hindu Girls For 5 Lakh Rupees (Times Now)
- END Triple Talaq—Most Cruel And Demeaning Form Of Divorce (Times Now)
- Oppose Triple Talaq—23-Year-Old Nasrin Was UNILATERALLY Divorced (Times Now)

Compared to these, NDTV 24x7 and India Today reported with neutral predicates:

- Triple Talaq ban: What’s bad in theology is bad in law? (India Today)
- Banning Triple Talaq: Votebank Politics or Righting A Wrong? (NDTV 24x7)
- Triple Talaq Banned: One Step Closer to Uniform Civil Code? (NDTV 24x7)

The headline, “Why Indulge A *Love Jehadi*?” on Times Now is not only giving credence to the premise that *love jihad* exists, but it also lexically frames the headline such that it proclaims the man involved guilty, despite no official indictment. Another headline: “Arnab Goswami EXPOSES *Love Jihad*” (Republic TV), also operates on the same pretext, this time taking on the burden of trying to prove the phenomenon of *love jihad*.

In other headlines, the stance of the channels (Times Now and Republic TV) is clear and it is evident that there is no room for debate. The anchor has taken on the role of the moral actor and, thereby, the savior in the following:

- #AbolishTripleTalaq: Closing in On The Quest For Equality? (Times Now)
- Women Allowed in Haji Ali—Big VICTORY, Next Triple Talaq Issue on their Agenda (Times Now)
- Don’t Hindu Girls Have Rights?

Objectivity is inherently assumed for the media and, while it may not always be there, viewers tend to trust news and presume non-partisanship and objectivity. These headlines are not merely a reflection of the channel but also warning signals for the society overall, as such framing reinforces stereotypes about Muslims.

4. Semiotics, Discourse, and Semantics: How the Episodes Are Framed

The second level of agenda setting involves content analysis of the debate. What the anchor says, what is displayed on the screen in the ticker and who is invited for debates—a combination of these

three factors frames how the audience views the story. For the episodes below, I study the hosts' speech, the text on the ticker, and overall semiotic inferences. Both these shows ("The Newshour Debate" on Times Now and "The Debate" on Republic TV) involve panel discussions. While the editors cannot be held responsible for the speech of the panelists, they do have editorial control over the selection of panelists. On both channels, there is an evident bias in selecting the voices presented. Hence, while I exclusively examine the speech of anchors because they guide the argument and conversation, I also make note of the representation (or non-representation) in the selection of the panelists.

4.1. Trope 1: The Victim Muslim Woman Who Needs to Be Saved from the Muslim Man

In her famous work, "Do Muslim Women need saving?", Lila Abu Lughod writes about being "surprised by how easily people presume that Muslim women do not have rights" (Abu-Lughod 2013). She acknowledges the violence and oppressive practices against women, but is also quick to note that this violence must not necessarily be associated with one religion. For this analysis, too, the acknowledgement of the oppression inflicted by certain practices on a section of the population is crucial. However, preventing the essentialization all Muslims and Islam as oppressive towards women due to certain practices followed by a minority is also important.

Topics like the banning of the *niqab*, the *hijab*, and other rights have dominated public debate in the last few years (Fadil 2018). These discussions have propagated the image of Muslim women as lacking agency and being oppressed—specifically, by Muslim men. In discussions around *triple talaq*—instant divorce that a man can give his wife—this lack of agency is most pandered to. I use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1993) essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", where she deconstructs power and voice between the powerful, colonial elite and the colonized subaltern. She notes that "white men are saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1993). I play on her claim to say that "Hindu men are saving Muslim women from Muslim men". In this analysis, a gendered racism pandering to oriental tropes and a savior-victim dichotomy emerge.

Navarro (2010) notes that for Western media, most news stories mentioning Muslim women and violence against them are shown repeatedly without much nuance. They do not "usually explain the political, economic and educational factors that fuel intolerable practices" and consequently build this perception of Muslim women as victims who need to be saved. The coverage of the *triple talaq* debate is framed along similar lines. Much of the issue is related specifically to women whose socio-economic status does not enable them to be independent. However, they are often essentialized as being Muslim women oppressed by Islam—a monolithic religion enforced by its men.

Episode 1: Should Triple Talaq Brigade Apologize? | "The Debate" on Republic TV (22 August 2017)

The analysis of this episode begins by noting the representation on the panel. In a trend that recurs throughout all the episodes analyzed, the spokesperson for all Muslims is a stereotypical religious clergyman dressed in traditional clothes with a hat and a full beard. Visually, he clearly stands out among fellow panelists as the face of Islam and is addressed as "maulana". The clergymen are trained in an ultra-conservative, religious school of thought and are a very small minority amongst Muslims.

Discussing instant divorce and its support among a certain section of Muslim clergy for the law that allows it, the anchor makes his stand evident early on. The anchor's speech is full of opinions and emotion words, including, but not limited to, the following:

- "Primitive. Fake. False unjust religious practices."
- "[This is the] biggest slap in the face of the likes of All-India Muslim Personal Law Board who have been expecting Indian Muslim women to tolerate triple talaq in 2017. In a secular country like India, horrible practices like this will be put to an end."
- "I'm not going to be politically correct or communally correct. You must accept defeat. Tomorrow this farcical religious argument you have built to squander the rights of women [. . .]."

All three sentences are laden with the lexical framing of Islam as a religion with “primitive” practices that are “unjust” to women. Adjectives like “horrible”, “unjust”, “primitive”, and “archaic” perpetuate racist images of Islam. The metaphor of a “slap in the face” is used to shame and indicate defeat of the “other” (religious Muslims) against a secular India. The belligerent tone employed by the anchor to address the Muslim panelists from the start of the show indicates an already existing conflict between his views and theirs.

