

CHRONOLOGY OF RUMOURS AND MISINFORMATION DURING COVID-19

By Anoushka Jha & Osama Manzar

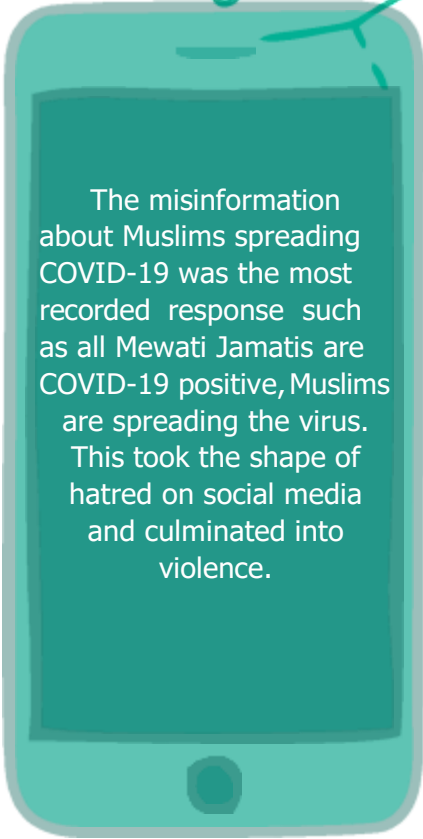
Abstract

The article tries to understand the chronology of events that started rumors, fake news and misinformation about COVID-19 that eventually managed to spread across the communities. It highlights the conditions that provide a fertile ground for rumors and the role that social media and word of mouth play in giving them unprecedented speed and reach. The rumors and fake news are social behavior exhibited by people and fueled by television news channels for some compelling reasons known best to them provide necessary impetus for rumors to take off. Social media is the laboratory where fake news and rumors are incubated. Certain sections of the society are ready consumers of these rumors and fake news that often culminates into violence putting social amity into danger while authorities remains mute spectator of these social nightmares.

COVID-19; Fake news, Rumors and Misinformation

The recent case of [mob lynching](#) has come from Palghar district of Maharashtra, where two god men and their driver were lynched on the rumor of being child kidnappers. The incident is of 16th April 2020, rumors of child kidnappers and organ harvesters visiting the village were already doing rounds on social media and in no time a mob of 400 men lynched all the three men who were on their way to Surat for attending a funeral. As a nation we are familiar with cases of lynching; the word itself brings the memory of Akhlaq or Pehlu Khan to our minds. History is full of incidents where women have been lynched for being witches; Dalits have been lynched for being keeping moustache and riding horses. People have been lynched for being child lifters and Muslims have been lynched for allegedly transporting and slaughtering cows. One common thread that binds all these incidents together is their genesis which lies in rumor. These rumors often start on social media and are spread as word of mouth taking the form of brutal mob lynching.

The case of mob lynching doesn't seem to stop or take a break even during the times of COVID-19 pandemic. The Palghar incident is one of the many incidents that have surfaced during the lockdown situation, in order to understand the cycle of misinformation that start on the social media and subsequently takes the form of violence in the real world, Digital Empowerment Foundation carried out a qualitative survey in 15 states of India to find the various fake news, misinformation, rumors and myths that were doing rounds.



The misinformation about Muslims spreading COVID-19 was the most recorded response such as all Mewati Jamatis are COVID-19 positive, Muslims are spreading the virus. This took the shape of hatred on social media and culminated into violence.

Voices from the Ground: The Methodology

A total of 378 respondents were surveyed across 15 states of India namely Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Delhi, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. The survey was qualitative in nature to capture the various rumors, misinformation, fake news and myths circulating in the communities. For the purpose of the analysis the responses across the four categories of rumors, misinformation, fake news and myths were colour coded and clubbed together. Five themes emerged during the process of coding which were; fake medical advice, Islamophobia, food and poultry, blind faith and lastly conspiracy theories. Secondary data in the form of news articles were used to substantiate the data emerging from the analysis of the survey.

Fake news around COVID-19

The Cambridge dictionary defines [fake news](#) as false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views. The survey identified that the most common fake news that people shared throughout the 15 states were about the government taking back Rs. 500 that was deposited in Jan Dhan bank accounts of women. The spread of this fake news started on social media and there were cases coming from Mangalore where 400 people came out on the street after they received messages on social media that government was [distributing Rs. 2000 in cash to everyone](#). A similar incident came from Jharkhand where a [woman died](#) waiting in line to withdraw Rs.500 deposited by government in the Jan Dhan Bank accounts. Many women across north Indian states queued outside the banks after coming across the [rumor](#) that if the deposited money is not withdrawn in April, the government would take it back. This resulted in women flooding the banks, standing in queues waiting to withdraw the money, as many families were facing an economic crisis due to the lockdown situation.



