STREAMING
VIOLENCE

How **Instagram** Fuels Cow Vigilantism in India

CS⊛H

Center for the Study
of Organized Hate
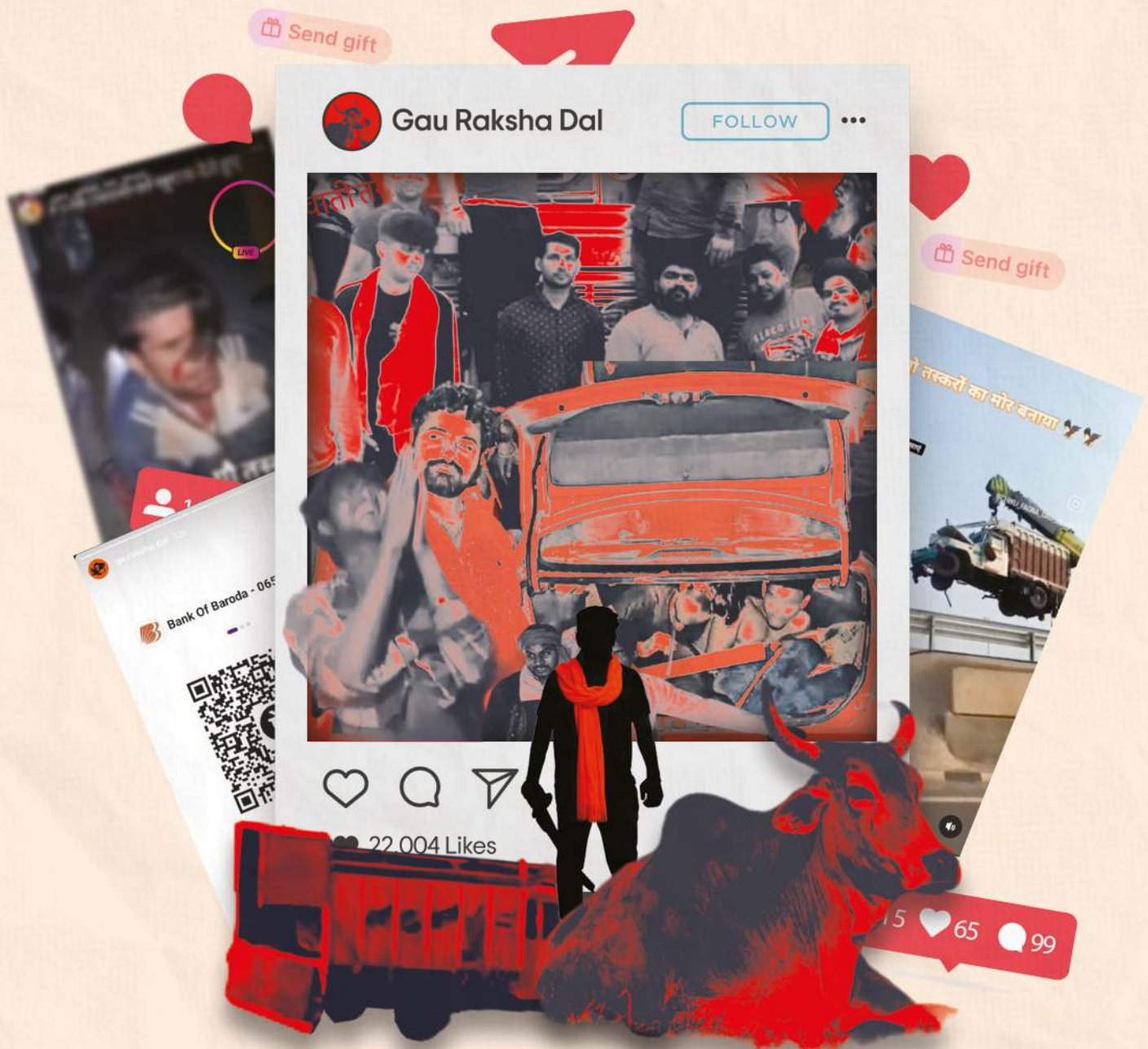
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The Center for the Study of Organized Hate (CSOH) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank based in Washington, D.C. CSOH is strongly driven by its mission to advance research and inform policies that combat hate, violence, extremism, radicalism and disinformation.

Our research, strategic partnerships, and community engagement programs are guided by the vision of a more inclusive and resilient society against all forms of hate and extremism.

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Human Rights Foundation

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1 Introduction

Since the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, came to power in India in May 2014, the country has seen a significant increase in lynchings of Muslims— a trend that scholars have compared to the Jim Crow period in the southern United States.[1][2] Many of these killings are justified in the name of *"gau raksha"* or "cow protection," with perpetrators claiming that the victims were involved in the consumption or transportation of beef or cattle (the cow being revered by some Hindus). Cow protection movements in India date to the 1880s, and are associated with Hindu reformist movement and Hindu nationalist movements.

As scholars note, they strike a deeply emotional resonance, and are fundamentally linked to the reshaping of Hindu identity for over a century, through Hindu revivalist and Hindu nationalist movements.[3] In the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, alongside the resurgence of Hindu nationalism as a powerful political, social, and cultural force in Indian society, cow protection has been an especially powerful issue around which to mobilize Hindu communities against imagined Muslim enemies suspected of cattle trade and cow slaughter.

Given that the cow is sacred for many Hindus, and that its power as a sacred symbol is a central theme of Hindu nationalist discourse, the act of eating beef in particular is framed as an insult to Hindus and, by extension, to the Indian nation. Beef-eating, as the scholar Wendy Doniger notes, has been weaponized to attack Muslims, Christians, as well as caste-oppressed Hindus.[4]

It is in the context of this background of historical and sociological factors that cow vigilante violence occurs in India.

Data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project suggests that at least 50 fatalities have been reported as a result of lynching or mob violence following suspeicted cow slaughter or trade between 2016 and 2020.[5] Nearly 22 percent of communal violence against Muslims between 2019 and 2024 was recorded to be motivated by cow-protection vigilantism.[6]

1.1 Logistics Of "Cow-Protection" Vigilantism

Hindu nationalist groups have, for decades, helped engineer riots against minoritized groups, often with state complicity.[7] These groups typically belong to the "Sangh Parivar" (RSS family), an umbrella term for several Hindu nationalist groups, led by the paramilitary group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and consisting of dozens of organizations including the ruling BJP, which serves as its political wing.[8] In fact, current Prime Minister Narendra Modi first acquired notoriety for his alleged complicity in such an anti-Muslim pogrom in his home state of Gujarat in 2002.[9] Given the circumstances, it is unsurprising that an IndiaSpend analysis of cow-related violence between 2010 and 2017 found that 97% of all reported incidents had occurred after the BJP took power in 2014.[10]

While these events might appear spontaneous, incidents of cow vigilante led lynchings are meticulously planned and organized. News reports have suggested that many *Gau Rakshaks* (cow protectors) operate extortion and protection rackets, collecting protection money from cattle transporters.[11] Other criminal networks employ donation boxes at Dhabas (roadside eateries) for "cow protection," harassing businesses and passersby for so-called "donations."[12] Those who refuse or fail to pay into these criminal rackets are often violently attacked or assaulted.