The anchor addresses all accusations towards the Muslim maulana (clergyman) and creates a spectacle by demanding explanations for specific instances of misuse of the triple talaq law around the country. He forces those supporting the law to apologize to the Muslim women on TV. The anchor incites and provokes the maulana by saying “Is [he] looking nervous and sheepish tonight?”. This is an implication that the Muslim man stands to lose his power with a change in the law, i.e., the ban on triple talaq. The anchor presupposes a stronghold of power of the Muslim orthodoxy, which he aims to convey to the viewer and, subsequently, to push the viewer to actively thwart it. The flashing ticker text reinforces the message:

- “Join the team that fought for Muslim women’s rights”
- “#REJECTTRIPLETALAQ”

The text urges viewers to join in as agents fighting for Muslim women’s rights, making them an active part of the savior campaign. Twice in the episode, however, the anchor and a supporting panelist note that they are attacking *triple talaq* on the basis that it is not a fundamental doctrine of Islam but has rather been used by Muslim men for centuries to oppress women. Noting this distinction is key, because while lexical framing of Islam as primitive is employed, this distinction reinforces the premise that Muslim women are oppressed by Muslim men.

Episode 2: Triple Talaq BANNED—Celebrations for Indian Women | “The Debate” on Republic TV (22 August 2017)

In this episode, the anchor’s speech was laced with lexical expressions such as “misogynistic”, “archaic”, “backward”, “biased”, “illegal”, and “wrong” for Islam and Muslims—each heavy with the baggage of racism that has shadowed Muslims in India. Noting snippets from the anchor’s speech:

- “Why was being anti-women, pro-Muslim?”
- “Is it a Muslim right to burn your wife alive?”
- “Muslims need to be protected from not having a Uniform Civil Code.”
- “1400-year-old regressive practice of *triple talaq* has been thrown away into the dustbin.”

The meaning produced here and the stress, intonation and word order of the questions presuppose an inherent misogyny in Islam. Further, the anchor creates his own meaning by misquoting the panelists who support *triple talaq* and express that they would resist this potential change in the law as follows:

- “All is not lost, these misogynists say, these sexists, chauvinists say, “There is still some hope we can still crush women. Only we’ll take 100 days to crush women.””

The selection of panelists in this episode is biased, as well. By regularly selecting conservative Muslims who present themselves in a traditional way—men with beards and skullcaps, and women with *burqas* and *niqabs*—they repeatedly portray a stereotypical image of a Muslim that is not representative of the diversity of voices that exist. In a country with 172 million Muslims, each with a different cultural and ethnic background and politics, this stereotyping is a gross mischaracterization.

Navarro (2010, p. 100) says:

Another strategy that accentuated the stereotype of Muslim women as passive and submissive women is that whenever the issue of “women in Islam” is discussed or reported, women are hardly ever given the chance to express their opinions; hence, they are deprived of preferential access to this discourse, a source of power comparable to social resources.

When Muslim women appear on these panels, they are either fully covered in *niqab* or completely Westernized, having shed their Islam. With this pattern, the anchor chooses to perpetuate a specific visual narrative—the oppressed Muslim woman, anonymized by religion, needs saving, and this can only be achieved if she denounces Islam completely; the bearded Muslim man represents ultra-conservative intolerance. In this episode too, this trend is evident. There were no Muslim women on the panel. Muslim men were made to represent women. During the episode, pointing to the clergymen, the anchor says:

- “Are women human beings for you or are they a flock of cattle that you do as you please?”
- “A man can gather all the wives he possibly can and reduce them to domestic help but why can’t a Muslim woman do the same?”
- “Why don’t you give Muslim women the freedom of movement?”

The metaphor of cattle is used to paint a picture of a submissive, passive woman who is objectified as property without much agency. The choice of words in the third question assumes that Muslim women need to be “given freedom”—with the presupposition that men restrict this freedom.

In another episode of “The Debate” on Republic TV (31 December 2017), the anchor accuses one of the clergy members on the panel: “Why are you fighting against the basic rights of Muslim women? Why are you against Muslim women? Why are you against progress?”. His intention to polarize the discussion with hostile speech and rhetorical questions is evident. He does not seek answers, rather, he uses these leading questions to produce the effect of conflict by provoking both the panelists and the audience.

Episode 3: Triple Talaq Petitioner Ishrat Shamed by Pack of Patriarchs | “The Newshour Debate” on Times Now (29 August 2016)

The discussion in this episode was focused on a political rally where a group of Muslim clergymen insulted a petitioner fighting for the ban on *triple talaq*. Taking a cue from this, the anchor uses leading statements, such as the following, to guide the viewers’ opinions:

- “See, this is what she [a Muslim woman] is having to face to stand up for dignity and equality. She was called every conceivable derogatory term that you can think of by these Muslim patriachs.”

Bringing the lady who filed the petition in question on air, he addresses her in a patronizing tone and says:

- “*Bohot sahi keh rahin hain aap. Kijye, aapko support karne wale bohot hai*” [You are saying the right thing. Do it, do it. There are many to support you.]

In this instance, we see how an act of misogyny by a group of men who happen to be Muslim is generalized as one sanctioned by Islam. Metaphors like the following incite the viewer towards anger at such injustices:

- “Doesn’t your blood boil? *Islam iski ijazat kaise deta hai?*” [How does Islam allow this?]

