



## **Religious Prejudice and Digital Misinformation: Examining Crime Trends in India**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The access to affordable internet has let the world into a small community with no boundaries. Information and communication can effortlessly disseminated via social media. On the other hand, social media has also expedited the spread of fake news and misinformation. Lately, there has been a growing apprehension regarding how the spread of online disinformation can worsen societal friction, specifically in the context of faith-based disputes. This study examines the relationship between fake news incidents and offences relating to religion in India. Using crime statistics published by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), the study adopts a multi-level analytical framework to analyse trends at the national level (India), state level (Maharashtra), and district level (Nagpur) between 2019 and 2023. The analysis compares cases registered under Sections 295–297 of the Indian Penal Code, which relate to offences concerning religion, with cases registered under Section 505 related to fake news. Trend analysis and correlation analysis were used to examine the relationship between these variables. The findings indicate that while religion-related offences have shown an increasing trend at national and state levels, fake news cases fluctuate considerably and do not exhibit a strong statistical association with religion-related offences. The study suggests that the relationship between digital misinformation and religious prejudice may be complex and mediated by broader social and political factors rather than being directly observable through aggregated crime statistics. The study highlights the need for further research combining crime data with qualitative analysis of misinformation events in the digital era.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The rise of affordable internet access has effectively collapsed global boundaries, transforming the world into a hyper-connected community. Within this digital landscape, information and communication flow effortlessly, largely driven by the pervasive reach of social media networks. However, this democratization of media has a well-documented dark side, it has severely accelerated the distribution of misinformation and fabricated news. Lately, there is growing apprehension regarding how this viral disinformation actively worsens societal friction, particularly regarding faith-based disputes. India is highly diverse nation, where different religious identities intersect with daily civic life, the digital sphere frequently acts as a catalyst for communal tension. False narratives and targeted rumours, amplified by social algorithms, possess the potential to deepen existing prejudices and trigger real-world hostility.

Despite frequent media reports and widespread public concern linking online rumours to communal violence, there is a distinct lack of empirical research testing this relationship against official law enforcement data. Much of the current discourse relies on theoretical models or isolated qualitative case studies. To address this critical gap, this study investigates the macro-level relationship between digital misinformation and religious offenses in India.

Utilizing crime statistics published by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) spanning from 2019 to 2023, this research employs a multi-level analytical framework. By tracking trends at the national (India), state (Maharashtra), and district (Nagpur) levels, the study compares cases registered under Sections 295–297 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) which deal specifically with offenses related to religion against cases filed under IPC Section 505, which pertains to statements creating public mischief and the spread of fake news. Ultimately, this



structural analysis seeks to determine whether the anecdotal link between digital deceit and religious prejudice manifests as a measurable statistical correlation in official crime trends.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of digital communication, identity politics, and social conflict has increasingly drawn the focus of contemporary scholars. Current literature generally agrees that social media platforms have fundamentally altered the mechanics of public discourse, frequently prioritizing sensationalism over factual accuracy.

**The Mechanics of Digital Disinformation:** Research highlights that the modern disinformation ecosystem relies on speed, emotional manipulation, and algorithmic amplification. Studies consistently demonstrate that false information outpaces accurate reporting across digital networks, driven by human psychological biases that favor novel, outrage-inducing content. In this environment, fake news ceases to be a mere nuisance; it becomes an active agent in shaping public perception and mobilizing social behavior.

**Religious Bias and Out-Group Hostility:** To understand why digital misinformation frequently targets religious identity, one must look to the sociological foundations of prejudice. At its core, religious prejudice involves an unfounded judgment or assumed superiority over others based entirely on their theological beliefs or affiliations. Foundational theories of prejudice emphasize that stereotypes and fabricated narratives are essential tools for marginalizing "out-groups." Digital echo chambers exacerbate this by continuously feeding users unverified information that validates their pre-existing biases, effectively hardening communal boundaries and fostering an environment ripe for theological exclusion.