Cow vigilantes are often an element of broader Hindu nationalist networks.[13] Organizations explicitly dedicated to cow vigilantism, such as the *Gau Raksha Dal* (GRD or *Cow Protection Group*) have proliferated in particular. The GRD is an offshoot of older Hindu nationalist organizations such as the *Bajrang Dal* and the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP), the two militant affiliates of the RSS.[14]

"The Caravan" magazine has estimated that the group had more than 5,000 volunteers in the state of Haryana alone, with branches in every single one of the state's districts.[15] These units often carry the names of their leaders: "Team Monu Manesar," "Team Sonu Hindu Phalwal," and "Team Shailender Hindu." According to the India Hate Lab's 2023 report on hate speech, the organization held about 13 hate speech events in 2023.[16] In October 2023, *Gau Raksha Dal* Haryana President Acharya Yogendra Maharaj told young cow vigilantes "to stop cow slaughter, even if we have to repeat Nasir-Junaid (the murder of two Muslim men by cow vigilantes in February 2023 in Haryana state's Bhiwani) 200 times, still we won't step back." Despite such blatant calls to violence, organizations like the *Gau Raksha Dal* rarely face any repercussions for their actions. In many cases, alongside their open political patronage and ideological support, state administration and police collaborate with the vigilantes to hunt down suspected cattle transporters.[17] Over the past decade, some ministers in Narendra Modi's government have garlanded cow vigilantes, while others have praised their activities.[18] In the 2024 general elections, BJP leaders regularly invoked the cow slaughter bogeyman, suggesting that opposition parties, if elected, would encourage the practice. For instance, Yogi Adityanath, Chief Minister of the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, regularly brought up the issue in his campaign speeches, implying that Muslims were responsible for cow slaughter and that they bore responsibility for any violence that results from the Hindu response. [19] [20]

1.2 Instagram And Cow Vigilantism

Over the past decade, cow vigilantes, who had previously been limited to rural areas, have slowly tried to establish their control over larger towns and cosmopolitan cities. Vigilantes tend to target roads and inter-state highways in particular, where they function as a source of terror for truck drivers transporting cattle or meat of any kind.[21] Many of the recent violent incidents of cow vigilantism have occurred on such highways, as truck drivers transporting cattle, mostly Muslims, are regularly targeted by these groups.[22] Many vigilantes have started using social media platforms to promote and glorify their violent activities and crimes.

Over the past half-decade, Instagram has become especially important to the cow vigilante movement, as it is used to promote extremist content, to fundraise, and

to glorify anti-Muslim violence. In this report, we document 1,023 accounts that promote violent cow vigilante content. We focus on Instagram, because it is the fastest growing platform in India, with at least 362 million users in January 2024, boasting more users in the country than the population of any other country in which the social media giant operates.[23]

The importance of Instagram for cow vigilantes comes from its user base, which tends to be younger and skews more male than the general population. According to social media engagement tool Napoleon Cat, about 66.5% of Instagram's India users are male, while a striking 44.4% of its base belongs to the 18-24 age range.[24] These groups are particularly susceptible to the hatred spewed by cow vigilante groups. The rank-and-file of these groups also tend to be young males, making Instagram a particularly potent recruitment tool for cow vigilante groups. The platform's reach is multiplied by the fact that it allows cross-posting to Facebook and WhatsApp within the Meta network, the two top social media platforms in the country. With India's 2020 ban of TikTok, Instagram is also the primary platform for short form videos with its "reels," increasing its prominence and growth within the country.[25]

On the early morning of January 28, 2023, a video went viral in the northern Indian state of Haryana. The video, posted on the Facebook page of cow vigilante leader Monu Manesar, showed three men being shoved into the back of a car, following which they are compelled to say their names live on camera.[26] In the video, Manesar interrogates the three men, all of whom appear to be bleeding from injuries.[27]

A 22-year-old Muslim car mechanic named Waris Khan is seen to be answering many of their questions. By noon, Waris was dead. In a court petition, Waris's family and the other two victims allege that more than a dozen vigilantes took turns beating the Muslim men in the car. Their statements are backed up by circumstantial evidence and eye-witness reports reviewed by the *Washington Post*.[28] The snippets of the clip were widely shared on various cow vigilante run Instagram accounts.

This was not the first time Manesar had live-streamed brutal violence against Muslims.[29] In fact, the cow vigilante is notorious for streaming his dangerous "chases" of alleged cow transporters, including videos of him shooting cattle trucks and ramming these vehicles with his SUV.[30] Manesar is currently jailed over accusations of engaging in several acts of violence, including murder of two Muslim men, two weeks after the killing of Waris.

The brazen glorification of cow vigilante violence on Instagram is emblematic of a new concerning trend in India: a devastating cocktail of anti-minority hate, violence in the name of "cow protection," and the use of social media platforms to promote such violence.[31]

This report primarily focuses on the deployment of Instagram for the purposes of anti-minority violence. It documents the use of Instagram by cow vigilantes to promote extremist content, to glorify violence mostly targeted at Muslims, to inspire other cow vigilantes, and to fundraise in explicit violation of Instagram's content policies and community guidelines.

2 Methodology

The methodology for this report involved four discrete stages. Firstly, we used a keyword search on Instagram to create a draft list of cow vigilantism-related groups and individuals. Our keywords included broad terms related to cow vigilantism, such as "*gau raksha*" (cow protection) and some of the bigger cow vigilantism organizations, such as the "*gau raksha dal*" (cow protection organization). All of these terms were searched in Devanagari (the most common script for Hindi), English, Marathi, Kannada, Assamese, Gujarati, and Odia. Next, we used scrapers, including variations of "snscrape" scraper, to partially automate the collection process by searching for posts containing the keywords as hashtags. Since the use of hashtags is often an effective way of expanding reach on Instagram, this process allowed us to identify a greater range of "cow protection" accounts.

We then compiled these accounts and manually coded for several latent variables of interest, including the presence of dangerous high speed truck chases, acts of aggression, explicit violence, and fundraising. The manual coding, carried out by individuals familiar with the local context, ensured accuracy and allowed us to achieve a more comprehensive qualitative and quantitative understanding of the activity of these accounts.

The data was collected between February 4, 2024 and August 13, 2024 and data analysis was conducted between August 15, 2024 and October 4, 2024. Additional data with recent examples for studying the network effect was collected throughout September and October 2024.

Next, to better understand variation between these accounts, we analyzed the follower count of each account and the engagement that each post received. Analyzing the number of plays on videos posted by the accounts provided us with a viable proxy for the reach and impact of this content. Such engagement metrics were effective in allowing us to understand the footprint left by individual expressions of hateful content. Since qualitative research on these groups has emphasized the connections between cow vigilante organizations and individuals, our next step was to analyze similar videos by different groups in order to assess any evidence of coordination.

We were also interested in understanding the geographic variation in these accounts to determine the hotspots of cow vigilantism. Hence, we analyzed all geo-tagged posts to map the geographical spread and hotspots of cow vigilante activities. While these posts are only a subset of our entire dataset, they provide some preliminary indications about the breadth of cow vigilantism. To see the extent to which Instagram allowed and enabled the monetization of vigilantism, we looked at how these groups use the platform for fundraising.

Finally, we wanted to analyze Instagram's response to the existence of such content on the platform. Instagram's community guidelines claim that the platform removes "credible threats of violence, hate speech, and the targeting of private individuals."[32] They also claim not to allow attacks based on "race, ethnicity, national origin, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion,

disability, or disease."[33] Many of the videos that we analyzed were in clear violation of this policy, with cow vigilantes often spouting hate, calling for violence against members of marginalized groups, predominantly Muslims, and frequently filming this violence itself. Moreover, many of these videos could also be a violation of Instagram's graphic violence rule, which states that they "may remove videos or images of intense, graphic violence to make sure that Instagram stays appropriate for everyone." Furthermore, a large number of these videos were explicitly in violation of the platform's "illegal content" rule, which states that they do not "allow support or praise of terrorism, organized crime, or hate groups on Instagram."

To assess Instagram's response to such incidents, we created a list of posts depicting physical violence and reported them using the platform's standard reporting procedure. We then implemented a tracking system to monitor Instagram's responses to our reports, documenting the response time between our initial report and any action taken by the platform, along with the nature of said action. This helped maintain accountability and transparency in our reporting process and further assess the effectiveness of content moderation policies on Instagram.