In her observations on Western media, Navarro (2010) mentions that the media gives access to specific types of “Muslim women [who] appear as active sources of information” and calls them “Westernized women”. They are the ones who do not wear veils, almost never belong to an Islamist movement, and provide a contrast to the helpless *niqabi*—the anonymous and passive veiled woman. This oppressed and passive traditional Muslim versus the modern, secular Muslim is often employed theatrically in Indian news. In the following episodes we have politician Shazia Ilmi—an example of a secular Muslim woman—unveiled and progressive, pitted against two traditional Muslim clergymen, both bearded and dressed in traditional attire.

It is noteworthy that when these programs discuss Islam, they do it under a garb of radical secularism by painting conservatives in one stroke. In this episode, they attack conservative politicians

and mullahs in one sentence. The debate is framed as a fight against patriarchy, but upon questioned by a clergyman on why only *triple talaq* is debated on the program and not patriarchal Hindu practices, the anchor responds with a dismissal: “Don’t make it about religion. Make it about dignity equality not about religion.” They frame the debate as Muslims versus (or opposed to) the constitution, versus dignity and equality for all, and, most importantly, versus women. While there is a certain distancing from critiquing all of Islam, their critique of regressive practices enshrined within it is evidently Islamophobic.

Episode 4: Khalid Speaks For ‘Traitor’, Shazia Can’t For “Triple Talaq”?: “The Newshour Debate” on Times Now (1 March 2017)

Episode 5: Government Officially Opposes Triple Talaq: “The Newshour Debate” on Times Now (7 October 2016)

Episode 6: Oppose Triple Talaq 23-Year-Old Nasrin was UNILATERALLY Divorced: “The Newshour Debate” on Times Now (2 November 2016)

In these episodes, the anchor introduces the panel members with strong descriptions, passing judgements on their rationality. Panelists include progressive Muslim women alongside maulanas. The anchor’s speech act is clear in his intonation and mocking stance in Episode 5 as he says, referring to the maulana figure:

- “They are for the regressive practice of *triple talaq*”
- “Viewers, I have a very arrogant man here. Let’s start on a basic premise—men and women are equal.”

In Episode 4, where they pit a good Muslim against a bad Muslim, we see ideological polarization through the use of opinion and emotion words. The anchor says:

- “Why do you [clergymen on the show] get very, very worried when there is a progressive Muslim woman who comes ups and challenges views?”

The anchor mocks and screams at the Muslim representatives and doesn’t let them speak. His tone of voice when speaking to the clergymen is markedly different from his demeanor with other panelists—he snaps and screams. Latching on to an instance of a Muslim panel member insulting Ilmi, he rushes to defend her right to speak:

- “You will not talk to them like that. You treat them like a joke. You will apologize to those women. Take off the mike and leave the show. You either apologize or leave the show. Don’t shamelessly sit. Don’t insult my panelists.”

His speech act here is patronizing and then reprimanding. In this process, he positions himself as the savior of the “good Muslim” woman, standing up for her rights. The anchor is combative, his body language displays aggression as he hunches over the panelist in an attempt to intimidate him, and he forces him to leave the studio. While chaos and argument dominate the scene, he immediately pulls up the other Muslim men on the panel for not reprimanding the erring panelist—creating the semantic spectacle that, evidently, Muslim men do not stand up for Muslim women.

In Episode 6, the anchor puts up another performance of saving the “Westernized Muslim woman” when one of the clergymen comments on her personal appearance. Reminding viewers of the overall plight of the “oppressed” Muslim woman, he quotes the following statistic:

- “48.1% of Muslim women cannot even read or write their names.”

Then he characterizes the clergymen as worried because of the rising influence of “progressive” Muslim women:

- “Aap log pareshan kyun hain? Kyunki aapko pata hai ki Shazia, Saba aur Zeenat Shaukat Ali jaisi auratein samne ayengi” [Why are you people worried? Is it because women like Shazia, Saba and Zeenat Shaukat Ali will come forth?]

Episode 7: Should Muslim Personal Law Be Scrapped? | One India, One Law: “The Newshour Debate” on Times Now (5 February 2016)

Episode 8: Uniform Civil Code | Personal Law above Constitution of India: “The Newshour Debate” on Times Now (6 November 2015)

In a similar vein, these two episodes, through their choice of panelists and lexical framing of arguments, frame a view of Islam as discriminatory towards Muslim women as follows:

- “The most archaic law. Most archaic Islamic law, politicians under the garb of secularism have nothing to question it”
- “Islam is discriminating against Muslim women”
- “What Muslim women are enduring in the name of religion”
- “Regressive practices as a result of Muslim personal law. How can that be supported?”

Episode 7 ends with the anchor making a powerful hand gesture of trashing something and dismissing with a hand flick. “Throw them out, these Muslim personal laws,” he says, as the ticker bleeps with photos of the flags of Muslim countries and text reading: “They reformed talaq laws, why can’t we?”. The panel for Episode 8 features two female news correspondents and six male panelists. Here, too, representation is skewed.

Juxtaposing this with how India Today reports this issue is interesting. The headline reads neutrally: “Triple talaq ban: What’s bad in theology is bad in law?”⁴ Amongst the panelists are two legal experts. Also on air is one of the first women who filed a petition against the practice of *triple talaq*—a Muslim woman without a *hijab*—and Salman Khurshid, a prominent moderate Muslim voice. The anchor does not specifically target Islam through the conversation, hailing the *triple talaq* ban as a victory for gender justice and not one against Islam:

- “Massive victory for gender justice—supreme court strikes down *triple talaq* in landmark judgment”

Through the show, the anchor and panelists highlight that *triple talaq* is against Quran and violates Islamic law. The debate isn’t seen as a fight between Muslim women and Islam, but rather as a conflict of “fundamental rights versus personal law.”

