

THE POLITICIZATION OF HATE SPEECH BY MEDIA: INFLUENCING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS FOR MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

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Abstract

Hate speech has evolved from a form of personal prejudice to a form of political propaganda that is intended to manipulate public opinion, particularly in the case of migrants and refugees. In recent years, both mainstream and digital media have emerged as influential channels for disseminating xenophobic and fear-driven narratives that depict migrants as potential security threats or economic burdens. This study rigorously analyses the mechanisms through which political figures and interest organizations manipulate through media narratives to shape and legitimize anti-migrant rhetoric, thereby impacting public opinion and legislative results. This study employs qualitative and comparative analysis to examine cases including the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and India, as well as anti-immigrant campaigns in Europe and the United States. The research highlights the manner in which algorithmic amplification on social media exacerbates polarization, converting hate speech into a nuanced instrument of political control. Examination of global legal structures and judicial precedents reveals deficiencies that allow for the continuation of such politicization. The paper emphasizes that hate speech propagated by media undermines democratic principles and recommends enhanced accountability within media, the promotion of ethical journalism, and international collaboration to address hostility and restore empathy in narratives related to migrants and refugees.

Keywords: Hate speech, Media framing, Migrants, Political discourse, Public perceptions, Refugees

1. Introduction

The most significant global issue of the twenty-first century is the movement and forced migration of individuals, with millions of people on the move due to war, political instability, climate change, poverty, pandemic; and so, as the issue of Hate Speech. UNHCR India recorded around 46,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from Myanmar and Afghanistan in early 2022 (UNHCR Asia-Pacific, 2022), [1] where the Rohingya population is characterized as a significant threat to India's national security and is considered unqualified for entry into the nation. In 2024, there were 118 cases categorized as hate speech, representing 10.1%, that specifically targeted the vulnerable Rohingya refugee community. Additionally, 182 instances, accounting for 15.6%, involved rhetoric that promoted the notion of the "Bangladeshi infiltrator." The incidence of hate speech directed at Rohingya refugees has increased by 210% in comparison to the previous year, 2023 (CSOH, 2024). [2] In recent years, media coverage of migration has increasingly been politicized, with prevalent discourses framing refugees not as vulnerable individuals requiring protection, but rather as security threats, cultural outsiders, or economic liabilities. In reality, the media's portrayal of migrants and immigrants appears as a significant factor in shaping public opinion as well as government policy (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2022; Wodak, 2015). [3] [4] The political use of hate speech illustrates a persistent conflict in which politicians and media entities manipulate public perception by constructing narratives that foster confined national identities and incite adverse sentiments or

behaviours towards migrants (Mudde, 2019; Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, & Wodak, 2018).[5] [6]

Hate speech in political discourse normalizes prejudiced attitudes through words (oral or text), emojis, visual representations, etc (Titley, 2019).[7] The use of dehumanizing metaphors, such as "swarms" or "floods," to characterize refugees results in the portrayal of migrants as indistinguishable masses that pose a threat to the communities into which they are integrated after migrating (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). [8] [9] This linguistic practice leads to the stigmatization of migrants and a reduction in public empathy, which subsequently paves the way for more restrictive immigration and securitized policies (Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013; Goodman, Sirriyeh, & McMahon, 2017). [10] [11] The proliferation of hate speech in the digital landscape has exacerbated the problem, creating a space that expose individuals to place xenophobic and hateful narratives that are continually reinforced (Mata & Alonso, 2021; Farkas, Schou, & Neumayer, 2018). [12] [13]

The rise of nationalist and populist movements in various parts of the world is the evidence of the connection between politics, the media, and hate speech. The media actively promotes and reinforces right-wing leaders' anti-immigrant rhetoric, which they exploit to garner support from the electorate (Mondon & Winter, 2020). [14] During the "refugee crisis" in Europe, for instance, certain news outlets portrayed migration as a threat by placing an excessive emphasis on terrorism, criminality, and cultural incompatibility. Research conducted in the United States has demonstrated that political media coverage, especially during election seasons, establishes links between migrants and notions of illegality or criminality. This portrayal serves to reinforce public perceptions related to immigration control measures as well as their deportation policies (Flores, 2017; Eberl, Meltzer, Heidenreich, Herrero, Theorin, Lind & Strömbäck, 2018).[15] [16]

In addition to traditional media, social media platforms are now the prominent sites for the circulation of politicized hate speech. Unlike the regulated world of broadcasting, the digital environment edifies user-generated content which often insulates content producers from accountability, generating virulent xenophobic and racist content (Daniels, 2018; Farkas & Neumayer, 2020). [17] [18] Some studies indicate a significant increase in online hate speech directed at migrants during political events, such as election campaigns, that exacerbate public polarization and justify the implementation of restrictive laws for immigrants (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Ekman, 2019). [19] [20] Moreover, the algorithms crafted to enhance user engagement frequently favour sensational and divisive content, thereby unintentionally magnifying the prevalence of xenophobic narratives (Nielsen & Schröder, 2014). [21]