Disclaimer

The CSOH team acknowledges the inclusion of direct links to hateful content from vigilante accounts in this report. While we understand that such content is extremely hateful and violent, and any engagement with it risks contributing to its visibility and monetization, we believe that its inclusion is necessary for accountability and urgent action by Meta.

We make two important observations in this regard:

1. As this is a research-based report, it is crucial to accurately attribute all our sources, including those that propagate hate, to maintain compliance with accepted standards of data collection and referencing.

2. By showcasing the harmful nature of this content on Meta's platform, we aim to highlight the urgent need for action, hoping this report prompts the swift removal of such accounts.

3 Data Insights

The takeaways from the data collected by Center for the Study of Organized Hate (CSOH) highlight the extent of violent cow vigilante content on Meta-owned Instagram. Throughout this report, we contextualize the scale and form of cow vigilantism in India by highlighting the key locations where cow vigilantes are either based or disseminate content from. We also draw attention to the networked nature of vigilante activity and the role of violent content in drawing higher engagement for these accounts. Lastly, we outline the disturbing emergence of fundraising by vigilantes on the platform and the use of Instagram's "send Gift" feature.

Content Warning: This report contains graphic material, including verbal, symbolic, and physical acts of violence, which may be deeply disturbing to some readers.

Key Takeaways

- The Center for the Study of Organized Hate (CSOH) tracked and analyzed 1,023 Instagram accounts of individuals and groups involved in cow vigilantism in India.

- 30% of the vigilante accounts analyzed had posts showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle and sharing videos of assault on Instagram. In several of these instances, the people being targeted are Muslims, as evidenced by their responses to being asked their names on camera in the videos posted by the vigilantes.

(Link to the post in the screenshot here/archive)   *(Link to the post in the screenshot here/archive)*

(Link to the post in the screenshot [here](#)/[archive](#))   *(Link to the post in the screenshot [here](#)/[archive](#))*

- There were 834 accounts where the Instagram account's location or the Indian state it was actively posting from or about, was clearly distinguishable. States in which the BJP is currently in power, either on its own or in a coalition, accounted for 793 of the 834 accounts – 95%.

- Of the 10 vigilante accounts with the highest number of followers, each account had posts showing vigilantes engaged in dangerous high-speed chases of trucks and mini-trucks transporting cattle.

- The vigilantes pursue the trucks at dangerously high speeds, often resorting to extreme measures, such as deploying spike strips or even firing at the vehicles.[34] [35] These actions have frequently resulted in fatal accidents. In cases where the trucks are stopped without crashing, they are typically vandalized by the vigilantes. For instance, in a collaborative post by "@himanshu_haryana30" and three other accounts, an individual can be seen throwing spike strips on the road to forcibly halt an approaching truck.[36]

(Link to the post in the screenshot [here](#)/[archive](#))

In a collaborative post by "@gau_savak_haryana" and "@gau_rakshak_dal_hr08," an individual can be seen drawing out a gun and appearing to fire at a truck that is being chased.[37] The post has 2.8 million plays. Instagram defines plays as "the number of times your reel starts to play or replay."[38]

(Link to the post in the screenshot here/archive - red circle added by CSOH to highlight the weapon)

In posts by "@_alwar_gou_raksha_dal_" and "@bajrangdal.indore," an individual can be seen drawing out a gun and appearing to fire at a truck.[39] [40]

(Link to the post in the screenshot here/archive - red circle added by CSOH to highlight the weapon)

(Link to the post in the screenshot here/archive)

- CSOH analyzed 121 Instagram reels showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle. The 121 reels had 8.3 million plays in all. As many as 9 of the 121 posts (7.4%) had more than 100,000 plays each.

- 100 of the 121 (82.6%) reels showing physical violence by vigilantes had no graphic content filter placed on them by Instagram.

- Reels showing vigilante violence — such as physical violence and dangerous high-speed truck chases — attracted approximately three times more views on the platform than other reels posted by the same accounts that did not feature violence.

- Multiple cow vigilante accounts had posted calls for donations on their Instagram profiles, in the content and captions of posts as well as stories.

- Half of the accounts that had calls for donations on their Instagram accounts had also posted content showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle.

- Multiple Instagram accounts with posts glorifying violence and showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle continue to have the "Send Gift" feature available, providing their viewers = with an opportunity to send them money directly via the social media platform.

- Of the 150 most-followed accounts which had posts showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle, CSOH found that 53 accounts (35.3%), had the "Send Gift" option activated on their reels.

- A total of 167 Instagram posts depicting explicit violence by cow vigilantes were reported by selecting the "showing violence, death, or severe injury" option under the "violence, hate, and exploitation" category. Despite clear guideline violations, Instagram failed to remove any, resulting in a 100% inaction rate.

- Nine of the 50 most-followed accounts, and 71 of the 1023 accounts overall (6.9%), had *Bajrang Dal* in their usernames, indicating their possible affiliation with the Hindu nationalist organization by the same name. The *Bajrang Dal* is part of the Sangh Parivar, an umbrella term for Hindu nationalist groups led by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which also includes India's ruling political party the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In 2023, when the opposition Indian National Congress proposed a ban on the *Bajrang Dal*, along with other extremist militant groups in the state of Karnataka, Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself defended and championed the organization. [41]

4 Mechanics of Vigilantism

4.1 Leading Locations

CSOH tracked and analyzed 1,023 Instagram accounts of individuals and groups involved in cow vigilantism in India.

As many as 1,013 out of the 1,023 accounts (99%) had posts showing vigilantes engaging in dangerous high-speed chase of trucks in towns, state and inter-state highways transporting cattle.

(Links to the posts in the screenshots: left/archive, right/archive)
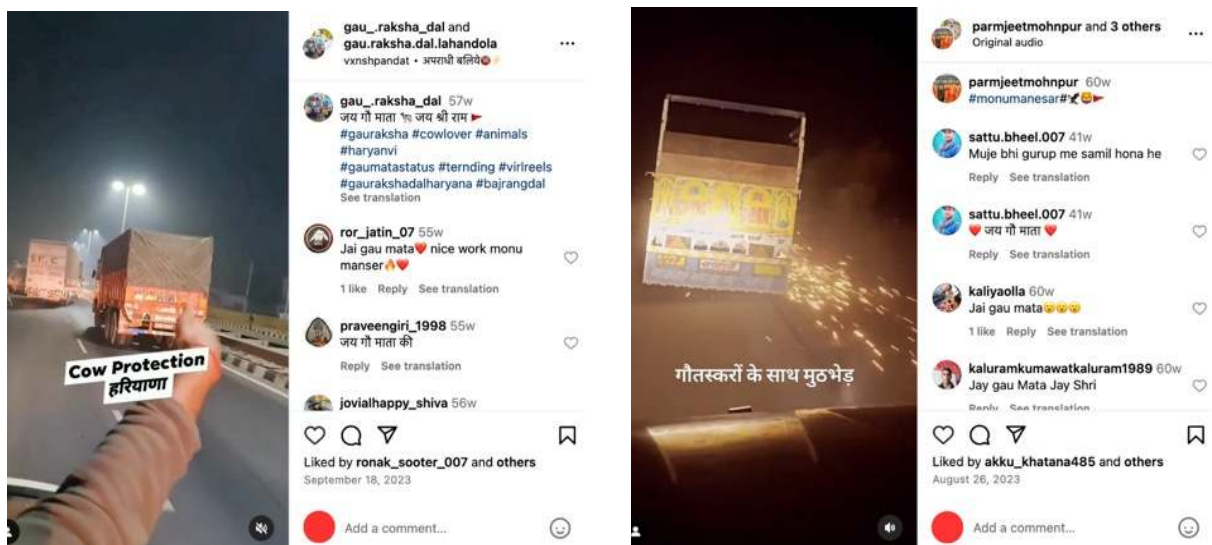
(Links to the posts in the screenshots: left/archive, right/archive)

Also 309 accounts (30%) had posts showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence against people who were allegedly transporting cattle or meat of any kind.