**The Indian Context and Communal Dynamics:** In the context of India, several scholars have mapped the dangerous trajectory from online falsehoods to physical unrest. Recent analyses document how messaging platforms and social networks have been utilized to disseminate rumors regarding religious identities, occasionally escalating into localized conflicts, mob violence, and public panic. The digital weaponization of cultural narratives often serves to inflame historical tensions and provoke immediate, visceral reactions from distinct communities.

**The Empirical Gap in Crime Data Analysis:** However, a significant gap remains in the literature. While the theoretical connection between online misinformation and social unrest is heavily documented, empirical validations utilizing formal, aggregated criminal records are remarkably scarce. Most existing research relies on analyzing specific, high-profile incidents or observing general social media traffic. Very few studies have attempted to correlate the broader, long-term trends of fake news dissemination with formal legal charges of religious prejudice. This study directly confronts this methodological blind spot, utilizing NCRB metrics to evaluate whether the digital acceleration of religious bias is, in fact, directly observable within the broader spectrum of national crime statistics.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyse trends in offences relating to religion in India between 2019 and 2023.
2. To examine trends in fake news related offences registered under IPC Section 505 during the same period.
3. To explore the relationship between fake news incidents and religion-related offences using NCRB crime statistics.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a quantitative descriptive research design using secondary data obtained from official crime statistics published by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB).

### Data Source:

The data used in the study were obtained from the annual publication Crime in India released by the National Crime Records Bureau. The dataset covers the period from 2019 to 2023.



Two categories of offences were examined:

1. Offences relating to religion, including cases registered under Sections 295, 295A, 296, and 297 of the Indian Penal Code.
2. Fake news on social media, represented by cases registered under Section 505 of the Indian Penal Code, which relates to statements or rumours that may create public mischief.

### Research Design:

The study uses the following analytical techniques:

1. Trend Analysis – to examine changes in religion-related offences and fake news cases over time.
2. Descriptive Statistical Analysis – to compare variations across different administrative levels.
3. Correlation Analysis – to explore the association between fake news cases and religion-related offences.

The results are presented using graphs and comparative analysis to illustrate patterns in the data.

### Limitations of the Study

- The study is based entirely on secondary data obtained from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB).
- Fake news cases in this study are represented through offences registered under Section 505 of the Indian Penal Code, which includes various forms of rumours and statements causing public mischief. Therefore, not all cases under this section necessarily relate specifically to religious misinformation.
- The analysis covers a relatively short period from 2019 to 2023 and NCRB released 2023 data on September 29, 2025.
- The study uses aggregated crime data at national, state, and district levels. Such data does not capture the specific circumstances or socio-political contexts behind individual incidents, which may influence the relationship between misinformation and religion-related offences.

### DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

| <b>Table 1: Offences Relating to Religion and Fake News Cases in India (2019–2023)</b> |                                                    |                                            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| <b>Year</b>                                                                            | <b>Offences Relating to Religion (IPC 295–297)</b> | <b>Fake News on Social Media (IPC 505)</b> |
| 2019                                                                                   | 1459                                               | 190                                        |
| 2020                                                                                   | 1749                                               | 578                                        |
| 2021                                                                                   | 1475                                               | 179                                        |
| 2022                                                                                   | 1872                                               | 230                                        |
| 2023                                                                                   | 2186                                               | 209                                        |
| Source: NCRB, Crime in India Reports (2019–2023)                                       |                                                    |                                            |



Figure 1: Trend of Fake News and Religion-Related Offences in India (2019–2023)

In **Figure 1** offences relating to religion increased gradually from 2019 to 2023. Whereas, offences related to fake news incidents fluctuated significantly, with a remarkable spike in 2020. The conflicting patterns suggest that religion-related offences do not directly correspond with fake news cases in at the national level.



| Correlation Matrix of Offences Relating to Religion and Fake News (National Level) |                                                 |                                      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Variables                                                                          | Offences relating to Religion (Sec. 295 to 297) | Fake News on Social Media (Sec. 505) |
| Offences relating to Religion (Sec. 295 to 297)                                    | 1                                               | 0.081                                |
| Fake News on Social Media (Sec. 505)                                               | 0.081                                           | 1                                    |

The statistical analysis reveals a Pearson correlation coefficient of **0.081**, which indicates that there is **no significant linear relationship** between offences relating to religion and the spread of fake news on social media.