The impact of politically motivated hate speech surpasses individual bias by altering collective beliefs and social systems. Political and media discourses are transforming notions of national belonging, citizenship, and multiculturalism by defining migrants and refugees as the "others" (Hall, 1997; Balabanova & Balch, 2010). [22] [23] The articulation of social boundaries through such discourse, results in the creation of social divisions, disrupts intercultural dialogue, and hinders the integration process for immigrants within the societies where they arrive or staying (Triandafyllidou, 2018). [24]

In light of this comprehension, it is observed that hate speech goes beyond mere text or language; it functions as a mechanism of governance aimed at perpetuating discriminatory initiatives and nationalist objectives. The link between politics and media in propagating hate speech influenced the public opinion regarding migrants and refugees. Through biased reporting, the media frequently supports political agendas that divide communities and affect legislative decisions. This approach undermines democratic principles such as equality and fairness. To comprehend the legal and social implications of hate speech, as well as to

promote fair and inclusive communication in society, it is critical to study media contributions in shaping public perceptions through hateful narratives towards migrants and refugees.

2. Objectives

The Objectives of the Study are-

1. To analyse how hate speech is framed and politicized in media discourses relating to migrants and refugees.
2. To identify the linguistic, symbolic, and visual strategies used by media and political figures in constructing negative narratives about migrants and refugees.
3. To examine the role of social media platforms and their algorithms in amplifying politicized hate speech against migrants and refugees, and to assess how this influences public perceptions and policy discourses.
4. To explore the legal and ethical issues involved in the politicization of hate speech by media and how it impacts democracy and human rights.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and analytical methodology to investigate the politicization of hate speech by media and its impact on public perceptions of migrants and refugees. The research is grounded in secondary data sourced from academic articles, media analyses, and reports from international organizations like UNHCR and UNESCO, as well as pertinent legal documents that encompass both national and international legislation related to hate speech and media regulation. A comparative analysis is intended to elucidate the various approaches taken by different nations in addressing media-driven hate speech. Concurrently, a content analysis of selected media narratives facilitates the identification of patterns related to political framing and bias. Judicial decisions and case laws undergo thorough examination to evaluate the effectiveness of legal responses and the robustness of accountability mechanisms. The methodology employed combines legal, social, and media viewpoints to offer an in-depth understanding of the issue at present.

4. Conceptual Framework: Migration, Politicization, Hate Speech, And Media Framing

Migrants are individuals who move from one location to another, whether within their home country or across international boundaries, primarily driven by factors such as employment opportunities, educational pursuits, or the pursuit of improved living conditions. Their movement typically occurs by choice, allowing them the option to return home securely at their discretion. Refugees are individuals compelled to leave their country of origin as a result of persecution, armed conflict, violence, or the apprehension of being targeted based on their race, religion, nationality, political beliefs, or affiliation with a specific social group. International law provides them with protection, notably through the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, which ensure their entitlement to safety and the principle of acceptance, safeguarding them from being returned to hazardous situations. (UN Definitions) [25] Migration and forced displacement represent one of the most significant global challenges of the 21st century. However, the perception of migrants and refugees within the public sphere is highly impacted by various mediating factors. The media's role extends beyond mere factual reporting; it involves the careful selection of frames, metaphors, images, and voices that significantly influence audience perceptions of newcomers. When media narratives employ dehumanizing or alarmist terminology, such as “invaders,” “criminals,” “rapists,” or “burdens”, they operate as inflammatory rhetoric or hate speech, that builds up the public for divisive political agendas. The implications are significant: this type of discourse has been associated with the intensification of policy measures, increased social animosity, and, in some instances, acts of physical violence. (Press News, 2024) [26]

The term politicization refers to the deliberate manipulation of media narratives that convert migration into a tool for political gain, whether that involves collecting votes, framing opponents, or justifying coercive measures. Hate speech refers to all kinds of communication that disparages, dehumanizes, or provokes animosity towards individuals based on certain characteristics, including national origin, ethnicity, religion, etc particularly in relation to migrants and refugees. (UN, 2021). [27] The theory of media framing demonstrates the processes of selection (determining what to cover), emphasis (highlighting specific aspects), and tone (utilizing language and imagery) that shape public perceptions and emotional responses, ultimately leading to behavioural changes towards them. The interaction among politically motivated media environments, the algorithmic enhancement of social platforms, and political opportunism fosters an environment conducive to the proliferation of politicized hate speech. Public solely rely on media narratives for national and international news. The way media portray any issue the public used to believe the same in such manner. So, media plays a vital role in shaping public opinion towards any issue, and hate speech disseminated by media is a sharp weapon for mass destruction and a threat to any democracy.