(Links to the posts in the screenshots: <u>left</u>/<u>archive</u>, <u>right</u>/<u>archive</u>)

(Links to the posts in the screenshots: <u>left</u>/<u>archive</u>, <u>right</u>/<u>archive</u>)

(Links to the posts in the screenshots: <u>left</u>/<u>archive</u>, <u>right</u>/<u>archive</u>)

Of the 1,023 accounts analyzed, there were 834 accounts (81.5%) where the Instagram account's location or state it was actively posting from was clearly distinguishable. The BJP-ruled northern Indian state of Haryana accounted for more than a third of the 834 profiles analyzed, with 320 accounts (38.3%).

State-Wise Breakdown of Cow Vigilante Accounts

Of the 1,023 Instagram accounts analyzed, 834 had a clearly identifiable location or state from which they were actively posting.

	State	No. of accounts	Ruling party/coalition
1	Haryana	320	Bharatiya Janata Party
2	Rajasthan	148	Bharatiya Janata Party
3	Maharashtra	131	Shiv Sena (Shinde)-BJP
4	Uttar Pradesh	50	Bharatiya Janata Party
5	Delhi	48	Law & Order Under BJP-led Federal Govt.
6	Gujarat	36	Bharatiya Janata Party
7	Madhya Pradesh	25	Bharatiya Janata Party
8	Telangana	17	Congress
9	Odisha	15	Bharatiya Janata Party
10	Karnataka	15	Congress
11	Punjab	8	Aam Aadmi Party
12	Chhattisgarh	8	Bharatiya Janata Party
13	Jammu & Kashmir	5	National Conference
14	West Bengal	2	Trinamool Congress
15	Uttarakhand	2	Bharatiya Janata Party
16	Himachal Pradesh	2	Congress
17	Bihar	2	Janata Dal (United)-BJP

BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party

Source: Center for the Study of Organized Hate (CSOH) • Created with Datawrapper

Of the 834 accounts where the Instagram account's location or Indian state it was actively posting from or about, was clearly distinguishable, 264 accounts (31.6%) had posted content showing physical violence against people transporting cattle.

114 of them were from Haryana (13.6%), followed by Rajasthan with 54 accounts (6.4%) and Maharashtra with 22 (2.6%).

Haryana Leads in Accounts Posting Content Featuring Violence Against Cattle Transporters

Among the Instagram accounts with clearly identifiable locations, 264 had posted content showing physical violence against individuals transporting cattle, with 114 of these accounts based in Haryana.

|	State	No. of accounts	Ruling Party/Coalition
1	Haryana	114	Bharatiya Janata Party
2	Rajasthan	54	Bharatiya Janata Party
3	Maharashtra	22	Shiv Sena (Shinde)-BJP
4	Delhi	21	Law & Order under BJP-led Federal Govt.
5	Gujarat	17	Bharatiya Janata Party
6	Uttar Pradesh	14	Bharatiya Janata Party

BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party

Source: Center for the Study of Organized Hate (CSOH) • Created with Datawrapper

States in which the BJP is currently in power, either on its own or in a coalition, accounted for 793 of the 834 Instagram accounts– that is over 95%.

95% of Instagram Cow Vigilante Accounts Located in BJP-ruled States

BJP/Coalition ruled states & New Delhi
793

Congress & other opposition ruled states
41
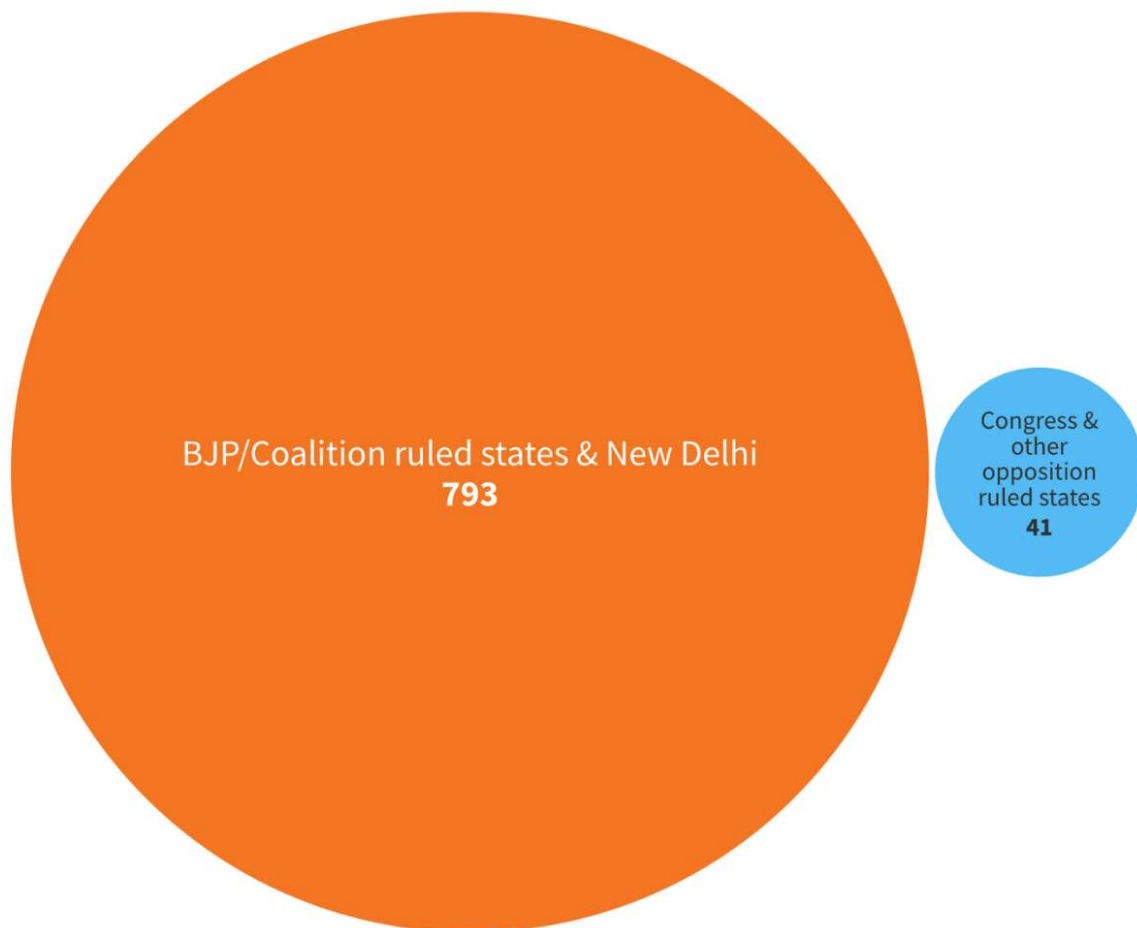
Source: Center for the Study of Organized Hate (CSOH)

Haryana stands out as a key state where cow vigilantism has proliferated tremendously in tandem with institutional support from the state. One of the ways the state has legitimized vigilantism is through the formation of the Special Cow Protection Task Force constituted in 2020 in order to enforce the state's cow protection law, The *Haryana Gauvansh Sanrakshan* and *Gausamvardhan* Act of 2015. The Cow Protection Task Force essentially offers state impunity to the activities of cow vigilantes and enables them to indiscriminately carry out intimidation, surveillance, and physical violence against truck drivers. The law empowers vigilante violence by allowing perpetrators to "take prompt action on such illegal activities after specific inputs received from the public," thus legitimizing vigilante activities.[42]

The role of state support in supporting vigilante action in Haryana has led to a

proliferation of vigilante activity in the state, which is reflected in the data collected by the CSOH team. The concerns around vigilante action are magnified by the high engagement levels of these accounts on social media and the subsequent social media interactions they receive for their content, effectively normalizing and glamorizing vigilante violence among the audience. The use of popular regional music as a backdrop for scenes depicting dangerous high speed chases and the use of weapons offers an appealing vision of vigilantism and generates greater interest among the youth engaging with such accounts.