On NDTV 24x7, the headline for this issue also reads in a similar vein: “Muslim Body Dares Government: Personal Law vs Rights?”⁵. Calling out biased reporting and domination of the discourse by the clergy, the anchor questions the representation of the stakeholders:

- “Who is the one who speaks for Muslim women in India? Is it the women’s groups backed by progressive men or is it these community leaders who see every suggestion for change as an attack on the Muslim community?”

While Republic TV and Times Now ignore all other social factors besides a victim’s Muslim identity, NDTV 24x7 and India Today explore alternative views instead of employing the savior trope. In the episode, “Banning Triple Talaq: Votebank Politics Or Righting A Wrong?”⁶ the ticker reads:

- “It is about gender justice, equality”

⁴ India Today—“People’s Court”, 22 August 2017.

⁵ NDTV 24x7—“Left Right and Center”, 13 October 2016.

⁶ NDTV 24x7—“Left, Right and Center”, 6 February 2017.

- “20 countries abolish *triple talaq*”
- “*Triple talaq* unconstitutional”
- “Using *triple talaq* as a poll plank BJP”

There is a significant difference in their reporting style, which shows objectivity and nuance, as well as a healthy skepticism and caution to not fall for racist stereotypes.

4.2. Trope 2: *The Hindu Woman Needs to Be Saved from the Muslim Man*

Explaining how Muslims are viewed by Hindus in India, psychologist Sudhir Kakar says that in the mind of Hindus, Muslims are “sexual predators” and the Muslim male is attributed a “physical ferocity and rampant sexuality” (Kakar 2007). From his interviews of men, it is clear that they thought that Muslim men were “obsessed with sex and [forced] themselves upon our women”.

This trope outlined by Kakar is reinforced within the shows analyzed here. Arguments for saving Hindu/non-Muslim women from Muslim men—portrayed as the rabid other—are made. Muslim men are accused of charming these women through the promises of love as well as through hypnosis. The rapid popularity of the conspiracy theory of *love jihad* can be attributed to the extent of such framing of its coverage in the mass media. Linking it to terrorism through the use of the word “jihad”, it perpetuates the global stereotype of the violent Muslim, thereby making it more believable.

Episode 9: Arnab Goswami EXPOSES Love Jihad | “The Debate” on Republic TV (16 August 2017)

Episode 10: CAUGHT: ISIS Converting Hindu Girls for 5 Lakh Rupees | “The Newshour Debate” on Times Now (23 June 2017)

These episodes are rife with drama. Both are framed as exposés, with the screen behind the anchor flashing and moving, creating an atmosphere of agitation. The background music adds to the environment of agitation. The panel invited to discuss the *love jihad* issue consists of men only, with not a single woman—reinforcing Navarro (2010) claim that the passive Muslim woman stereotype stems from this access, or the lack of it, to representation in this discourse. Unsurprisingly, no reference to women’s freedom to choose was made in the debate, which makes the bias in the selection of panelists evident.

Episode 10 has a hunt-and-chase sequence much like the earlier one. The text on screen is bright red and a strike through the text—a slashing of bright red words—creates an imagery of violence. The episode shows an aerial view of a neighborhood which is zoomed in on and then a car rushing through the streets, leading the viewer to dingy locations with the ticker flashing with the lines “academy of terror tutorial” and in red, bold letters “young minds poisoned here” and “Radicalization Hub exposed”. While the actual footage and testimony did not prove any allegations of a forceful conversion racket to a careful viewer, the connotation is evident. The panelist accuses “the caliphate” of being desperate for new conversions, with the connotation that this trend stems from a global Islam. She claims to produce evidence of a rate card for conversions of different non-Muslim women, alleging that the prices to convert different types of non-Muslim women were different. This was later proved to be a doctored image, now used as WhatsApp propaganda which can be appropriately termed “fake news”⁷. The channel ran this insidious story without fact-checking and loaded it with false allegations against Muslims.

Editorial control over the panelists’ speech cannot be exerted once live on air, but the anchor can question the veracity of the statements and claims made by the panelists. Twice in these episodes, the anchors ignored obvious farcical claims by panelists. In the first instance, the anchor eggs on a panelist to make the preposterous claim that Muslim men are allowed to have sex slaves who are non-Muslims. The anchor does not cross-question the panelist’s claim, but rather signals her approval

⁷ Source: <https://www.altnews.in/times-now-runs-prime-time-story-based-7-year-old-photoshopped-image/>.

with the exclamation, “That’s right!”. In Episode 9, a guest made the following racist remark, but the anchor fully validated his line of thought:

- “When jihadis are going for these girls they do not go with their beards and skull caps and ‘*bade bhai ka kurta*’ and ‘*chote bhai ka pyjama*’ [elder brother’s shirt and younger brother’s pants], they go as perfect—as you and me.”

In this stark case of othering of Muslims, the anchor alludes to the common stereotype that Muslims reproduce with an agenda; they have many children to increase the population of their race. To further dramatize this, the anchor interjects, screaming, “Shame! Shame! Shame!”. This is a powerful speech act that he uses to malign the Muslim clergy.

The first questions asked by the anchor at the opening of Episode 9 are evident of his stance on *love jihad*. His lexical framing creates the impression that conversions are not consensual but forceful or deceitful:

- “Are Hindu women, or non-Muslim women being forcefully converted, radicalized and a fraction of them pushed towards terrorist groups?”
- “Forcefully converted. Lure them into marriage. Pack them off to the Middle East.”

The anchor repeats these sentences multiple times, and the text “lured, converted and packed off to Syria” flashes on the ticker repeatedly, reinforcing the semantic framing of this conspiracy behind conversions. “Lured” is a word that suggests evil design that can be stopped through conscientious intervention. The episode thus encourages viewers to be active participants, or active thinkers, against this “ploy” of the Muslims. “Packing them off” is a metaphor which suggests the lack of agency and consent of the women involved. Further, the anchor says:

- “Those who survived speak up.”
- “*Love jihad* is for real and there is a pattern to lure Hindu women to marry Muslim men”
- “Forced, lured, enticed, at conversion centers.”