5. Hate speech towards migrants/refugees and media influence on public perceptions

The stereotypical portrayal of migrants and refugees in media narratives frequently serves as a trigger for hate speech and societal prejudice. Some news outlets and internet platforms utilize exaggerated or false narratives to portray migrants as threats to national security (terrorists), employment, or cultural identity, rather than fostering empathy or understanding. (UN News, 2017) [28] This type of politicized discourse not only disseminates disinformation but also influences societal perceptions of migration, redirecting attention from humanitarian protection towards suspicion and exclusion. Additionally, the proliferation of these narratives across social media platforms highlights the importance of digital spaces in sustaining and disseminating politicized frames. (Hasan, et.al., 2022) [29] The swift sharing of emotionally charged materials, including AI-generated images and videos, assists in normalizing racist and Islamophobic imagery in online spaces, and promotes the further distribution of bigotry (The Times, 2025). [30] This is further complicated by social media's engagement-focused algorithms which are driving communities online to become radicalized and normalizing hate action. Content that divides will always result in engagement (Reuters, 2024). [31]

Specifically, media discourses do not simply record the events of migration in a neutral way, but rather frame migration events, to fit the broader political ideologies of the dominant political figure. The relationship between political rhetoric and the media representations shows that hate speech is often used purposefully to shape public understanding of migrants, empower the political powers, and account for exclusionary politics towards migrants and refugees (Hoffmann, 2024; Arcila-Calderón, 2022). [32] [33]

When media narratives repeatedly link migrants to illegality or disorder, they legitimize discriminatory attitudes and make hate speech seem acceptable. As a result, the gap between public opinion and political propaganda blurs, allowing hate speech to thrive in both mainstream and internet settings where emotional reactions override factual reporting.

Here are certain examples of such Hostile Discourse, such as:

5.1. Instances of Hostile Discourses in India / South Asia:

i. “Illegal Bangladeshis / Infiltrators” rhetoric in Assam and Northeast India- During the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), political leaders and media outlets in Assam routinely characterized Bengali-origin Muslims as “illegal Bangladeshis”. Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has made statements referring to individuals as “illegal Bangladeshis” and has called upon the public to refrain from providing shelter to those who have been evicted. This portrayal of them diminishes their humanity and positions them as external entities that pose a threat to the integrity of the state.

(CJP, 2025). [34] Nearly 2 million Assam citizens are excluded by India. The controversial National Register of Citizens, released by Assam, threatens to render over 2 million people stateless. Media narratives during the NRC process often depicted as “illegal immigrants” that being threats to cultural identity and resources, utilizing emotive imagery and reductive victim/villain divisions. The frames in question were strategically politicized by various parties to ignite local concerns regarding demographic shifts and competition for resources. The significant media scrutiny both reflected and provoked political discussions that intertwined migration with notions of cultural threat and security concerns. (Al Jazeera, 2019). [35]

ii. Adverse media portrayal of Rohingya refugees-

Media and political rhetoric have portrayed Rohingya refugees in India as security dangers and economic burdens. Rohingya refugees in India petitioned social platforms for more content moderation in late 2023 and 2024, claiming that online hate and targeted misinformation from India harmed them and sought to transfer them to Myanmar. These narratives show how media, including social media, influences political discourses that make refugees vulnerable to governmental action or deportation. Media representation in discourse often frames them as terrorists or illegal immigrants, which in turn generates public fear and exerts pressure on policy-making. (VOA, East Asia, 2024). [36]

iii. Electoral speeches using “infiltrator” narrative-

Throughout election campaigns, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has faced allegations of labelling Muslims as “infiltrators,” implying that they take resources meant for citizens and then hinder peace by making unnecessary chaos. Such statements exacerbate communal discord and validate prejudiced perspectives. (The New York Times, 2024) [37]

iv. Harassment and detention of Bengali-speaking migrants-

The harassment and detention of Bengali-speaking migrants in various states raises significant legal concerns. Migrant workers originating from West Bengal, predominantly Bengali speakers, have faced detention and allegations of being Bangladeshi “infiltrators” in various states, including Odisha. Notwithstanding the possession of legitimate documentation, individuals were subjected to targeting based on their linguistic and ethnic characteristics. (360 Politics, 2025) [38]

v. Online hate campaigns, Digital harassment and degradation targeting women from minority groups-

The Bulli Bai case involved the use of an app to disseminate images of Muslim women, including journalists and activists, while conducting a mock auction that served to humiliate them in relation to their religious identity. (BBC, 2022) [39] This case exemplifies the utilization of online platforms as instruments for perpetuating sectarian animosity and harassment.