4.2 High Engagement for Violence

One way that popular vigilante accounts exacerbate anti-minority sentiments and compound precarity among minorities is by glorifying displays of violence and violent conduct. Reels that directly showcase violent acts tend to draw disproportionately high rates of online engagement. In addition to explicit physical violence, many accounts also produce content that includes verbal abuse and threats towards Muslims in particular. As Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become the preferred modes of communication and social interaction in India, they are increasingly riddled with vigilante accounts that reproduce hateful content, furthering harmful stereotypes and encouraging violence against minorities.[43] In addition to hateful content, vigilante accounts also habitually issue threats of physical violence by showcasing a variety of weaponry. These displays reflect an intent to commit violence and also cause insecurity among minorities who are the target of hate from these accounts. The display of guns, swords, knives, and other forms of weaponry has increasingly become common on vigilante accounts. These brazen threats reflect the abject failure of Meta to regulate and remove these accounts.

CSOH analyzed 121 Instagram reels showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle. As many as 9 of the 121 reels (7.4%) had more than 100,000 plays each, and 42 of the reels (34.7) had more than 10,000 views.

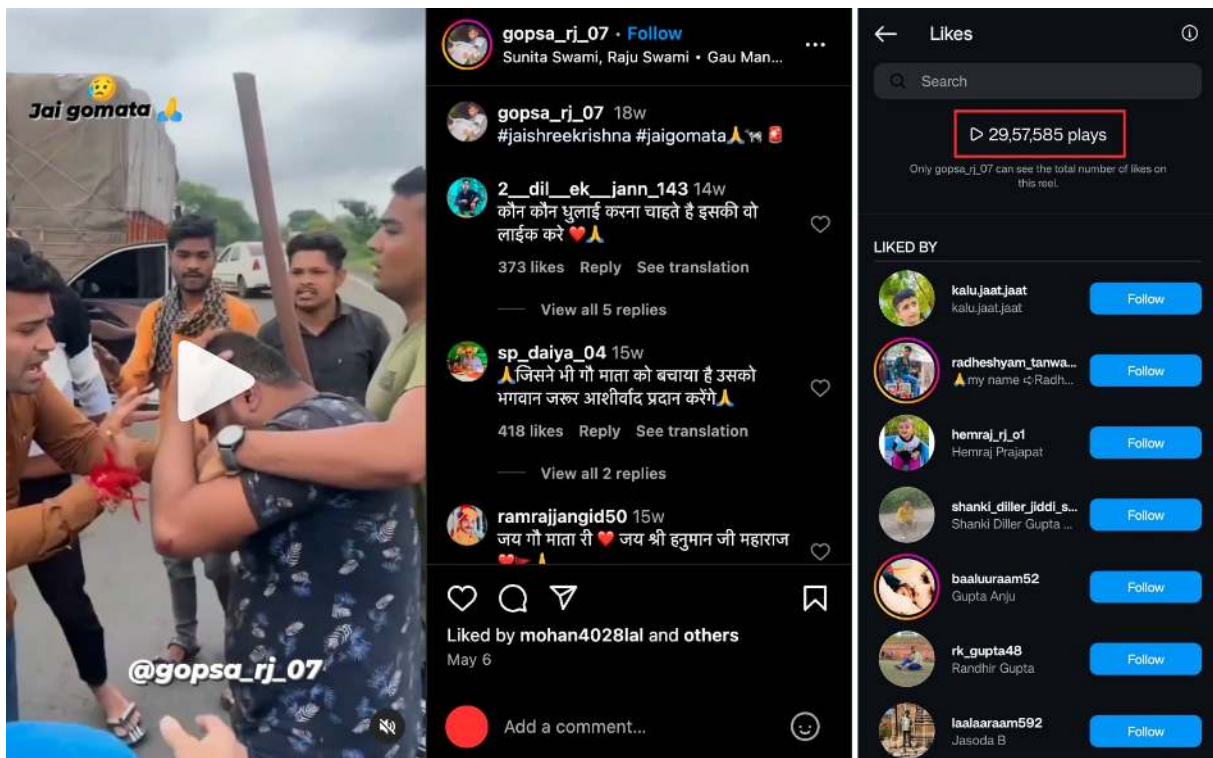*(Links to the posts in the screenshots: left/archive - 77k plays, right/archive - 27.8k plays)*

(Links to the posts in the screenshots: left/archive - 47.7k plays, right/archive - 41.4k plays)

(Links to the posts in the screenshots: left/archive - 22.8k plays, right/archive - 18.5k plays)

The 121 reels had an average play count of 68,305 and a median play count of 4,655.

Of the 121 reels showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence, the one with the most number of plays was a reel by an Instagram account with "@gopsa_rj_07" as the handle and "@Go_raksak_🐄💗7773" as the username.[44] The reel had more than 2.9 million plays and 2,630 comments at the time of data collection. It showed a man being physically restrained and assaulted by vigilantes.

(Link to the post in the screenshots here/archive)

Another reel by "@harish__hindu__09" shows a man being violently assaulted by three different men inside a car.[45] The man who is being beaten up has blood on his face. The video has more than 4,300 views on Instagram.
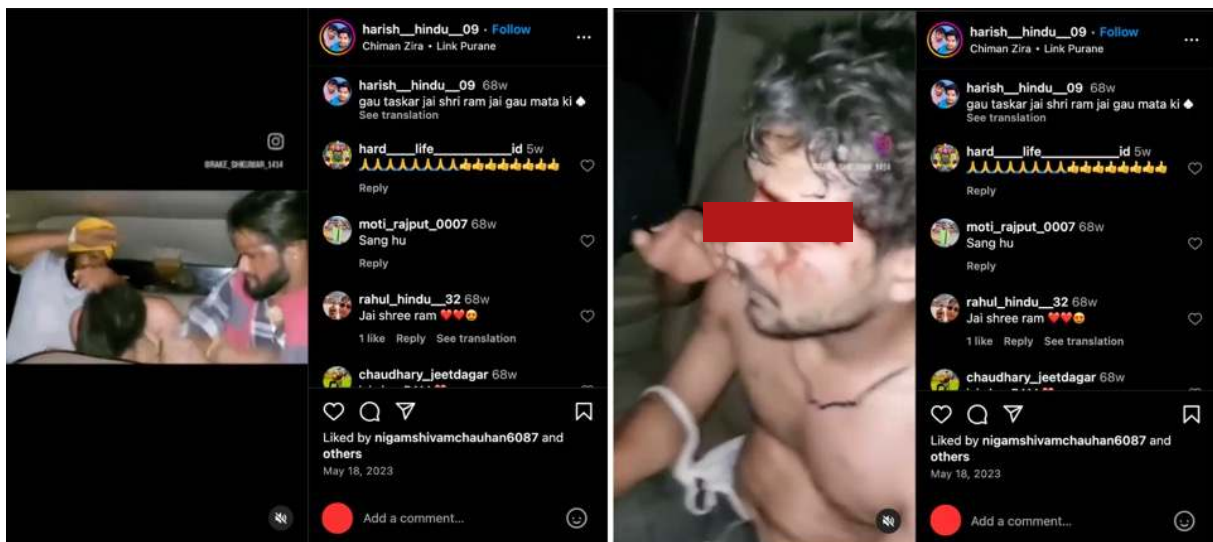
(Link to the post in the screenshots here/archive)