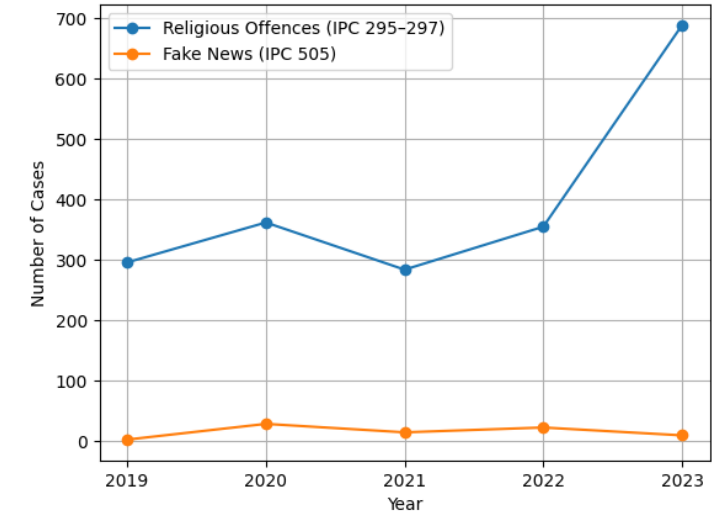


**Table 2: Offences Relating to Religion and Fake News Cases in Maharashtra (2019–2023)**

| Year | Offences Relating to Religion (IPC 295–297) | Fake News on Social Media (IPC 505) |
|------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 2019 | 296                                         | 3                                   |
| 2020 | 362                                         | 29                                  |
| 2021 | 284                                         | 15                                  |
| 2022 | 355                                         | 23                                  |
| 2023 | 688                                         | 10                                  |

Source: NCRB, Crime in India Reports (2019–2023)

**Trend of Fake News and Religion-Related Offences in Maharashtra (2019–2023)**



*Figure 2: Trend of Fake News and Religion-Related Offences in Maharashtra (2019–2023)*

In **Figure 2**, religion-related offences in Maharashtra has increased substantially, in 2023 it was highest. However, Fake news cases, remained comparatively low and showed fluctuating patterns. This indicates that the increase in religion-related offences cannot be directly associated with fake news cases by variations in it.

**Correlation Matrix of Offences Relating to Religion and Fake News (State Level)**

| Variables                                       | Offences relating to Religion (Sec. 295 to 297) | Fake News on Social Media (Sec. 505) |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Offences relating to Religion (Sec. 295 to 297) | 1                                               | -0.156                               |
| Fake News on Social Media (Sec. 505)            | -0.156                                          | 1                                    |

A Pearson correlation coefficient of **-0.156** shows that there is **no significant relationship** between religious offences and fake news on social media. These two things happen independently, more number of religious offences does not lead to fake news.



| Table 3: Offences Relating to Religion and Fake News Cases in Nagpur District (2019–2023) |                                             |                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Year                                                                                      | Offences Relating to Religion (IPC 295–297) | Fake News on Social Media (IPC 505) |
| 2019                                                                                      | 16                                          | 0                                   |
| 2020                                                                                      | 24                                          | 0                                   |
| 2021                                                                                      | 3                                           | 0                                   |
| 2022                                                                                      | 10                                          | 1                                   |
| 2023                                                                                      | 16                                          | 1                                   |
| Source: NCRB, Crime in India Reports (2019–2023)                                          |                                             |                                     |