vi. The dissemination of fear and hate speech through messaging apps-

Within WhatsApp groups, political communication has employed fear-based rhetoric, a severe variant of hate speech, directed at religious minorities to provoke concerns regarding demographic shifts, security risks, and cultural erosion. Such communications frequently reference threats or conspiratorial narratives concerning a specific group. (The Conversation, 2019) [40]

5.2. Instances of Hostile Discourses in other democracies:

i. Use of Dehumanizing Terms-

Katie Hopkins, a media figure in the UK, has made derogatory remarks about migrants, labelling them as “cockroaches” and “feral humans,” and has proposed the use of gunships to deter migrants from crossing the Mediterranean. This type of rhetoric diminishes migrants to the status of invaders and positions them as a dehumanized danger. (The Guardian, 2015) [41]

ii. “Illegal Migrants” / “Invasion” Frames in Political Discourse and Media Analysis-

In the United Kingdom, political and media discourse has frequently used the term "illegal migrants," sometimes accompanied by adjectives like "non-EU" or "economic burden," perpetuating the perception that migrants are basically lawbreakers or undeserving. A report from the Runnymede Trust indicates that the term "illegal" frequently appears in discussions regarding migrants within UK parliamentary debates. Similarly, various media outlets have employed phrases such as "migrant invasion" in provocative headlines, implying that migrants represent a deluge or a danger to national boundaries. (The Guardian, 2025) [42]

iii. Politician's Speech Framing Migrants as Threats to National Identity or Culture-

In a speech delivered in 2022, Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, delineated a vision of Europe characterized by the coexistence of "European and non-European peoples," which he contends undermines national identity, as opposed to a Europe that preserves distinct "civilisations." He asserted that interaction with non-European populations jeopardizes the concept of Europe as a unified cultural entity, expressing his desire to avoid becoming a society of mixed races. (The Guardian, 2022) [43]

iv. Media and Misinformation Characterizing Refugees as Threats-

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the discourse propagated by media and political figures frames migrants and refugees as economic, social, and cultural liabilities, or even as potential security threats. (The World Bank, 2024) [44] Certain assertions posited a connection between migrants and terrorism or criminal behaviour, lacking proof, while others framed them as a threat by warranting eviction. The narratives in question garnered significant attention within public discourse and were strategically utilized by politicians to garner support.

v. Newspaper Rhetoric & Exaggeration-

Newspaper discourse often employs speculation and sensationalism. A further illustration can be observed in the media outlets operating within Arab nations and Lebanon. A Lebanese news outlet disseminated an article that characterizes Syrian refugees as significant contributors to the increase in cancer rates, presenting unsubstantiated assertions as established truths. (ALARABIYA News, 2018) [45] This type of reporting employs fear, stemming from concerns about disease, economic strain, and security, to perpetuate stigma against refugees. The examples provided above illustrate the manner in which narratives surrounding hate speech in India and other democracies frequently intertwine assertions of illegality, perceptions of threat, notions of burden, outsider status, and the process of securitization. The mechanisms by which migrants or refugees experience marginalization in public discourse are effectively illustrated. Table 1 depicts the Comparative analysis of certain incidents showing Media's role in exacerbating hate speech against migrants and refugees.

Table 1: Comparative Table: Role of Media in Exacerbating Hate Speech Against Migrants and Refugees

Country / Region	Incident / Example	Year	Media Role	Impact on Public Perception / Society	Legal / Institutional Response
India	Anti-Rohingya Narratives in TV & Online Media	2023–2024	National TV debates and social media portrayed Rohingya as “ <i>illegal infiltrators</i> ” and “ <i>terrorists</i> ”; politically aligned news channels used inflammatory visuals and language.	Increased local hostility, mob attacks on Rohingya settlements in Delhi and Jammu; normalization of anti-refugee sentiment.	UNHCR and Amnesty International issued warnings; Delhi HC petitions sought removal of hate content (Amnesty International, 2023).
Europe (UK, Germany, Italy)	Refugee “Invasion” Framing during EU Migrant Crisis	2015–2022	Tabloids and talk shows used militarized terms like “ <i>swarms</i> ” or “ <i>waves</i> ” of migrants; politicized by nationalist parties to justify restrictive policies.	Shifted public discourse toward xenophobia and anti-asylum measures; rise in far-right populism.	UNHCR’s 2016 report urged ethical reporting; EU media guidelines introduced for migrant coverage (Berry et al., 2016).
United States	Anti-Immigrant & Anti-Muslim Rhetoric under Trump Era	2016–2021	Cable news and partisan talk shows echoed political claims of “ <i>criminal caravans</i> ” and “ <i>illegal aliens</i> ”; extensive repetition across networks.	Heightened racial tension; spike in hate crimes against Latino and Muslim communities.	FBI and civil rights groups documented hate-crime surge; research linked rhetoric with violence (Müller & Schwarz, 2021).
Myanmar	Facebook Hate Campaign against Rohingya	2017–2019	Government officials and nationalist monks used Facebook to incite hatred; posts calling Rohingya “ <i>Bengali terrorists</i> ” were widely shared.	Mass violence, killings, and the exodus of over 700,000 refugees to Bangladesh; global condemnation.	UNHRC held Myanmar accountable for incitement; Facebook later admitted policy failures (UNHRC, 2018).
India (North-East Exodus)	Misinformation Targeting North-East Migrants	2012	Fake images and rumours on social media and local media reports accused North-East migrants of communal violence; triggered panic.	Over 40,000 people fled South Indian cities in fear; heightened ethnic distrust.	Govt. blocked inflammatory websites; MHA issued a report on social media misuse (MHA Report, 2013).