100 of the 121 reels (82.6%) showing physical violence by vigilantes had no graphic content filter placed on them by Instagram. The social media platform had placed a filter reading, "Sensitive content: This video may contain graphic or violent content" on only 21 of the 121 reels (17.3%).
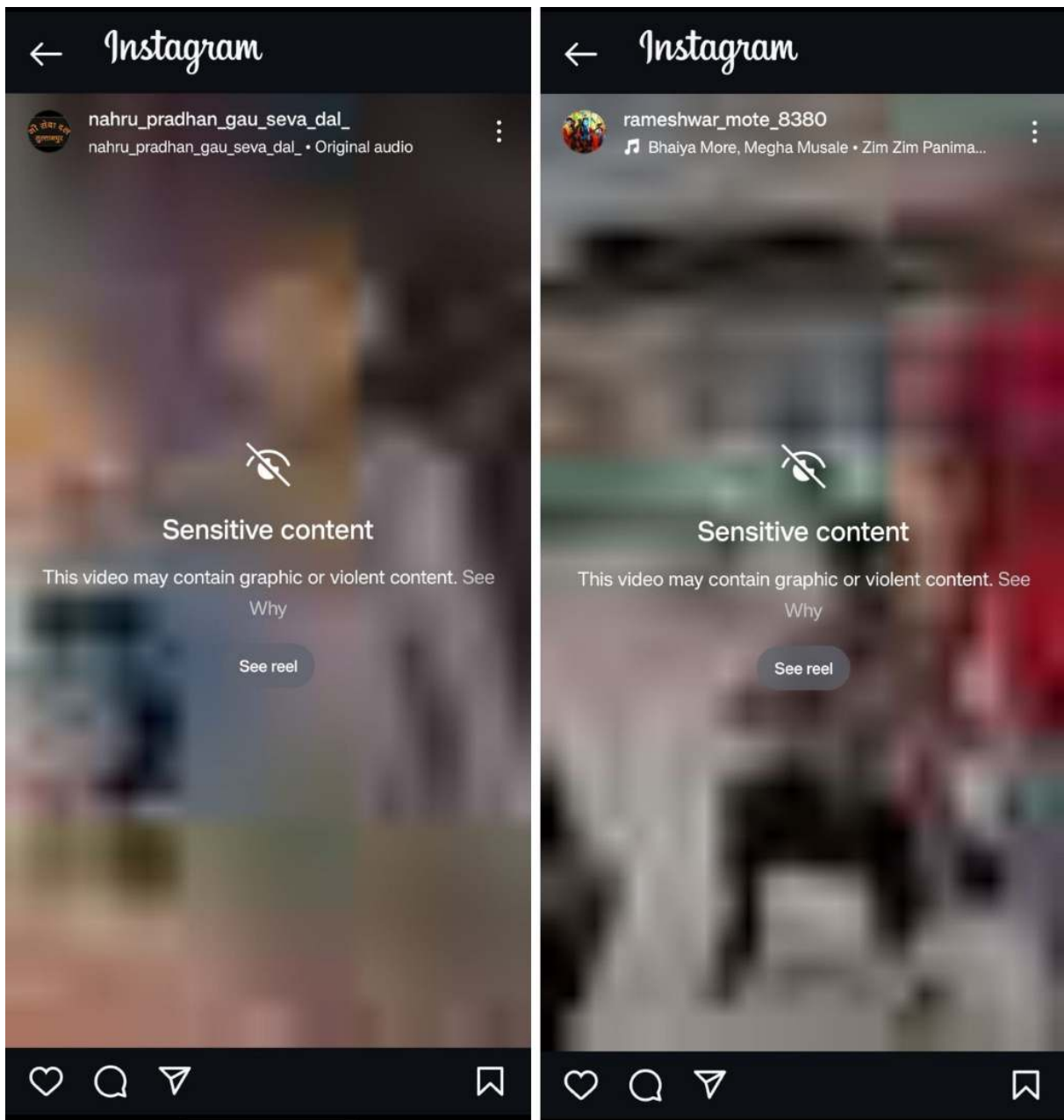
(Links to the posts in the screenshots: left/archive, right/archive)

Out of the sources of the 121 reels, CSOH engaged in an additional, deeper analysis of the accounts that had posted the 10 most-watched reels, looking into the scale of engagement with those accounts. Specifically, our analysis looked at the number of plays on reels showing physical violence by vigilantes and compared it to the number of plays on the account's previous and subsequent reels. In cases of collaborative reels, the first account that appeared in the list of collaborating accounts was considered.

The analysis found that the reels depicting vigilantes engaging in physical violence typically outperformed reels posted by the same accounts that did not include physical violence by vigilantes. In many cases, the reels showing physical violence by vigilantes were the ones that helped an account increase or attain virality.

For instance, a reel posted by "@hindu_swarajsena_official2141" depicting physical violence received 193,000 plays.[46][47] However, the very next reel that the account posted did not contain physical violence and received less than 9,000 plays.[48] Similarly, the reel that "@hindu_swarajsena_official2141" posted right before the viral violent reel was one that did not contain physical violence, and it only received 8,030 plays.[49]
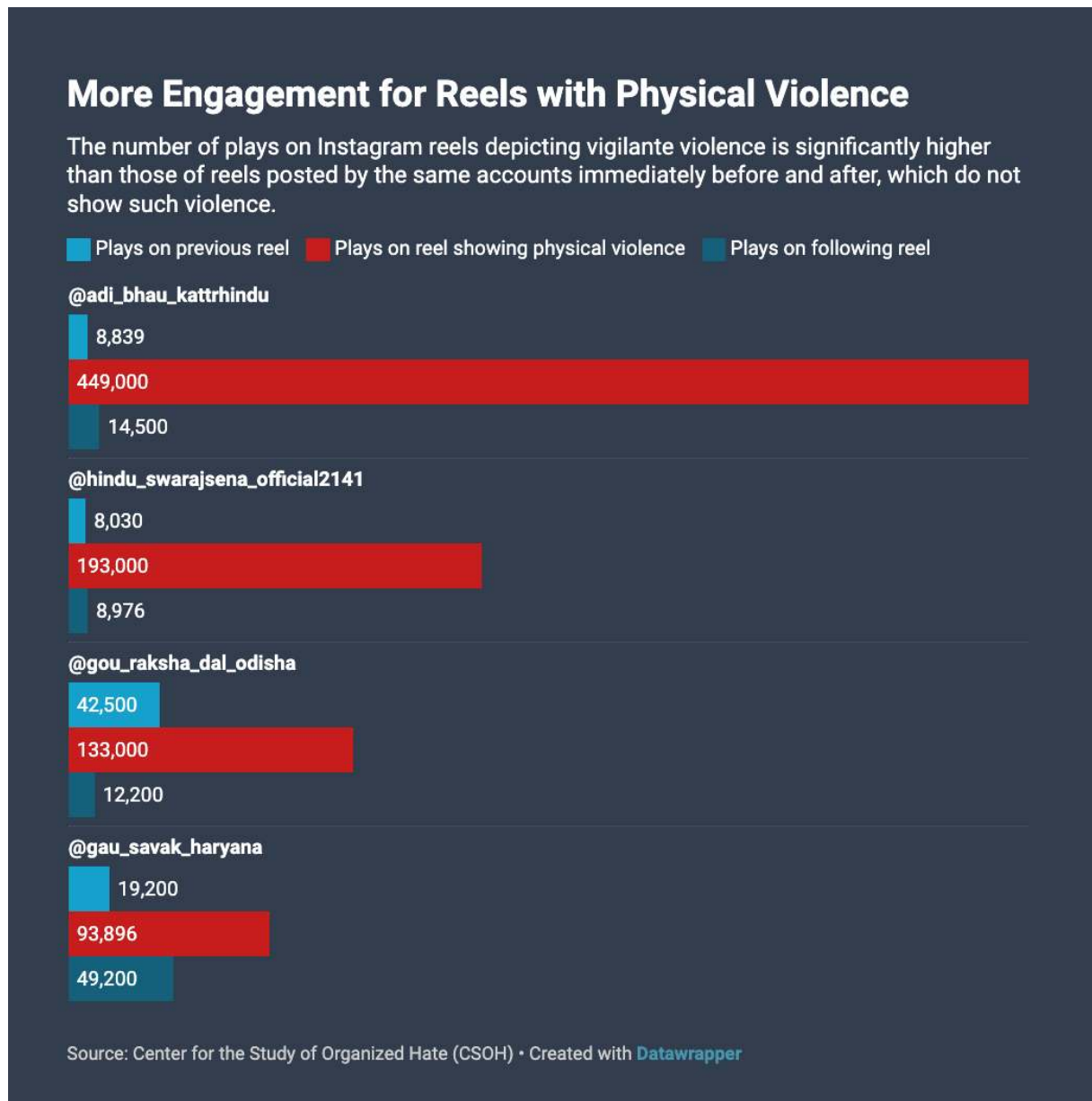