In all these there is the presupposition that *love jihad* is a real phenomenon and that the women here are victims/survivors who were lacking agency and independent decision making. During this conversation, global Islamophobic superstructures come into play. Mentions of the Middle East, Jihad, Yemen, and Syria play into the primed minds of the viewers, striking the fear of global terrorism. De Saussure’s (1966) theory suggests that these words are signs that point to signifiers of global terrorism emanating from the Middle East. The word “racket” is used to a similar effect. All these expressions dispatch a very specific, targeted meaning at viewers—one that links Islam to terrorism, as evident in the anchor’s speech:

- “Lured, converted and packed off to Syria”
- “How is this innocent conversion? This is illegal conversion with a jihadi agenda.”

This again is a call for action by “othering”. By insinuating that these conversion centers “brainwash” women and preach hatred of Hindus, the anchor’s speech is creating fear in the minds of viewers, which may translate to suspicion in personal lives:

- “Brainwashed! Preaching hate on Hindu gods and Hinduism.”
- “Something dangerous is going on and we need to investigate it.”

Elaborating on the story behind a woman’s conversion, the anchor says:

- “She accidentally said ‘Inshallah’ at the workplace and she was hounded, lured and consumed by these *love jihadis* to convert to Islam to be sent to Yemen. Is that consensual conversion or forced conversion?”

The meaning signified in this sentence is that of wily Muslim men waiting to pounce on any sign of weakness or sympathy from Hindu women towards Islam in order to convert them. The lexical framing of the ticker text enhances this implication. Usage of the word “innocent” for the women involved presumes their passivity and naivety:

- “Lured, thrown into illegal conversion centers”
- “How innocent women were lured and converted”
- “Exposed *love jihad*-terror link”

There is little evidence of terror links but the connection is presupposed in the very use of the term *love jihad*. The use of the metaphor “thrown” also suggests the women’s reluctance and cautions vigilance.

Episode 11: Why Is India in Denial On “Love Jihad”? | “The Debate” with Arnab Goswami on Republic TV (31 October 2017)

Episode 12: Love Jihad Case: ‘Consent’ Is Prime, But Is It ‘Independent’? | “The Newshour Debate” on Times Now (27 November 2017)

Episode 13: Akhila to Hadiya Via ‘Hypnosis’? | “The Newshour Debate” on Times Now (11 March 2018)

The case of Hadiya, a Hindu woman who converted to Islam to marry her Muslim lover, became national news for months. Hadiya’s parents claimed she was abducted and indoctrinated, while Hadiya herself asserted her free consent as an adult. While there was no evidence of forced conversion, the media trials were regular on these channels. The channels’ stance was evident in how the issue was reported. Lexical expressions like “religious conversion racket” and words like “indoctrination” dominated the speech of the anchors, as demonstrated by the following example:

- “Hadiya’s father has been fighting a battle against psychological kidnapping.”
- “She confesses she was taught to cut head, ear, eye and nose.”

All this while the ticker flashes the text below:

- “Love or psychological kidnapping?”
- “Was told real Islam is in Saudi and Yemen”
- “Incited hate against Hindus”
- “Taught the idea of jihad and darul Islam”
- “Personal affair vs larger plot”

Alleging conspiracy, including the systematic conversion of women to Islam through hypnosis, was a key feature of these three episodes. The anchor clearly states the inability of the woman in question, Hadiya, to make autonomous decisions. Reinforcing this view with the vocabulary of coercion, consent, indoctrination, brainwashing, etc., and peppering it with allegations of Stockholm syndrome, make the case for this being a coercive marriage even stronger. Following are some examples of anchors’ incendiary speech:

- “Not everything that Hadiya says can be taken at face value”
- “Where does coercion stop and consent begin”
- “She was getting indoctrinated or brainwashed”
- “Look at the story of Patty Hurst (. . .) see what the case of Stockholm syndrome can actually mean and see whether there are similarities or not.”

All this while the ticker is flashing the following text, priming the audience to interpret the debate in the way that leads them to believe that this was a forced conversion:

- “Confinement and coercion”
- “NIA Exposes hypnotic conversion”
- “Who runs conversion centers?”
- “Hadiya paraded for photo op”
- “Intensive hypnotic counseling”
- “PFI uses hate to hypnotize”

Such reporting not only misleads but also creates panic. In contrast, NDTV 24x7, when reporting on this issue, treats the term *love jihad* with a healthy skepticism and questions its origins. In the episode titled, “Is ‘Love Jihad’ Just A Political Campaign?”⁸ the anchor says:

- “What is actually *love jihad*? I actually find *love jihad* most offensive. It’s crass, derogatory.”

Reporting on the specific case, the ticker shows the following text, proving that it is possible to report without targeting Muslims and Islam:

- “Kerala Interfaith Marriage”
- “SC: Girls consent is of prime importance”
- “*Love Jihad* a political gimmick”

Not only does the channel report in a balanced manner, it also questions the potential origins of the conspiracy theory of *love jihad*, rather than accepting it *prima facie*. How the media views and frames the issue is essential to how things are interpreted by the public. In December 2017, around the time the issue of *love jihad* was widely debated in the media, a Hindu man in Rajasthan hacked to death a Muslim laborer while filming a video which would go on to become viral. He used *love jihad* as a justification⁹ for killing the man (a claim that was later proven to be a lie), confident that he would find public endorsement for his cause.