Media-driven hate narratives across nations have strongly influenced public perceptions toward migrants and refugees, as shown in the table above. In India, politicized and sensationalized reportage of Rohingya as “illegal infiltrators” or “terrorists” between 2023–2024 and during the North-East migration (2012) fosters fear, hatred, and communal polarization. Globally, European newspapers called refugees “invasion,” U.S. networks promoted anti-immigrant language, and Myanmar’s Facebook campaigns incited Rohingya atrocities. These instances show a global trend of media complicity in xenophobia, where framing and emotive rhetoric turn complicated migrant issues into threats. Labelling migrants as ‘threats’ to ‘national security’ and ‘cultural identity’ legitimizes exclusionary policy options and creates a climate of xenophobia and fear. (Carvalho, 2025) [46] From the UNHCR to national courts, institutional solutions have tried to stop hate speech, but enforcement gaps still exist. The findings show that media shape public opinion and that stronger legal and ethical frameworks are needed to avoid hate amplification.

No.	Case / Incident	Jurisdiction	Key Parties / Plaintiffs	Legal Provisions Involved	Core Issues	Decision / Status	Implications
1	Rohingya a PIL vs Facebook / Meta (2024)	Delhi High Court, India	Two Rohingya refugees petitioning Meta/Facebook	Indian Constitution (Articles 14, 19, 21), intermediary liability under IT Act, possible defamation / hate speech laws	Hate speech on social media; platform responsibility; impact on refugee rights & safety	Court asked Facebook to remove hateful content; case pressing on procedural and substantive reliefs; still under judicial consideration.	Highlights increasing recourse via PIL for online hate; foregrounds role of platforms; raises standards for content moderation in India.
2	Bulli Bai Case (2022)	India (Delhi / Maharashtra / Jharkhand etc.)	Muslim women (journalists / activists) targeted by an app/user	Indian Penal Code (IPC) sections: 153A (promoting enmity), 153B (imputations etc. prejudicial to maintenance of harmony), 354A (3) (sexual harassment online), 509 (insulting modesty), etc.; IT Act provisions	Online harassment, communal targeting, gender-based hate; humiliation under guise of "auction"	Arrests made; investigation ongoing; media, civil society criticisms; judicial oversight increasing.	Case became a precedent for examining gender + communal dimensions of online hate; pressures on law enforcement and platforms to respond.
3	Mohammad Salimullah v. Union of India (Ongoing; major actions 2017-2025)	Supreme Court of India	Rohingya refugees vs state	Non-refoulement (international law), Indian Constitution (Articles 14, 21), executive powers over immigration	Deportation of refugees; balancing humanitarian protection vs state security; rights of non-citizens	Courts have issued interim protections; some orders restraining deportation; state's reluctance remains; case unresolved fully.	Demonstrates legal space for asserting refugee rights; but also shows lack of a fully fleshed domestic law for refugees in India.
4	Wazahat / Wajahat Khan matter (2025)	Supreme Court / High Courts, India	Individuals accused under various FIRs for alleged hate speech / communal posts	IPC; courts' powers under Articles 19/21; free speech limits; criminal procedure (arrest, bail, etc.)	Whether certain social / political speech qualifies as hate speech; whether preventive arrests valid; how states prosecute online controversies	SC issued notices to states; restrained some arrests; showing caution about misuse of criminal laws; cases under judicial scrutiny.	Highlights tension between freedom of speech & need to prevent hate speech; demonstrates judicial gatekeeping in politically-sensitive cases.
5	R. v. Keegstra (1990)	Canada	James Keegstra (schoolteacher)	Canadian Criminal Code s. 319 (wilful promotion of hatred); Canadian Charter s.2(b) (freedom of expression) & s.1 (reasonable limits)	Hate speech in educational context; whether limitations on speech are constitutional	Supreme Court upheld the law criminalizing hate promotion as a justifiable limit on free speech given harms.	Important precedent for criminal prohibitions of hate speech; informs comparative law arguments.
6	Jersild v. Denmark (1994)	European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)	A journalist, Mr. Jersild	ECtHR Article 10 (free expression), Danish law punishing hate speech / racist propaganda	Whether journalists broadcasting interviews with racist individuals aids the spread of hatred, or are protected as expression/reporting	ECtHR held that Denmark's conviction violated Article 10 in this context; journalists given protection when conveying persons' viewpoints, subject to context.	Sets limits on hate speech regulation when media is reporting rather than propagating; informs journalism protections.
7	Brandenburg v. Ohio (1969)	United States	Brandenburg, a Ku Klux Klan leader	U.S. First Amendment; Ohio criminal syndicalism statute	Speech advocating violence / revenge; definition of incitement; verdict of what speech is punishable	U.S. Supreme Court held the Ohio law unconstitutional as applied; developed "imminent lawless action" test.	High threshold for when speech is punishable; freedom of expression strongly protected; relevant in evaluating how restrictive law can be.