(Links to the posts in the screenshots: first from left/archive, second/archive, third/archive)

Similarly, a reel posted by "@gou_raksha_dal_odisha" showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence received 133,000 plays.[50][51] But the reels posted by the same account immediately before and after did not contain physical violence and received 42,500 and 12,200 plays, respectively, much lower than the engagement received on the reel showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence.[52][53]


(Links to the posts in the screenshots: first from left/archive, second/archive, third)

The same phenomenon was observed across multiple accounts.

More Engagement for Reels with Physical Violence

The number of plays on Instagram reels depicting vigilante violence is significantly higher than those of reels posted by the same accounts immediately before and after, which do not show such violence.

■ Plays on previous reel   ■ Plays on reel showing physical violence   ■ Plays on following reel

@adi_bhau_kattrhindu
8,839
449,000
14,500

@hindu_swarajsena_official2141
8,030
193,000
8,976

@gou_raksha_dal_odisha
42,500
133,000
12,200

@gau_savak_haryana
19,200
93,896
49,200

Source: Center for the Study of Organized Hate (CSOH) · Created with Datawrapper

In addition, from the database of cow vigilante accounts, CSOH also analyzed the 20 most-followed accounts which have posted content showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence and are still public and operational. CSOH analyzed the 10 most recent Instagram reels posted by each of these 20 accounts, resulting in an analysis of 200 reels.

Out of these 200 reels, the 32 reels (16%) showing vigilante violence, including dangerous car chases involving trucks transporting cattle or other forms of physical violence, have an average of 73.8k plays and a total of 2.4 million plays. In comparison, the videos that do not show such vigilante violence have an average of 25.5k plays, only around a third of the average plays for videos depicting vigilante violence.
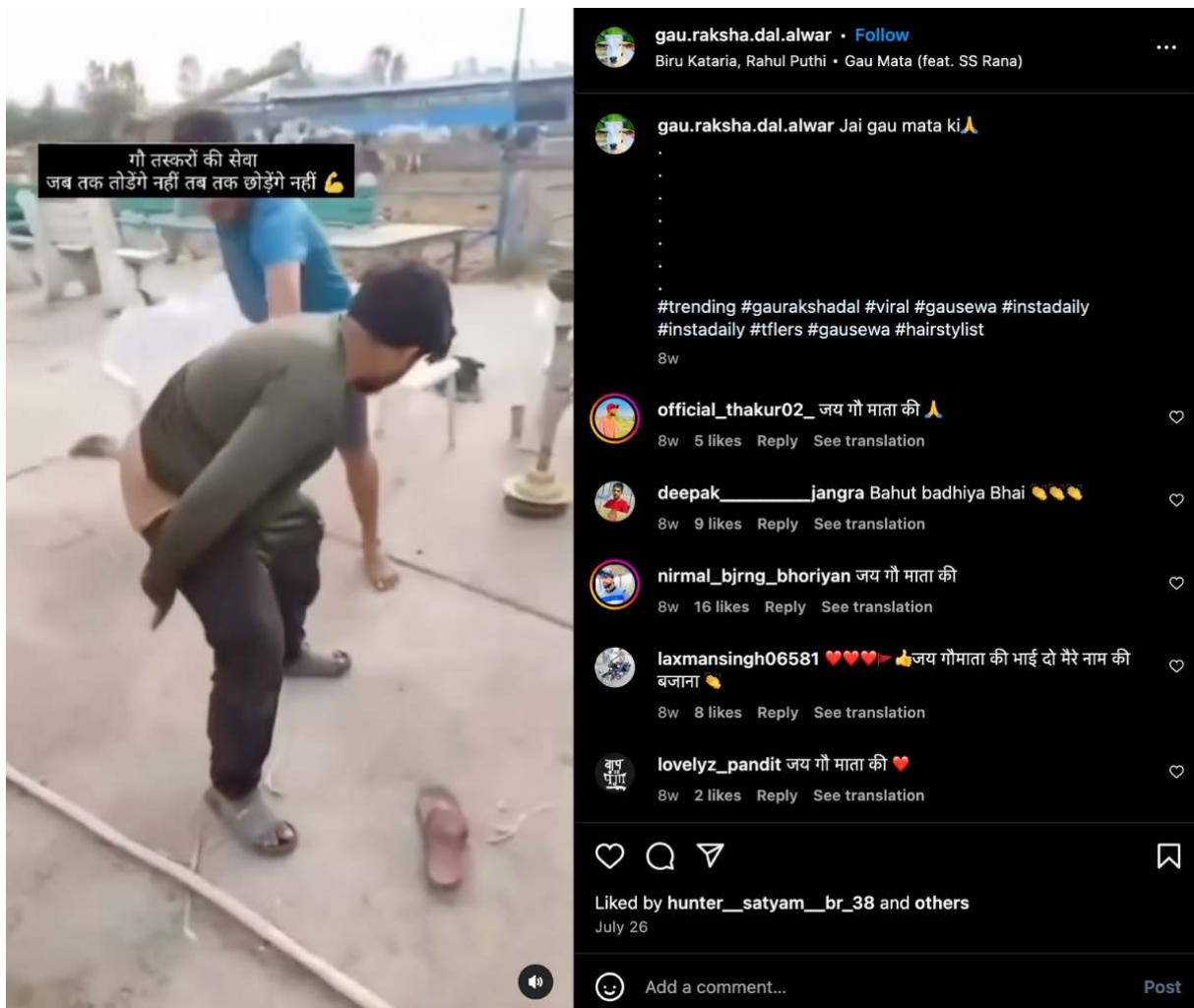
(Link to the post in the screenshot here/archive: 83.4k plays)

The analysis reveals that reels depicting vigilante violence—such as physical violence and dangerous high-speed truck chases—attracted approximately three times more views on the platform than other reels posted by the same accounts that did not feature violence.

Reels Showing Vigilante Violence Receive More Plays

Instagram reels showing violence by cow vigilantes, including high-speed dangerous chases and physical violence, receive a higher number of plays on average than other videos posted by the same accounts which didn't show violence.

■ Average plays on reels with vigilante violence   ■ Average plays on other reels

Overall (all 20 accounts analyzed)
73,764

@gau.raksha.dal.alwar
326,467

@bajrang_dal_phaltan
25,523

@gau_savak_haryana
15,120

@cow_protection_manesar_
6,325

@gaurakshadalpunjab
1,255

From its database of cow vigilante accounts, CSOH analyzed the 20 most-followed accounts that have posted content depicting vigilantes engaging in physical violence and are still operational and public. For each of these accounts, the 10 most recent Instagram reels were analyzed.

