

Identifying Themes of Right-Wing Extremism in Hindutva Discourse on Twitter

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Extended Abstract

Introduction – Hindutva (‘Hinduness’) is the core ideology of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – the present ruling party in India – and according to this ideology, Hindu identity is a combination of sacred territory, language, and race. Researchers to date have categorized Hindutva as religious nationalism instead of ethnonationalism and this is the main contributing factor for the continued absence of Hindutva from Right-Wing Extremism (RWE) literature. Against that trend and building on Leidig’s (2020) argument, we advocate that discourse on RWE, as a global problem, should include Hindutva as an ideology of RWE, for it indeed has all of RWE’s key features.

To uncover the extremist identity of Hindutva, we performed network analysis to identify features and themes of RWE in Hindu nationalist’s Twitter discourse, along with a toxicity analysis to determine the linguistic features of those themes. Our analyses were performed with 15 million tweets from users who liked and shared the tweets posted by Hindu nationalist leaders and organizations. We tried to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Does the Hindutva discourse on Twitter consist prominent/essential features associated with right-wing extremist ideology?

RQ2: Are there any differences in toxic behavior between Hindi and English-speaking Hindutva supporting Twitter users?

Method – To observe the broad discourse on Hindutva among ordinary people on Twitter instead of only influencers and organizations, we first curated a list of 10 Twitter accounts (i.e., “seed accounts”) of influential extreme-right individuals and organizations in India. We included extreme-right individuals, organizations, and media in our seed account list. We selected these seed accounts based on their extreme-right views, the sphere of influence (either in the virtual or real world), and past actions. All seed accounts exhibit radical views, frequently expressed hate against Muslims, and a sense of Hindu superiority. Next, we identified the Twitter accounts of 200 users who had liked and retweeted the most recent 200 posts from the seed accounts, which yielded 19,440 accounts. Last, we collected the 900 most recent tweets and retweets from each of the 19,440 accounts, which gave us 14.99 million tweets and retweets.

To identify essential features of RWE in Hindutva discourse (RQ1), we first created a co-occurrence network of hashtags that occurred at least 10 times – 44,470. Then to identify the topics of discussion, we applied the Louvain community detection method (Blondel, Guillaume, Lambiotte, and Lefebvre, 2008). As a result, we identified 2,804 clusters of hashtags, 45 of which contained at least 10 hashtags. For each of those clusters, we ranked the hashtags according to their descriptiveness (i.e., centrality in the cluster). To investigate the difference in toxicity in Hindi and English tweets (RQ2), we used Google’s Perspective API via Communalytic.

Results – Although the discourse on RWE consists of several features, four are the most common: a) exclusionary nationalism, b) conspiracy theories, c) violence and hate against minorities, and d) anti-democratic sentiment. If those features are present in the Indian right-wing discourse – Hindutva – then we can conclude that Hindutva should be categorized as an ideology of RWE. To detect the mentioned features, we constructed a co-occurrence network of hashtags with at least 10 occurrences in our data (Fig. 1). The resulting network shows the presence of the topic of Hindu Rashtra (i.e., exclusionary nationalism) – #hindu, #hindurashtra, #hindutva, #islamicterrorism, #hindugenocide; the Delhi riots and anti-feminism (i.e., violence and hate against oppressed groups) – #hindulivesmatter, #bulldozer, #hindusunderattack, #mentoo, #golddigger, #feminazi, #toxicfeminism; love jihad (i.e., conspiracy theories) – #lovejihad, #groomingjihad, #upsc_jihad, #educationjihad; and the discrediting of protests against India’s Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) (i.e., anti-democratic sentiment) – #caa, #minority_appeasement, #beefexportban, #nrc, #ucc, #populationcontrol.

For toxicity analysis, we obtained the 10 most central hashtags in clusters related to RWE features and then filtered all the tweets corresponding to the identified hashtags for each cluster. In this way, we extracted 5,478 English and 3,370 Hindi tweets. We compared toxicity in English and Hindi-language tweets for each feature of RWE by using the Mann-Whitney U test with Bonferroni correction. Figure 2 shows that for the features of conspiracy theories and violence & hate, the results were significant, meaning that Hindi-language tweets in the category were more toxic than those in English. For the feature of anti-democratic sentiment, it is difficult to provide a meaningful explanation because there are very few tweets in English in that category. Finally, in the category of exclusionary nationalism, both English and Hindi-language tweets showed a similar level of toxicity, suggesting a similar linguistic behavior.

Discussion – Right-wing extremism is on the rise around the world and the success of political parties with extreme right ideology in electoral democracy is a major cause of concern for liberal democratic political structure. India, as the world’s largest democracy, is ruled by a Hindu nationalist party whose core ideology – Hindutva – is an RWE ideology, as we have shown by analyzing Twitter data. However, due to the lack of focus on Hindutva by RWE scholars, the categorization of Hindutva as an ideology of RWE, remained elusive. In the meantime, India, under the rule of BJP, is becoming an illiberal democracy – in Christophe Jaffrelot’s words, an “ethnic democracy” – in which Muslims are treated as second-class citizens (Jaffrelot, 2021). Against that background, it is crucial to study Hindutva from the RWE perspective, for it stands to not only bring global awareness about the ideology but also diversify the existing narrative about RWE and, in turn, make it global instead of Eurocentric. In our future research, we would try to analyze 1) how different social media platforms are being used by Hindutva supporters to propagate their ideology, and 2) how similar or different Indian right-wing extremism is from what is found in the US or the European countries.