Table 2: Landmark National and International cases

The table 2 presented above delineates a collection of significant national and international cases that together demonstrate the challenges faced by courts, media, and policymakers in addressing the complex interplay between hate speech, media accountability, and the rights of refugees or migrants. Recent Indian cases, including *Rohingya PIL vs Facebook/Meta* (2024) [47] and *Mohammad Salimullah v. Union of India* [48], illustrate an increasing judicial focus on matters concerning online hate, intermediary liability, and the protection of refugees. These cases highlight the existing gaps in domestic laws related to refugee and digital governance. In the interim, cases such as the *Bulli Bai Case* (2022) [49] illustrate the pervasive nature of gendered and communal animosity that proliferates on digital platforms, exacerbating societal hostility through exaggerated media portrayals. Comparative precedents, such as *R. v. Keegstra* (Canada) [50], *Jersild v. Denmark* (ECHR) [51], and *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (U.S.) [52], offer distinct legal frameworks that illuminate the ways in which democracies balance the principles of free speech with the imperatives of social responsibility. These cases collectively highlight the pressing necessity for a clear definition of hate speech, the establishment of independent media regulation, and the importance of judicial consistency in tackling politicized and media-influenced hate narratives aimed at migrants and refugees.

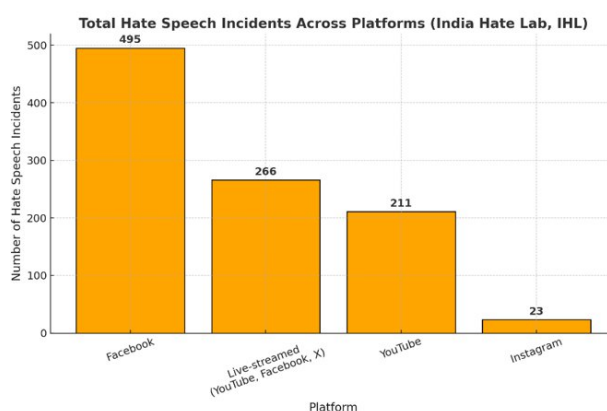


Figure 1: Total Hate Speech Incidents Across Platforms (Source: India Hate Lab, 2024)

The bar chart in figure 1 shows India Hate Lab statistics on hate speech incidents on key online platforms. Facebook had the most incidences, emphasizing its role as the primary medium for divisive content. Live-streamed contents on YouTube, Facebook, and X (Formerly Twitter) additionally helped spread heated themes. These online hate speech incidents portray migrants and refugees as security, cultural, or economic threats, exacerbating conflicts between communities and encouraging discrimination online and offline.

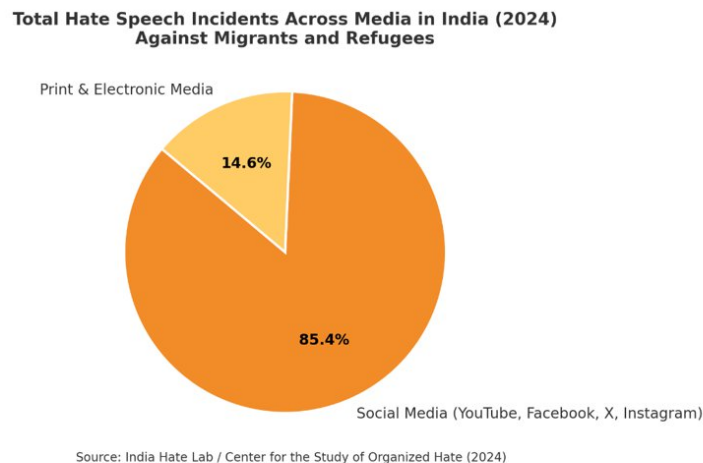


Figure 2: Total Hate Speech incidents across Media in India (Source: India Hate Lab/ CSOH 2024)

The chart in figure 2 depicts that social media was the source of most hate-speech incidents targeting migrants, refugees, and religious minorities in India. the Online platforms broadcast is 995 out of 1,165 incidents total in 2024. The remaining incidents are offline (print, broadcast, and in-person speech). These findings highlight social media's essential role in propagating xenophobic and anti-refugee discourses, while offline actions (rallies, speeches, and some media coverage) continue to fuel hate.