4.3. Trope 3: *Us vs. Them—Muslims as Not Fully Indian*

Studies have discussed how in India, the category of “Muslim” has been reproduced as a religious category, and has been rendered incompatible with “being Indian” (Mehdi 2017). Mehdi (2017) extends Said’s Orientalism thesis (1978) to “explain how in the secular nation state of India, the phobia isn’t of Islam; rather, it is of religion. The religion is identified as Islam.”. She discusses how “national identity and religious identity are at loggerheads”, making it impossible for Muslims in India to be Indian. Through the process that Van Dijk calls the creation of “the We-Groups and the others” (Van Dijk 1998), we examine how the media plays a role in positioning Muslims as the dangerous “other”.

Evidence for this can be found in the episodes on *love jihad* discussed above (episodes 9–13). Flashing ticker messages display the following text”

- “National Song, national anthem insulted”
- “Incited hate against Hindus”
- “Wanted me to leave the country”
- “Taught jihad”

The connotations here are not only of forced conversion into Islam, but also that Muslims are taught to hate India. The ticker framing signifies that the girl in question intended to leave the country and denounce her Indian identity and embrace a Muslim one.

⁸ NDTV 24x7—Left, Right and Center, 30 October 2017.

⁹ Source: <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/shambhu-lal-regar-gave-afrajuls-murder-a-love-jihad-angle-to-hide-his-affair-sta/306866>.

Episode 10: CAUGHT: ISIS Converting Hindu Girls for 5 Lakh Rupees | “The Newshour Debate” on Times Now (23 Jun 2017)

This episode has been discussed earlier. The anchor openly posits the Muslim as the other and makes an “us-them” distinction between Muslims and Hindus when she says:

- “Do you think our faith is for sale? Us Hindus?”
- “Are we really going to allow this in our country?”

Terming this phenomenon as “rabid Islamism” and a part for “global jihad”, she also uses the term “trafficking” to describe the conversion. Meanwhile, the ticker flashes with the following text, indicating the Hindus as targets of this conversion campaign:

- “Caught: ISIS Converting Hindus”
- “Survivor Recalls Nightmare”
- “My daughter was told to learn to Quran”
- “My daughter was told to learn Syrian”

It is important to note that the channel showed “Syrian” as a language on screen, without fact checking. The links with ISIS, too, remain unsubstantiated, but the ticker claims the following:

- “Radicalization hub exposed”
- “Inside ISIS conversion zone”
- “Young minds poisoned here”

In this episode, the anchor panders to global Islamophobia by using feared buzzwords, such as “caliphate”, “jihad”, and “sharia”, when talking of conversions. These place Indian Muslims within the broader canvas of the global fear of Islam. Again, citing emotive terms and metaphors, she calls the Muslim men who are involved with these women, “ISIS terror recruiters”:

- “ISIS terror recruiters befriend Hindu girls.”

Episode 14: BAN “Nikah” Sex Racket in Hyderabad | “The Debate” with Arnab Goswami on Republic TV (20 September 2017)

The semiotics of this episode are tilted in the favor of the anchor’s argument, against the Muslim men. I use this episode because it ties in with the Muslim personal law debate we have seen arise in *triple talaq* discussions. The male panelists, much like on the other shows, appear with beards and caps. One panelist wears a keffiyeh—a garment alien to India and associated with Palestinian Arabs. This visual marker strongly suggests the correspondence of Muslims with Arabs in the global Islamophobia context, as described earlier. The anchor doesn’t shy from such stereotypes and racist imagery.

Here too, while discussing a possible sex racket, the anchor frames the issue as if the Muslims sanction it through a specific loophole in the Muslim personal law. The persons actually responsible are not questioned. While seeking defense from the clergymen the anchor pauses to catch the clergyman’s use of the words “Islamic law” and screams:

- “Don’t you ever use the word Islamic Law in the context of India, stop dreaming about it.”
- “This gentleman is unhappy in India, he wants the laws to be changed.”
- “I don’t care about your Muslim personal law. No Muslim personal law.”

The presupposition here is that the clergyman wants Islamic law over Indian law. In the eyes of the anchor and now the viewer, the keepers of the Islamic religion, and consequently Islam itself, are fundamentally opposed to India.

The episode then goes on, with the anchor spewing further racist epithets:

- “*Boodhe, gande, Arab sheikh—ameer, sexually frustrated, perverted, Arab sheikh*” [Old, dirty, Arab sheikhs—rich, sexually frustrated, perverted, Arab Sheikhs.].

He provokes the clergymen to defend this strawman in order to alienate them from the Indian audience:

- “Is it bothering you if I say something about Arab sheikhs. Are you an Arab sheikh? Why do you have a problem? Are you getting tickled if I say something about them?”

Through these insinuations, the anchor primes the audience to further racism and Islamophobia

- “*Boodhe, gande, Arab sheikh. They come from Islamic states. They take them [Indian women] to Saudi and Oman where Islamic law works.*”
- “To hell with people like you who say we want Islamic law in this country. Islamic personal law has allowed selling off of little children for short term sex-packages to Arab men.”

This allegation not only others the Muslims in India from secular Indians but also paints a picture of the barbaric Arab with whom the Indian Muslim is linked.

- “This is a secular country. Say you want sharia, then you go to one of those Arabic countries where you get a legal sanction to flog women in public. You go join the ISIS where sex slavery is legal. Go to Syria.”

The anchor brings back the argument to a topic of current relevance where he now associates Islamic personal law—a topic under contention by Indian judiciary:

- “I have a huge problem with Islamic personal law and I have a problem with those that don’t have a problem with Islamic personal law because it is this Islamic personal law that has sanctioned the selling off of little girls to old and perverted Arab men.”

