



RESEARCH SUMMARY

NOMADIC NARRATIVES

THE CROSS-BORDER SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION IN SOUTH ASIA

6 OCTOBER 2024



PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The goal of the project is to investigate the spread of transnational misinformation across South Asia, and subsequently aims to connect the South Asian civil society to combat regional misinformation and hate speech in a concerted effort, considering the shared consequences and collective harm to the region. In doing so, it prioritizes an effective collaboration among various civil society actors from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Maldives.

This project is led by the Center for Critical and Qualitative Studies (CQS), University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), with Center for Media Research (CMR) – Nepal and Sri Lanka Press Institute (SLPI) as co-investigators. The project has been funded by the Asia Foundation under the South Asia Governance Program (SAGP).

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INTRODUCTION

South Asia, home to over 1.9 billion people spread across India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives, has a rich cultural and religious history shared by all its constituent nations – and, this has deeply shaped, and continues to influence its social and political landscape. However, these intertwined histories have made South Asia vulnerable to the spread and diffusions of cross-border spread of misinformation, especially in a context of historical tensions, religious identities, and political conflicts. Additionally, the rise of digital technologies and social media in modern South Asia has contributed to the surge of information disorder, affecting millions of new users, many of whom lack critical media and digital literacy skills. While this has also led the way to rise in fact-checking initiatives aimed at countering this issue, the persistence of misinformation in both individual countries and across South Asia demands a more critical examination, which goes beyond just technocratic considerations. Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube have become significant channels for misinformation, often in the form of decontextualized images, videos, or messages that exploit political, social and religious tensions. These false narratives can tap into the region's history of inter-religious

conflict, inter-state tensions and other regional vulnerabilities, which in turn can inflame hostilities and exacerbate existing divisions.

Therefore, the existence and the continued persistence of transnational misinformation in South Asia is not just a byproduct of digital globalization but is rooted in the region's complex socio-political and religious context. Various state and non-state actors have weaponized misinformation for their own agendas, complicating efforts to combat false information. While fact-checking initiatives have grown in recent years, they struggle to keep up with the rapid spread of misinformation, which transcend national boundaries, means that national efforts to tackle the issue are often insufficient, underscoring the need for coordinated regional strategies and enhanced media literacy programs to help people critically assess the information they consume. Hence, this research explores the essential dynamics of transnational misinformation in South Asia by critically examining its underlying socio-political factors, nature of diffusion and social media presence which perpetuate the ongoing circulation of false narratives across the region and have obvious socio-political consequences.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the major themes of diffusion, core characteristics, and types of transnational misinformation in South Asia, and how do socio-cultural tensions and social media platforms contribute to its persistence, mobility and recurrence?

METHODOLOGY

This research has been led by the Center for Critical and Qualitative Studies (CQS), ULAB and was conducted in collaboration with the Center for Media Research, Nepal and the Sri Lanka Press Institute (SLPI). The primary focus was on examining the transnational spread of misinformation across South Asia, particularly from 2017 to 2024. The methodology employed a qualitative approach, using content analysis, Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII) to gain a comprehensive understanding of how misinformation travels across borders and adapts to the socio-political climates of different South Asian nations.

The research focused on gathering data from fact-checking reports, online articles, and social media to identify viral posts, images, and videos shared across borders. Purposeful sampling was used to select the most influential cases of transnational misinformation, particularly those with significant socio-political impacts, such as religious violence, political tensions, or diplomatic conflicts. The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis, with a coding framework categorizing misinformation based on themes like religious tensions, food contamination and health, emergency and disaster, and inter-state tensions. Case studies examined the origin, spread, adaptation, and socio-political effects of the misinformation in different countries. Additionally, 8 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 24 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted both online and in-person to understand the nature, content, and context of the spread of misinformation across South Asia.