6. Findings and discussions

The findings indicate that hate speech has emerged as a significant tool within political and media spheres, strategically employed to shape public perception, especially concerning migrants and refugees. By examining case studies, media narratives, and legal comparisons between India and other nations, it is clear that both mainstream and digital media have evolved from neutral transmitters of information to influential actors in the construction of exclusionary national narratives. In India, televised debates and social media campaigns often depict migrants as “outsiders” or “threats,” frequently aligning with political rhetoric aimed at consolidating majority sentiment. Comparable patterns can be observed on a global scale, such as the anti-refugee narratives in Europe during the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis and the xenophobic rhetoric employed by political figures in the U.S. during discussions surrounding immigration policy. Similarly, from the social media data (posts, trending hashtags, repost) it is observed that, politicized hate speech directed towards migrants and refugees was much more likely to be amplified during culturally politicized moments (e.g., during an election season, during a migration crisis). Hashtags branded with xenophobic framing would not just trend but would trend internationally while also engaging mass amounts of people. Amplified engagement was mediated differently depending on the emotional valence of a post (inducing strong emotion [fear/ threat/ invasion] would lead to greater engagement [likes/ shares/ comments], then, the social media platform's engagement-driven algorithm would engage more of the post).

Both national and international news articles, political speeches, and social media posts, when analysed as forms of secondary data, showed that hate speech towards migrants and refugees is always framed with an expression of politicized content. Multiple media outlets' accounts tended to feature the same general themes of risk, insecurity, and their role as an economic burden, which closely track both nationalist and populist political agendas (Hoffmann, 2024; Arcila-Calderón, 2022). Such studies agree that immigrants and refugees are negatively

affected by a media framing bias which will be viewed sentimentally as hostility and reinforce support for receiving society restrictions on policy (Hoffmann, 2024). The observed pattern of politicization in these contexts illustrates that hate speech goes beyond mere spontaneous expression; it serves as a calculated communicative weapon used to ignite public sentiment, defend discriminatory policies, and distract from underlying governance failures. The findings reveal a reciprocal dynamic in which media bias serves to legitimize political discourse, while such discourse, in turn, exacerbates media sensationalism, thereby intensifying polarization and the marginalization of vulnerable communities.

In legal perspective, the politicization of hate speech by media creates a significant conflict between the right to free expression and the State's duty to safeguard against harm and discrimination. Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution enshrines the right to free speech; however, Article 19(2) permits reasonable restrictions for the sake of public order, decency, or morality. When media discourse evolves hate speech that incites animosity towards migrants or refugees, it ceases to be regarded as protected speech, it transforms into a misuse of the right. Judicial precedents like *Pravasi Bhalai Sangathan v. Union of India* (2014) [53] and *Amish Devgan v. Union of India* (2020) [54] highlights the notion that hate speech violates the constitutional principles of equality and fraternity, necessitating proactive measures from the state. In a similar vein, international human rights law mandates, as articulated in Article 20(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), that states must take measures to prohibit any expression of hatred that amounts to incitement to discrimination or violence. Consequently, the obligation of the legal framework goes beyond mere punitive measures: it is imperative for states to implement responsible media regulation, enforce platform accountability, and uphold ethical journalism standards to avert the influence of politicized hate narratives on public perception. The task at hand involves establishing a framework that effectively safeguards genuine criticism and political discourse, while simultaneously mitigating the risks of intentional misinformation, stigmatization, and harm directed at vulnerable migrant or refugee populations.

However, the gaps present in Indian legislation play a substantial role in the unregulated escalation of hate speech propagated by the media. In light of numerous constitutional guarantees aimed at protecting freedom and equality, it is noteworthy that India lacks a precise statutory definition of hate speech. This absence has led to varied judicial interpretations and instances of selective enforcement. The Indian Penal Code's provisions (Sections 153A, 295A, and 505) are limited in scope, failing to address subtle or coded hate narratives. The Press Council of India and NBDSA, as regulatory entities, exhibit a deficiency in punitive authority, which permits media organizations to evade responsibility for reporting that may be biased or inflammatory in nature. The Information Technology Act, 2000, along with the IT Rules, 2021, falls short in effectively regulating the dissemination of online hate and lacks specific protections against the algorithmic amplification of divisive content. Furthermore, the impact of political influence on media ownership, as well as the absence of editorial independence, intensifies the issue, covering up the distinction between journalism and propaganda. As a result, the fragmented and ineffective enforcement mechanisms in India create a setting in which narratives fuelled by hate become commonplace, leading to a deterioration of public confidence in the media and a decline in the quality of democratic dialogue.