Here he reinforces the picture of Muslim men who are sex-obsessed and prey on younger women. In this complex process of representation through association, the anchors and editors try to build social consensus for an issue—abolishing Muslim personal law in India—through the construction of dominant images of sexual predation and barbarism, which are racist.

This toxic racism and portrayal of Muslims as predatory others is one of the reasons of mob violence against Muslims. There is deep suspicion amongst Hindus against Muslims and their intentions. Linking Arabs with Indian Muslims and toxic racism against Arabs makes this even more dangerous. In a case of mob lynching in July 2018, the murderers justified their actions by saying, “Did you see the Qatari’s face? His big beard?”¹⁰ The fact that the man looked visibly Muslim and Arab caused his death at the hand of a suspicious mob.

5. Hashtags: What Is Guiding the Conversation Flow?

Hashtags are a way to sort and classify individual tweets on Twitter by topic. It uses the “#” symbol in front of a string of text that acts as an index. All conversations around a certain hashtag are thus searchable and accessible. Hashtags are often used to mobilize conversation around a particular topic and generate the impression of a popular opinion. Shows from both channels that were analyzed—Republic TV and Times Now—use hashtags during their show to engage live viewers, and what we see is a call for action and a priming of digital public opinion.

Each of the hashtags mentioned below has several hundred to a few thousand associated tweets. This means that thousands of viewers were watching and engaging with the content in real time.

¹⁰ Source: <https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/did-you-see-his-long-beard-he-looks-like-a-terrorist-says-one-of-the-villagers-in-bidar-lynching-case-350303.html>.

The channels encourage this practice of live-tweeting and participating in the larger public discourse. Each time someone tweets, they must type out the text in the hashtag for their voice to be heard. In this, the channels control and incite public discourse by setting the agenda and guiding the conversation by the adjectives and predicates of the hashtag.

The hashtags associated with *love jihad* are replete with hostile verbs—e.g., “ban”, “nailed”, and “fight”—and they also cite global Islamophobia speech registers, such as the “caliphate”, to invoke a sense of urgency and wrongdoing towards the Hindu.

Love Jihad Hashtags:

- Lovejihadtapes
- bannikahsex
- lovejihadfight
- CaliphateConvertsHindu
- Lovejihadnailed
- Lovejehadnexustapes
- Hadiyaconversiontwist
- Hadiyapfitrophy

Hashtags for *triple talaq* are similarly wedded to verbs like “reject”, “over”, “oppose”, and so on. The emphasis is on exhorting Indians to be united as one country under one law, as the Muslims and their laws are positioned as evident threats to it. Even the hashtag #MullahsShameIshrat is framed in such a way that gives the impression that all mullahs oppose her.

Triple Talaq Hashtags:

- Rejecttripletalaq
- Tripletalaqover
- Tripletalaqbillpassed
- TripleTalaqSabotage
- mullahsShameIshrat
- iOpposetripletalq
- indiawithaneesa
- onecountryonecode
- oneindiaonelaw

The physical act of tweeting one’s opinion involves typing out the hashtag. That act in itself may reinforce this media-fed thought process as one’s own. It is also likely that only those who condone the channel’s opinion will tweet to be heard, polarizing all conversation with a specific opinion. Republic TV appeals to viewers to come out with their stance, all this while tweeting incendiary statements from the show and insinuating likeminded people to engage.

A quick glance at the conversations using tweets with these hashtags confirms that few, if any, tweet with nuanced opinions employing them. The opinions generated by the show are not only one-sided and polarized but also documented online for posterity long after the show is off air.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Media trials and, most importantly, biased media debates, create widespread, one-sided notions about current affairs. I began the paper with common notions of what a Muslim has looked like over the years—the media trials have reinforced that belief. Through these hours of prime-time news debates, the Muslim has been barbaric, misogynistic, regressive, anti-national, not-Indian, Arab, a terrorist, and the other. While it must be acknowledged that for the issues discussed here the perpetrators are Muslim and claim to derive sanction from Islam, it must also be noted that instead of holding the

individual perpetrators accountable, the media starts a trial against all Muslims and Islam. They use global superstructures to play into these tropes and, through repetition, reinforce the stereotypes. That Muslim men oppress Muslim women or that Hindu women need to be cautious of a Muslim man's intentions to lure and convert her, or that Muslims aren't Indian, that they are the "other" to an ideal Hindu Indian—all create buckets for Indian Muslims to fill. The hostile anchors, the selection of clergymen for misrepresented panels, and visual and aural cues while on-air, all fuel resentment. When the adjectives used to describe Muslims include "jihadi", "ISIS recruiters", and "patriarchs", this is the view that is reinforced in the minds of audience members. Not only does such careless journalism miss the diversity within Islam, but it also leaves ordinary Muslims open to racist discrimination—with very material consequences. It is essential here to reiterate to that these programs select headlines from the news of the day to highlight and open debate—the recurrence of issues like *love jihad* and *triple talaq* is striking in terms of the sheer number of episodes devoted to the two. The rampant use of WhatsApp to spread fake news is one example of this. The reason why lynch mobs find it so easy to believe and kill at the behest of an unverified message forwarded via WhatsApp is a systemic racism against Muslims that is slowly being normalized by the mass media.

In both these cases, of *triple talaq* and *love jihad*, we see provocative racist imagery that stays with the audience long after the news cycle dies. Origins of the term *love jihad* are unknown but its rise to common parlance is solely a factor of its use in the media¹¹, especially TV news. Similarly, anti-Muslim fake news, circulating on WhatsApp and other mediums and creating mass panic, finds more credence because similar conspiracy theories have been reported and highlighted by the news media. A case in point is the rate card for conversion of non-Muslim women that was discussed in an episode—an image later proved to be doctored and fake.