FINDINGS

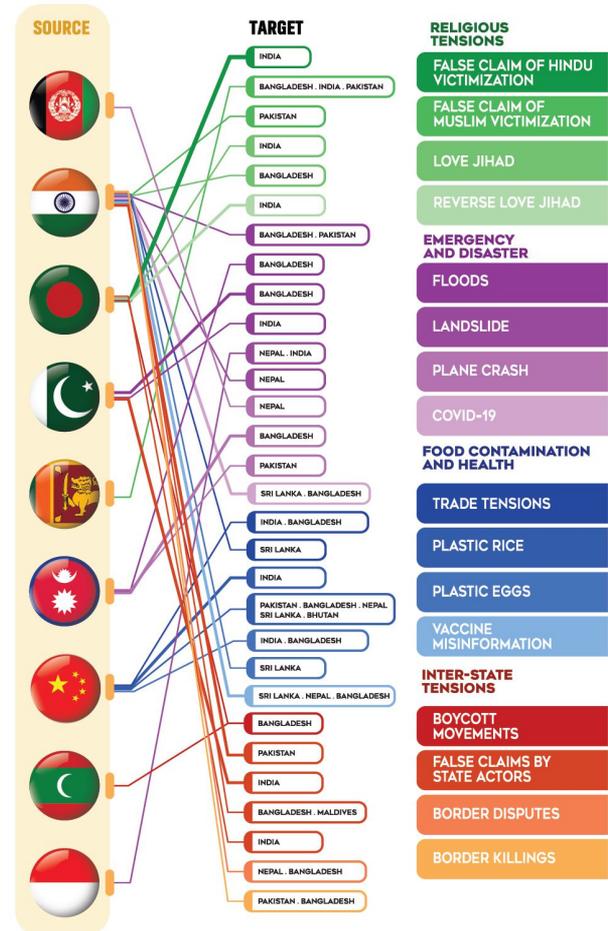
The findings have been classified into three categories: dominant themes, core characteristics, and prevalent tactics of traveling misinformation in South Asia.

DOMINANT THEMES

Religious Tensions

The social, political and regional dynamics of religious and ethnic communalism in South Asia have deep historical roots, which are exacerbated by colonial legacies and ongoing socio-political tensions. In such an environment, the role of transnational misinformation in propagating religious communalism in South Asia has become increasingly pervasive, fueled by the interconnectedness of social media and the rapid dissemination of content across borders. This not only divides a wedge between religious communities, but also threatens national and regional stability.

THEMES OF TRANSNATIONAL MISINFORMATION



Emergency and Disaster

In South Asia, natural disasters such as floods, landslides, and storms often leave behind more than just physical devastation—they create fertile ground for the spread of misinformation, which not only causes panic and tensions among countries but can trigger regional discord. In times of crisis, when reliable information is scarce and emotions run high, social media platforms become conduits for transnational misinformation.

Food Contamination and Health

South Asian nations face significant public health challenges, the effects of which are magnified by the potent combination of weak public health and communication systems, the rapid spread of misinformation via social media, and a fragile trust in medical information and food safety standards. The consequences are not just individual health concerns, but economic disruptions, as public trust in traditional authority erodes and leads to confusion and moral panic. This creates a fertile ground for the spread of transnational misinformation in areas of public health and food safety concerns across South Asia.

Inter-state Tensions

Transnational misinformation plays a crucial role as a driver of inter-state tensions in South Asia, especially in an environment marked by historical grievances, border disputes and nationalist politics. Thus, this type of misinformation has emerged as a powerful tool to shape public opinion and escalate diplomatic tensions.

CORE CHARACTERISTICS

Cross Border Amplification and Transnational Diffusion

One of the primary characteristics of transnational misinformation is that content originating in one country is repurposed and circulated in another or multiple other countries. The diffusion of misleading content occurs where localized misinformation gains traction in neighboring countries, exacerbating regional distrust. The spread of online content from one country to another illustrates how misinformation not only transcends national boundaries but also travels and transforms across regions.

Cyclical Resurfacing

Transnational misinformation often resurfaces over time, adapting to new contexts and exploiting current events to gain traction. The cyclical nature of this type of misinformation reveals a troubling

adaptability; it can shift and morph to fit new contexts while retaining its core misleading elements.

Exploitation of Existing tensions

The dissemination of transnational misinformation often thrives on existing social, religious, and political tensions. This represents another critical trend in the landscape of misinformation. By strategically timing the release of misinformation to coincide with sensitive events—such as the hijab ban or inter-state skirmishes—purveyors of falsehoods can provoke heightened emotional responses and deepen societal divisions.