7. Recommendations

- i. It is essential to formulate a clear legal definition of hate speech in India to eliminate ambiguity and guarantee uniform enforcement across various media and digital platforms.

- ii. It is crucial to enable autonomous media regulatory entities to oversee, recognize, and impose sanctions on reporting that is politically driven or inflammatory, particularly when it concerns migrants and refugees.
- iii. It is imperative to enforce rigorous compliance with journalistic ethics, ensure transparency regarding media ownership, and establish accountability for the dissemination of divisive narratives.
- iv. The establishment of comprehensive digital literacy initiatives across the nation is necessary to empower individuals in critically assessing media content and effectively countering misinformation and hate propaganda.
- v. The alignment of India's legal framework with international standards is required regarding refugees and human rights to guarantee safeguards against hate speech and discriminatory portrayals.
- vi. It is the need of an hour to promote the development of responsible media and civil society initiatives aimed at generating counter-narratives that cultivate empathy, inclusion, and social cohesion.
- vii. It is essential to incorporate modules on ethics, constitutional principles, and human rights awareness into journalism programs to cultivate responsible media professionals.

8. Conclusion

According to the study, media discourse is a significant factor that constructs how communities think about migrants and refugees while enacting hate as part of a polarized message that reinforces government priorities/political agendas. The research finds that media representations, the language used and the images, operate as a dehumanizing system by creating a vision of migrants as socio-cultural stasis that normalize public opinion on migrants and produces an impact of reinforced ideologically exclusionary politics. This rationality is fundamental to political figures who routinely use enhance media representations so that media legitimizes severe immigration policies and elevates public support for nationalist/populist movements and policies. Social media amplifies and sustains these defaming views, through the rapid dissemination of emotionally driven responses to news media, while platform algorithms promote criticised public opinion about migrants to normalize hostile emotions and stereotypes. Media plays a vital role in the politicization of hate speech, affecting societal views on migrants and refugees, frequently shifting public empathy towards fear, hostility, and exclusion. Both traditional and digital platforms, whether by deliberately or inadvertently enhance narratives that link migrants to illegality, cultural threat, or violence, thus validating discriminatory attitudes and policies. This piece notes the complicated and interrelated relations among media representation, political ideology, and the public's overview; where, media framing, is not only representational, but it also actively fills social realities about rising migration. Similarly, legal examination indicates that although freedom of expression is safeguarded by the constitution, hate speech directed at vulnerable groups is not encompassed by these protections and necessitates governmental action. Comparative observations, ranging from the Rohingya situation in India and cases in the North-East to global instances in Europe, the U.S., and Myanmar, highlight the fundamental role of media in influencing public perception and the pressing necessity for comprehensive legal, regulatory, and ethical structures. The integration of precise statutory definitions of hate speech, independent monitoring of media, accountability of platforms, adherence to journalistic standards, and heightened community awareness is crucial for curbing the proliferation of hate speech, all while safeguarding democratic liberties. In a nutshell the implementation of responsible media practices alongside the enforcement of legal protections is essential for safeguarding the rights of migrants and refugees, enhancing social cohesion, and maintaining the integrity of public discourse. This research examines these interrelationships and constructs

to add to theoretical and practical conversations that encompass media framing theory, political communication, and migration studies, while simultaneously providing useful information for practical conversations on ways to curb the current media framing about immigration to include emigrants, alleviate the harmful influence of misinformation, and develop spaces for narratives where migrants are in control of the borders and about citizenship.

9. Implications, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

The implications of this study are significant for theory as well as practice. From a theoretical perspective, it reinforces the importance of media framing and discourse analysis to further understand how political agendas shape public perceptions of marginalized groups, particularly concerning migrants and refugees. From a practical perspective, the findings point to the need for policymakers, media regulatory bodies, and civil society organizations to develop interventions to draw attention to the need for balanced media coverage, take action to counter hate speech, and promote inclusive narratives to reduce prejudice and social polarization. This study has its limitations, as it relies solely on secondary data sources, which may not reflect the lived experiences and perceptions of migrants, and the focus on media content was from specific geographic areas, limiting generalizability across broader sociopolitical contexts. Future research could overcome these limitations by gathering primary data through interviews, focus groups, surveys with migrants and host communities, and address the geographic context of the analysis with additional national contexts and studies across digital media and social media platforms. Further studies may explore the extent and impact of interventions that seek to diminish influences of politicized hate-fed speech and make calls for more balanced coverage.

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