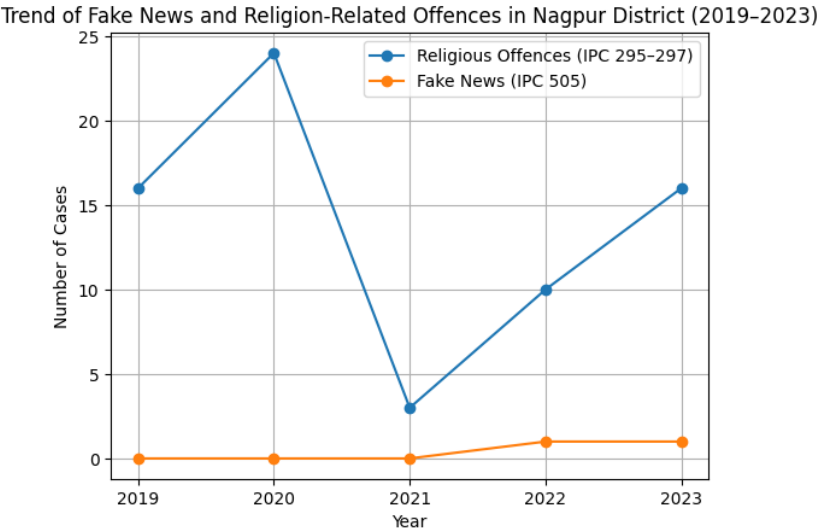


Figure 3: Trend of Fake News and Religion-Related Offences in Nagpur District (2019–2023)

In **Figure 3** the religion-related offences in Nagpur fluctuate considerably, whereas, fake news cases remain null from 2019 to 2021. The minimal number of fake news cases in 2022 and 2023 suggests that district-level record mechanism may be dysfunctional.

| Correlation Matrix of Offences Relating to Religion and Fake News (District Level) |                                                 |                                      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Variables                                                                          | Offences relating to Religion (Sec. 295 to 297) | Fake News on Social Media (Sec. 505) |
| Offences relating to Religion (Sec. 295 to 297)                                    | 1                                               | -0.093                               |
| Fake News on Social Media (Sec. 505)                                               | -0.093                                          | 1                                    |

The correlation value of **-0.093** indicates that there is **no significant relationship** between offences relating to religion and fake news on social media.

CONCLUSION

The three multi layered analysis conducted in this study shows a wide-ranging perspective on the association of religion-related offences with digital misinformation in India. While there has been a growing influence of digital platforms in shaping public discourse, the evidence from statistical analysis from NCRB data does not indicate a strong and direct relationship between religion-related offences and fake news during the study period.



At the national level, a gradual increase in religion-related offences led to increase in reporting of such incidences. Nevertheless, reporting of fake news follow this trend. On the other hand, fake news cases show episodic spikes in the year 2020 and the fluctuation continues till 2023.

The state-level statistical analysis of Maharashtra shows fake news cases are limited as compared to religion-related offences and fake news fluctuates independently. A negligible correlation has been observed in both state and national datasets. The relationship between religion-related offences and digital misinformation is likely to be intervened by various factors such as social polarization, political climate, broader media environment and local disputes.

At the district level, the significant issue is flagged of reporting of fake news in binary numbers. The amount of digital misinformation may not fully able to gauge through crime statistics. A general rise in misinformation circulating on digital platforms may not result in formal legal cases, which implies that NCRB provide only a partial representation of the digital information ecosystem.

All these findings suggest that while religion-related offences is an emerging challenge its influence on digital misinformation may be indirect. Consistent statistical patterns across time, suggests, the relationship between fake news and religion-related offences are not easily observable through aggregated annual crime data.

Hence, further research should combine qualitative analysis with quantitative crime statistics with of specific events, local socio-political contexts and social media dynamics in order to understand how religious prejudice flows intersects with digital information in the digital era.

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