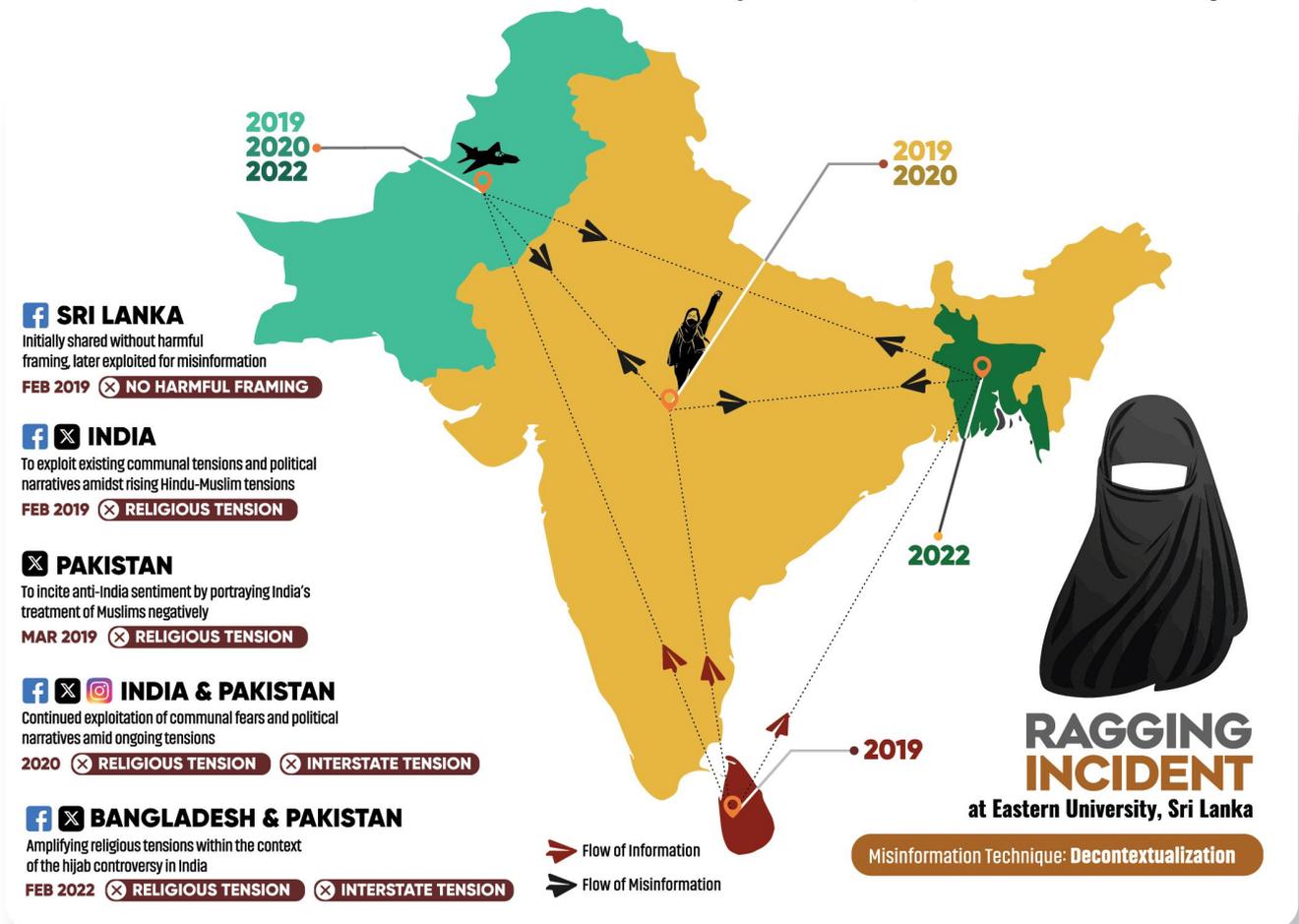
Community-specific Targeting

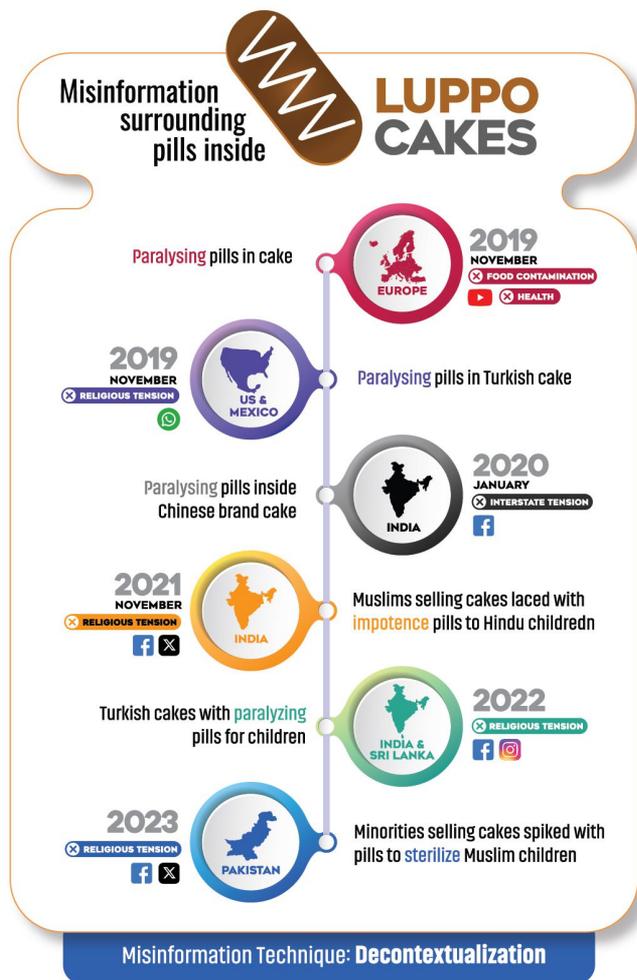
Transnational misinformation often targets specific communities like religious and ethnic minorities to exacerbate existing tensions. This targeted approach underscores the role of misinformation in deepening communal divides.

TYPES OF MISINFORMATION TACTICS

Decontextualization

This form of misinformation occurs when images, videos, or statements are removed from their original context to convey a misleading or false message. Content that may otherwise seem harmless is manipulated to





suggest harmful or provocative implications.

Fabricated Narratives

Transnational misinformation often involves the creation of entirely fabricated narratives or the distortion of facts to fit a particular agenda. Exaggerated versions of actual events are crafted to manipulate public understanding and provoke fear and division, thereby leveraging the power of misinformation to further ideological and political goals.

Manipulation of Visual Content

Transnational misinformation spreads via the alteration of images and videos. This tactic leverages the emotional impact of visual media, which often elicits strong reactions before the accuracy of the content can be verified.

Rumors and Conspiratorial Claims

Transnational misinformation spreads in the form of unverified claims or speculative rumors, often through informal social media networks and messaging services like WhatsApp. These rumors may involve political scandals, health crises, or security threats and can quickly gain traction, as they are difficult to fact-check and become viral in low-trust environments and low-information environments.

DISCUSSION

Religious tensions often trigger the spread and facilitate the persistence of transnational misinformation across South Asia. This diffusion of misinformation manifests mostly as fake narratives of:

- communal discord during religious events and festivals
- conspiratorial claims about drivers of inter-religious marriages
- false claims of demographic increase of religious minorities
- misleading accounts of growing and undue influence of religious minorities
- use of decontextualized content to falsely claim accounts of brutality against religious minorities
- transformation of non-communal and non-religious content and context into false events of religious tension.

Disaster and emergencies borne out by natural disasters not only affect great physical harm and human suffering in South Asia, but also act as a major trigger of transnational misinformation across South Asia. Particularly, the Covid-19 pandemic was a key purveyor of misinformation leading to a regional and global infodemic. This spread of transnational misinformation occurs as narratives involving:

- exaggerated claims of damage by heavy rainfall, floods and landslides using decontextualized visual content
- false depiction of visuals of plane crash using older videos
- false information claims of an event of plane crash
- speculative claims of public gatherings during pandemic as triggers of spread of virus and disease.