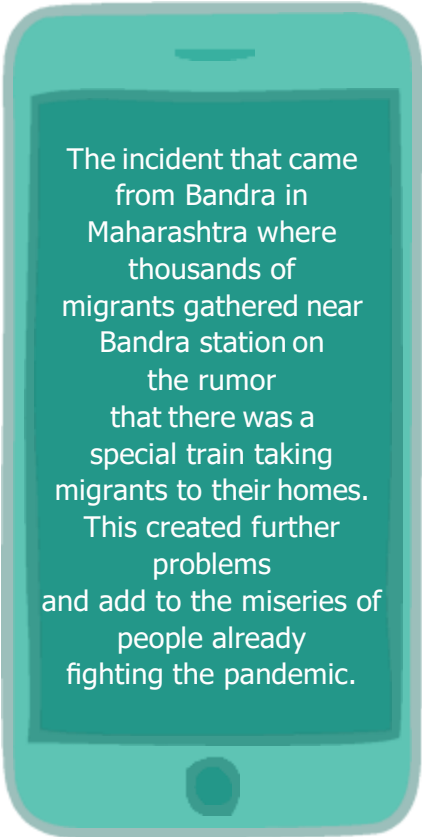
Rumors about fake medical advice have been widely circulated on the social media as well as on prominent news channels. There were political parties hosting program such as cow urine parties which was covered by news channels as well.

Rumors around COVID-19

Fake Medical Advices: Fake medical advices spread much faster during the times of pandemic as the consumers of rumors are all the more receptive to fall for it. [Rumors](#) can be defined as unsubstantiated claims which are disseminated with lack of evidence to support them. Rumors such as eating non-vegetarian food, virus found in vegetable and fruits and some respondents even had this opinion that they have heard rumors about food grains causing the disease. There were also rumors about how to cure COVID-19 infection, such as drinking alcohol prevents the virus from entering the body, taking hot steam and drinking hot water will kill the virus in the throat, garlic will enhance the immunity to fight COVID-19 and lastly rumors such holding one's breath for 10 seconds and eating basil leaves and ginger would prevent COVID-19.

Such rumors about fake medical advice have been widely circulated on the social media as well as on prominent news channels, there were viral messages doing rounds on social media which claimed that [eating lemon](#) in lukewarm water and consuming [Vitamin C](#) can help fight COVID-19.

Rumors around Consumption of Poultry and Cow Urine: Other viral message about eating chicken causes COVID-19, not only created apprehensions in the minds of chicken eaters but it also affected the [poultry industry](#). The price of chicken fell from 180 Rupees per kg to 70-80 Rupees per kg, as the consumers of poultry declined sharply this also impacted the [maize and soya industry](#) as the poultry industry has been the biggest buyer of these crops. Rumors about Goumutra and cow dung being the cure of COVID-19 went viral on social media; this was followed by cow and urine parties organized by [Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha](#) where the participants drank urine and even ate mixtures of cow dung, urine, milk, curd and ghee (Panchgavy) to cure the virus. Although the event was successful to garner many eyeballs with the help of extensive media coverage, it has also managed to reach a wider audience that might actually end up eating or drinking cow urine and dung causing further health issues while at a time when the health sector is already battling with COVID-19.



The incident that came from Bandra in Maharashtra where thousands of migrants gathered near Bandra station on the rumor that there was a special train taking migrants to their homes. This created further problems and add to the miseries of people already fighting the pandemic.

Misinformation around COVID-19

Islamophobia: The misinformation about Muslims spreading COVID-19 was the most recorded response. Responses such as all Mewati Jamatis are COVID-19 positive, Muslims are spreading the virus, boycotting Muslim vendors and their products and the respondents even told about cases that they have come across on social media where Muslims are spreading the virus by spitting on fruits and vegetable, they are throwing money laid with virus on the roads. Misinformation's that have been recorded in the survey can be traced back to a series of events that unfolded and took the shape of hatred on social media and culminated into violence. The chronology of the events started with the Tablighi Jamaat congregation held in Delhi being declared as a hotspot and the government calling the congregation being a [major national COVID-19 source](#). This claim by the government laid the foundation for accusing Muslims as spreaders of the virus and calling it a Muslim conspiracy.

The religious profiling of the disease led to creation and circulation of [Islamophobic fake news](#) which involved showing Muslims spitting on relief food materials, Muslim man dropping currency notes and intentionally spreading corona virus amongst others. Simultaneously hashtags such as [#CoronaJihad](#) started trending on twitter, the BJP party leaders claimed that members of Tablighi Jamaat were carrying out 'corona terrorism' and this was part of an [Islamic conspiracy](#). The series of fake videos and misinformation being made viral on social media took the shape of violence in the real world. In Punjab around 80 Muslims were [chased out](#) from their village while in Karnataka Muslim men were beaten and [accused of spreading the virus](#) while in other places Muslims vendors were not allowed to enter certain localities and were even [boycotted](#). Prateek Sinha, the founder of Alt News in a story done by [Caravan Magazine](#) says that, given the polarization of the society the misinformation becomes easily accepted. He further said that there was no religious undertone to the pandemic until the coverage of Nizamuddin event by mainstream media.