References

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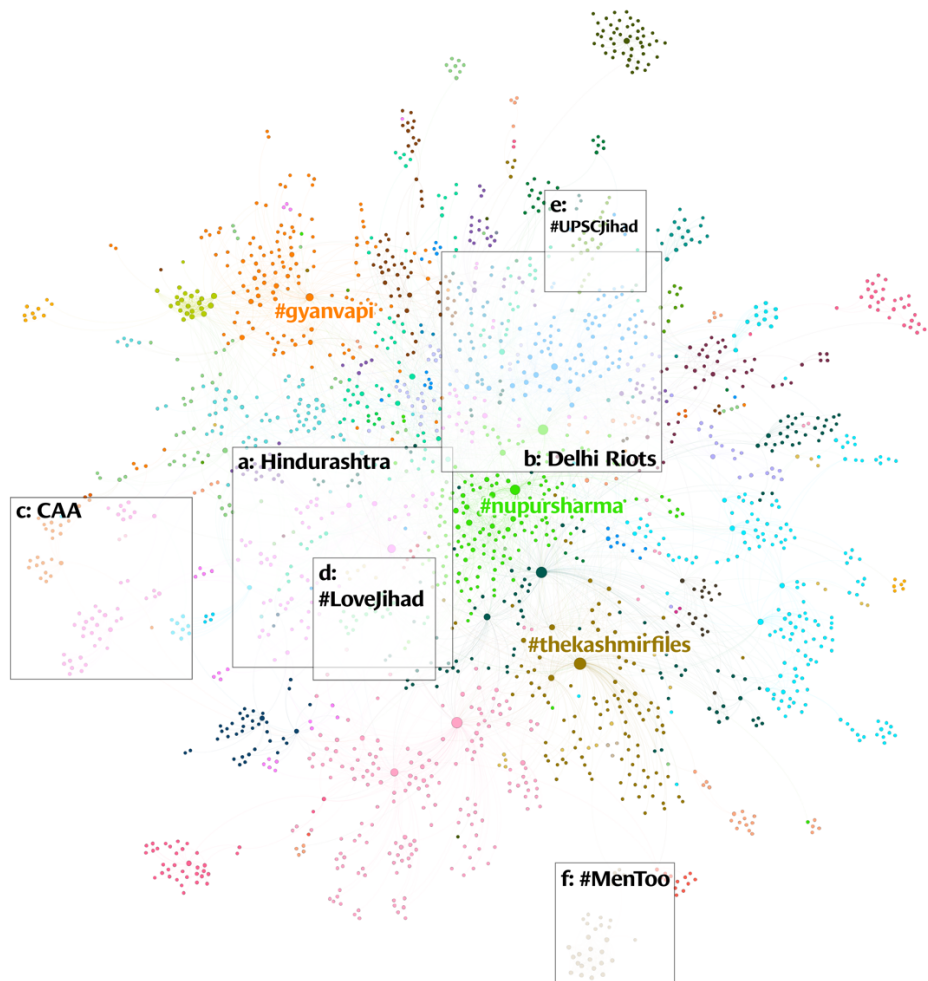


Figure 1. Hashtag co-occurrence network, with clusters in colors following the Louvain method, node size according to Page rank, and ForceAtlas 2 layout

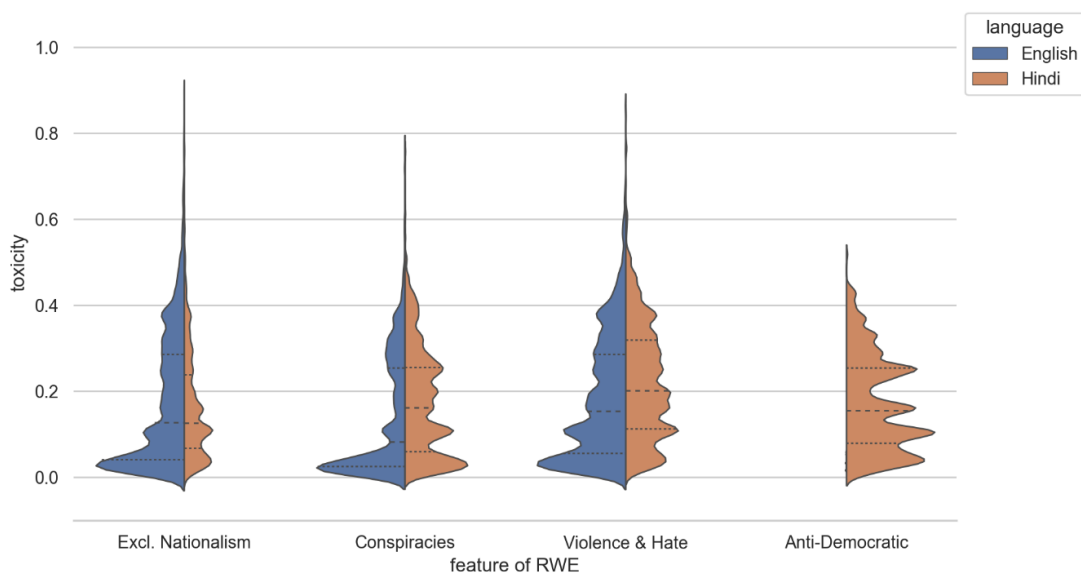


Figure 2. Distribution of toxicity per feature of RWE in Hindutva Discourse