Public health and food contamination concerns plays a significant role in the formation and spread of transnational misinformation in South Asia, a region plagued by weak public health and mass communication systems, and distrusted food safety regulation authorities. Thus, this paves the way for the spread of misinformation across the region with narratives often involving:

- myths of plasticization of staple food items in South Asia e.g. rice, eggs
- health scare of food contamination leading to general paralysis and sterilization
- communal framing of food contamination leading to intentional sterilization of members of certain religious communities
- trade tensions that falsely claim contamination of food items imported from foreign countries.

The socio-political dynamics of South Asia is marked by recurrent inter- state tensions among its many countries. Thus, events of tension between nations set off the spread of transnational misinformation with narratives pertaining to:

- accusations made by state actors targeting other South Asian countries using fake content
- decontextualized and interchangeable use of visual content and narratives regarding boycott movements against India

| false claims of food contamination to promote boycott of Indian products

| false claims of ceasefire violations leading to border tensions

| misleading visuals which falsely claim border killings of civilians by another country's military forces.

// India provides a critical juncture for the travel and propagation of transnational misinformation across South Asia. Indian cyberspace serves as a connecting tissue among the cyberspace of all other South Asian nations in the dissemination of transnational misinformation.

// The persistence of transnational misinformation in cyberspace demonstrates the limitations of traditional fact-checking to act as an antidote to this information disorder.

// The variation in the quality and strength of fact-checking programs across different social media channels like Meta, X, Youtube, WhatsApp, Telegram and Instagram enables the recurrence of transnational misinformation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Establish Regional Collaboration Networks

Create a South Asia-wide consortium involving governments, civil society, and media organizations to foster real-time information sharing and develop region-specific misinformation detection framework. The regional collaboration can take via state and non-state means.

| For regional collaborations involving state actors, advocacy should include developing frameworks and mechanisms of countering transnational misinformation by regional bodies like SAARC and BIMSTEC. Particularly, the *Working Group on Information and Media*, which is one of SAARC's areas of concern pertaining to Information and Poverty Alleviation and BIMSTEC's *Expert Group on Cyber Security Cooperation* should address the informational and security challenges of information disorder in South Asia.

| For regional collaboration among non-state actors, academic institutions, NGOs, fact-checking organizations, think tanks, and media should collaborate to form regional networks advocating for cross-border cooperation. This should include initiatives on media literacy, social cybersecurity, and regional data-sharing protocols to strengthen collective resilience against misinformation.

Enhance Digital and Media Literacy

Develop and implement regional media literacy programs aimed at educating citizens on identifying misinformation and improving critical thinking around digital content, particularly focusing on reaching rural areas and communities with limited access to traditional education systems by using local languages and culturally relevant materials. Additionally, develop specific outreach programs aimed at vulnerable communities most targeted by misinformation, such as religious or ethnic minorities and encourage community leaders to participate in media literacy efforts and counter-narrative initiatives that address communal and religious misinformation.

Implement Cross-Border Misinformation Monitoring

Develop a shared database among South Asian countries to monitor misinformation that travels across borders, with tools for identifying recurring themes and commonly used online and social media platforms. Integrate the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to flag potentially harmful misinformation circulating on social media platforms across borders.

Promote Social Media Accountability and Regulatory Cooperation

Advocate for uniform regulations across South Asian countries for holding social media platforms accountable in addressing cross-border misinformation and push for policies that require platforms to provide region-specific data on misinformation and report on actions taken to mitigate its spread. Encourage countries to implement stricter oversight on misinformation, focusing on regional vulnerabilities like religious tensions and inter-state disputes.

Crisis and Disaster Communication Protocols

Establish a regional emergency communication framework to provide reliable information during natural disasters or public health crises, minimizing the spread of panic-inducing false claims. Equip local governments and disaster management agencies with media tools to combat misinformation in real-time during emergencies.

Support Multilingual Media and Misinformation Research

Fund research that examines misinformation in multiple South Asian languages, focusing on how messages adapt across linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries. Encourage academic institutions and think tanks in South Asia to collaborate on longitudinal studies of transnational misinformation.

For the full report, please visit:
nomadicnarratives.net