Conspiracy Theories: Along with calling the pandemic as an Islamic conspiracy, there also have been videos and message getting circulated that claim COVID-19 is a Chinese conspiracy. The surveyed respondents said that they have come across information of the virus being created in Chinese labs and the virus being the Chinese world war conspiracy. Again, the roots of these claims by the respondents can be found on social media and WhatsApp forwards which claim that Coronavirus has been manufactured by China. [The tweets about the virus being generated in Chinese laboratories by Manish Tewari](#) were widely shared and circulated by people. The impact of calling the pandemic a Chinese conspiracy also resulted in [racist attacks on people from north-east India](#). There have been news reports where a man spitted on a Manipuri woman residing in Delhi and called her Corona, there were other incidents where people have [lodged complains](#) on northeast people for being Chinese and spreading COVID-19 and landlords have told [people from northeast to vacate their flats](#). The misinformation around the spread of Coronavirus by Chinese and Muslims has resulted in an increase of racist and xenophobic attacks on our people.



The spread of this fake news started on social media and there were cases coming from Mangalore where 400 people came out on the street after they received messages on social media that government was distributing Rs. 2000 in cash to everyone.

Myths around COVID-19

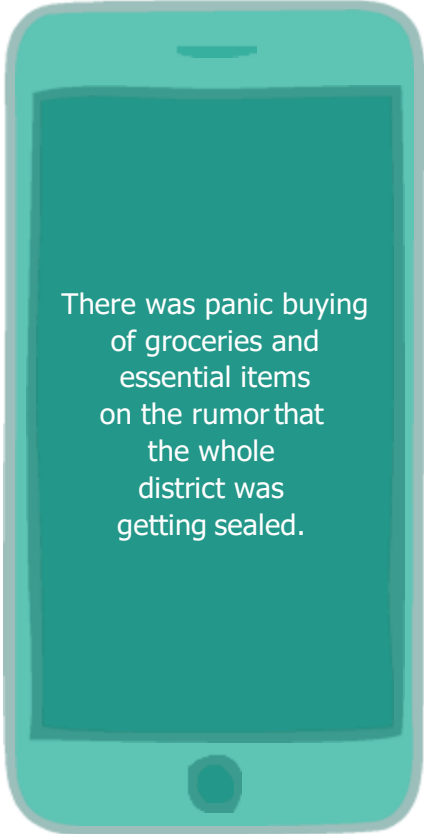
Blind Faith: The survey has also tried to understand the various myths that people came across related to COVID-19; the Oxford dictionary defines [myths](#) as a widely held but false belief or idea. Most common myth that people reported were of asteroids and comets striking the earth on 29th April and the world coming to an end, fasting helps prevent the virus, drinking alcohol prevents COVID-19, keeping chakla and belan (tools for making chapattis) upside down will prevent family from COVID-19 and the virus dissipating in summers were few of the myths recorded. There were videos being circulated on social media regarding NASA satellite image of [India getting illuminated](#) after PM Modi requested people to light candles and diyas during Janata Curfew while the other message being widely circulated was about coronavirus retreating from India because of the [sound](#) made by banging of pots and pans which was detected by NASA's SD13 wave detector.

Looking at the spread of myths related to the novel Coronavirus, [WHO](#) issued advisory for public on myth busters, some of them are COVID-19 does not spread by houseflies, drinking alcohol, methanol or ethanol does not cure COVID-19 and the virus can transmit in hot and humid climate. In times such as these when the country is battling a deadly disease, fake news and misinformation create further problems and add to the miseries of people already fighting the pandemic. Be it the incident that came from Bandra in Maharashtra where thousands of migrants gathered near Bandra station on the [rumor](#) that there was a special train taking migrants to their homes, or the incident where people started doing [panic buying of groceries](#) and essential items on the rumor that the whole [district was getting sealed](#). Such instances bring out the helplessness of people, making them further vulnerable to the pandemic. Under these circumstances it is important to recognize the efforts taken by fact checking websites that are working tirelessly to burst myths and rumors and call out fake news. Agencies such as Alt News, Boomlive, Indiatoday Fact Check, VishwasNews and Factly are few of the various agencies that have taken the responsibility of bursting the fake news.

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Myth busters

The rumors about Janata Curfew breaking the cycle of infection was busted by Alt News, they even published an article regarding [the how long the virus can stay on different surfaces](#). The various rumors about Tablighis spreading COVID-19 was covered by Alt News. One such report of [a Muslim spiting on relief food during lockdown](#) was fact checked, the fake news about [development of vaccine](#) for the disease was also among other information that were fact checked.



There was panic buying of groceries and essential items on the rumor that the whole district was getting sealed.

Conclusion

From what we have described above gives the impression that rumors and misinformation have played the role of wildfire, making it very difficult to manage before it did substantial harm. The survey analysis has shown that these rumors and misinformation not only spread on social media platforms but are even disseminated via word of mouth and through a simple phone call and messages. This highlights that in times like these when people are already under lockdown, these rumors often come camouflaged as hope exposing the desperation and helplessness of people for example, a special train taking migrants back to their villages or the worry that the money given by state would be taken away if not withdrawn. Such desperation speaks volume about how rumors and fake news plays in the times of lockdown caused by pandemics such as COVID-19. But we should not forget that fake news, rumors and misinformation, causes rupture in the social fabric and the damage done takes longer time to heal and even if at all they get healed, the scar remains.

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