Much speculation suggests that such irresponsible journalism finds sanction through political motivations—with the rise of a right-wing Hindu nationalist government that seeks to divide voters on communal lines. NDTV 24x7 and India Today have also highlighted this. The recent Cobrapost sting operation ([The Wire 2018](#)) confirms what many have suspected all along: media houses in India manipulate news, and the way it is investigated and presented, as a direct result of funding. In Cobrapost's secretly recorded conversations, executives have been caught on tape saying that journalists "will refrain from going deep negative, but they can't ignore a news"¹² in exchange for an exorbitant sum of money from a group with obvious political affiliations.

Understanding this in the context of sponsors, Said says, "(imagery in mass media) is presided over by the great power establishments—the oil companies, the mammoth corporations and multinationals, the defense and intelligence communities, the executive branch of the government" ([Said 1981](#)). Studying ownership patterns of these channels is telling. Republic TV is owned by Goswami, along with Rajeev Chandrasekhar, a member of the ruling party (BJP), while Times Now is part of the Times group owned by Bennet and Coleman. While the former has affiliations with the BJP stated clearly, the other is also a conservative right-wing channel with undisclosed affiliations. NDTV 24x7 and India Today are both owned by journalists and individuals. Taking a stance and covering certain issues responsibly as a journalist is an objective duty. While displaying affiliations is not desirable, what is most reprehensible is this toxic racism.

Many viewers I spoke to dismiss these programs as infotainment. Research ([Pandalai 2013](#)) suggests that while policymakers do consume television media, they take the written word far more seriously. TV news, with its competition and fight for viewership, appears flippant and shallow—"more entertainment than news". This knowledge, however, does not change the fact that, even if for

¹¹ Source: <https://www.news18.com/news/politics/parties-wash-their-hands-off-love-jihad-controversy-say-its-not-a-political-issue-but-a-media-creation-710740.html>.

¹² The Cobrapost sting files can be found here: <https://www.cobrapost.com/blog/Operation-136-Part-1/1009> and the full story on the operation can be read on The Wire here: <https://thewire.in/media/cobrapost-sting-big-media-houses-say-yes-to-hindutva-black-money-paid-news>.

entertainment, this media is being consumed voraciously: together these channels record 2 million impressions a week. Many of these impressions insinuating racism indirectly cause violence and killings. In a recent case of lynching, a man was killed because he looked like a terrorist owing to his long beard.¹³ Another was lynched as revenge for *love jihad*.¹⁴ While the impact of TV news on the minds of the murderers is not proven, the fact that stereotypes and imagery stays for recall, even in the minds of rational and informed audiences, is frightening.

While my analysis is limited to these select topics and media, it is also a first step to initiate a wider study, one that goes past the limitations of manually watching and transcribing hundreds of hours of TV footage. Artificial intelligence and voice-activated natural language understanding tools could be useful in analyzing the same content on a large-scale. Moreover, I have only studied two channels within the English language media landscape. The discourse in Hindi and other regional languages would be a useful subject of study, as these channels have much higher viewership. Further, it would also be useful to analyze the impact of the conversations sparked by such coverage. Drawing out cause-and-effect relationships between the racist broadcasts to mob violence is possible when the data spans a longer duration of time and is not anecdotal, as presented here. Artificial intelligence tools could help track public sentiment and the impact of these conversations on social media with a certain degree of accuracy.

The first step is to “expose and deconstruct the work of representation which the stereotypes are doing” (Hall 1997; Jhally 1997) in order to be able to address it further. This is what I have attempted here. The next step would be to establish correlation and causation between this and actual acts of violence. I have tried to sketch the how for this question and hope that it opens up questions of further research. My proposal for it would be twofold: first to call for a wider discourse analysis of Hindi and English media in India and, second, to assess its impact by linking audience receptiveness to these shows to instances of racial prejudice and crime.

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Appendix A. List of Headlines

NDTV 24x7—“Left, Right and Centre”

1. From Attacks on Muslims to Christmas: No Country for Minorities?
2. Tough Talaq Law: Will It Empower Women?
3. Top Court Sends Hadiya to College
4. Triple Talaq Banned: One Step Closer to Uniform Civil Code?
5. India’s Obsession with Cow: Are We Losing Sight of Real Issues?
6. Banning Triple Talaq: Votebank Politics or Righting a Wrong?
7. Muslim Body Dares Government: Personal Law vs. Rights?
8. From Haji Ali to Shani Temple: Shouldn’t Women Have Equal Rights?
9. Does India Need a Uniform Civil Code?

India Today—“The People’s Court”

1. Kasganj violence: No punishment for communal Katiyar?
2. What really happened in Kasganj? BJP hints conspiracy

¹³ Source: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-killings/he-looked-like-a-terrorist-how-a-drive-in-rural-india-ended-in-a-mob-attack-and-a-lynching-idUSKBN1KJ09R>.

¹⁴ Source: <https://www.firstpost.com/india/a-year-after-lynching-of-man-in-bulandshahr-over-love-jihad-issue-victims-family-members-live-like-refugees-4501227.html>.

3. Congress questions BJP's hypocrisy on beef: Janeyu in Gujarat, beef in Karnataka?
4. First talaq then mehram: Fight for rights or demonising Muslims?
5. Why are patriarchs blocking Triple Talaq Bill?
6. Love or Love Jihad in Hadiya case: Can consent have exceptions?
7. Operation Conversion Factory: Islamic State a reality in Kerala?
8. Zainaba exclusive: Love jihad an RSS-BJP bogey to polarise votes?
9. Kerala love jihad 'victim' Hadiya first time on camera: Forced conversion or choice?
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