Source: Center for the Study of Organized Hate (CSOH) · Created with **Datawrapper**

As a result of the popularity of these accounts and their link with Hindu nationalist religious and political organizations, there has been a rise in symbolic expressions and performances of aggressive militarism by young men on social media who wish to imitate these vigilantes.[54] These young men often cannot physically join in the violence, so they choose to put up images and videos of themselves holding various traditional weapons such as swords, machetes, or knives, while also displaying religious symbols or caste-based slogans on their social media accounts.

Copycat terrorism is a well documented phenomenon in far-right terrorism.[55]

Online platforms have been used by far-right terrorists in the United States, New Zealand, Germany, Norway, and Sweden, in order to share their manifestos, messages, and even livestream their attacks. Videos uploaded by cow vigilantes pose a clear risk of inspiring copycat terrorist acts.

A tragic actualization of this possibility recently occurred in Faridabad, Haryana where a group of 'wannabe' cow vigilantes shot a19-year-old student dead, mistaking him to be a cow smuggler.[56] Two things stood out from this case. One, the widespread outcry over the brazen nature of the crime was significant since the victim was Hindu, whereas similar crimes against Muslims have received scant attention from news media.[57] Two, one of the assailants, Anil Kaushik, was inspired by cow vigilantes such as Monu Manesar into starting his own organization, called "Live for Nation," and was known locally to be involved in violent cow protection activities.[58]

5 The Economy Behind Cow Vigilantism

I n this section we look at the clearest case of Meta's complicity in furthering the ability of these vigilante accounts to terrorize minorities in India. As mentioned above, Meta classifies "support" of dangerous groups and individuals as objectionable. It defines support to mean, "Any act which improves the financial status of a designated entity – including funneling money towards or away from a designated entity" or "any act which provides material aid to a designated entity or event." Now, given that Meta has not deemed these groups as dangerous as per its classification, despite their clear and repeated engagement in violence as outlined in this report, the groups' use of the platform to raise funds is a particularly concerning practice.

Below we highlight multiple posts that include appeals for funds directly by these accounts in order to support their fight against alleged "traffickers". These posts are often couched in hateful language that directly or indirectly targets minorities. When combined with videos depicting harassment and violence against minorities, the financial support is garnered in order to directly support cow vigilante activities that harm minorities in India. By allowing these accounts the platform to fundraise, Meta directly facilitates an expansion of cow vigilante activity. The money directly strengthens these groups and individuals, while also allowing them to expand their reach to users who might be based away from the regions where they operate. These accounts can now seek financial support through Instagram. The lack of accountability around how these funds are raised and used raises further questions about Meta's failure to crack down on these accounts.

In addition to fundraising through social media, in many states like Haryana, vigilante groups are often supported financially by state governments. The notorious vigilante Monu Manesar was part of a civil defense team formed by the state, and many of the vigilantes receive salaries for their work. As a result, platforms like Instagram function as a tool, enabling these accounts to whip up hysteria around anti-Muslim beliefs and attitudes that form a core part of their hateful ideology, as a means to raise financial resources. In its failure to remove such posts, Meta has consistently facilitated anti-minority vigilante violence and is clearly complicit in the targeting of minorities in India through its platforms.

5.1 Bringing in the Bucks: Vigilante Fundraising

CSOH also analyzed multiple cow vigilante accounts that posted calls for donations on their Instagram profiles, in the content of their posts, their captions, or their Instagram stories.

Half of the accounts that had calls for donations on their Instagram pages also posted content showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle. The accounts also had posts showing vigilantes engaging in dangerous car chases against trucks transporting cattle. Among these accounts,
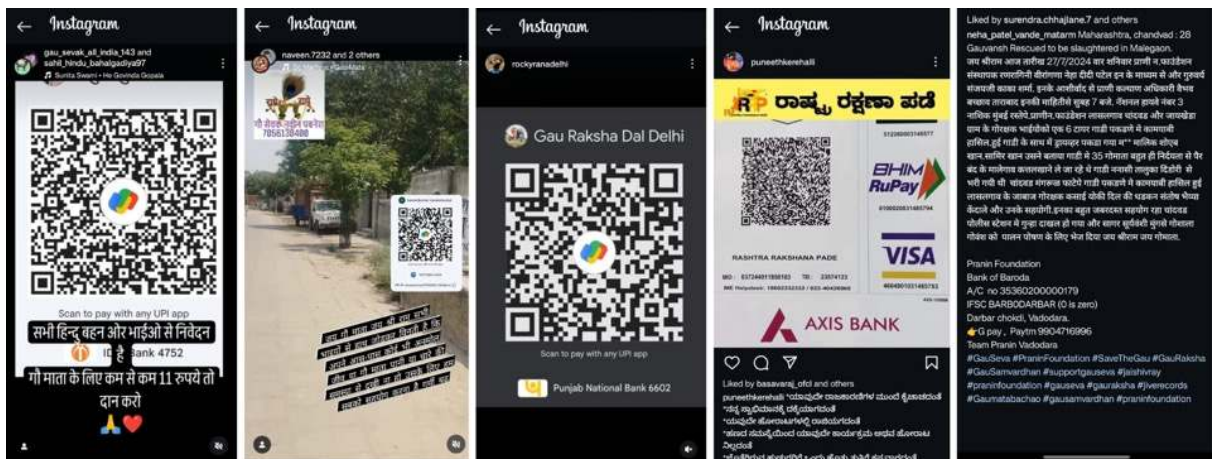
(Links to the posts in the screenshots: first from left/archive, second/archive, third/archive, fourth/ archive, fifth/archive)

the handle with the highest number of followers was an Instagram account"@ rocky.rana_official." The account had 57.4k followers and posted content showing vigilantes ,including himself, engaging in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle. In September 2024, news reports on cow vigilantism in Delhi mentioned that Rocky Rana's account would post videos showing him engaging in physical violence.[59][60]

Five of the fundraising accounts had more than 10,000 followers. Each of them had posted content showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle. The usernames of the five accounts are:

- @rocky.rana_official (57.4k followers)

- @go.raksha.dal (37.7k followers)

- @puneethkerehalli (20.3k followers)

- @rockyranadelhi (18.4k followers)

- @neha_patel_vande_matarm (11.2k followers)

The individual named in the third of the five accounts, Puneeth Kerehalli, has over half a dozen criminal cases against him, according to a July 2024 report in *The Hindu*.[61][62] The report further mentions that he was arrested for the murder of 39-year-old Idrees Pasha in April 2023, in an incident of cow vigilantism.

As many as 75% of the fundraising accounts were personal accounts. Only five of them were accounts representing groups or organizations. An Instagram account with the handle "@gau_sevak_all_india_143" was one of the vigilante accounts attempting to raise funds. In a collaboration post shared along with "@sahil_hindu_ bahalgadiya97", the accounts appealed to their followers, "Our request to all our Hindu sisters and brothers is that you should at least donate 11 rupees for our gau mata." Gau mata, which translates to "mother cow," is a phrase that denotes reverence for the cow, an animal considered sacred by many Hindus.

Given that the vigilante account "@gau_sevak_all_india_143" asks people to donate

to the "gau mata," it is worth noting that CSOH found that the account was posting content depicting vigilantes engaged in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle.

The account displayed a Google Pay QR code in a post requesting donations, alongside the Indian IDBI Bank logo.

Google Pay is a digital wallet and payment platform by Google. It is one of the platforms by which users in India avail the benefits of the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), an instant real-time payment system developed by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) to facilitate inter-bank transactions made via mobile phones.

The following examples illustrate how fundraising details and QR codes were also shared through Instagram stories.
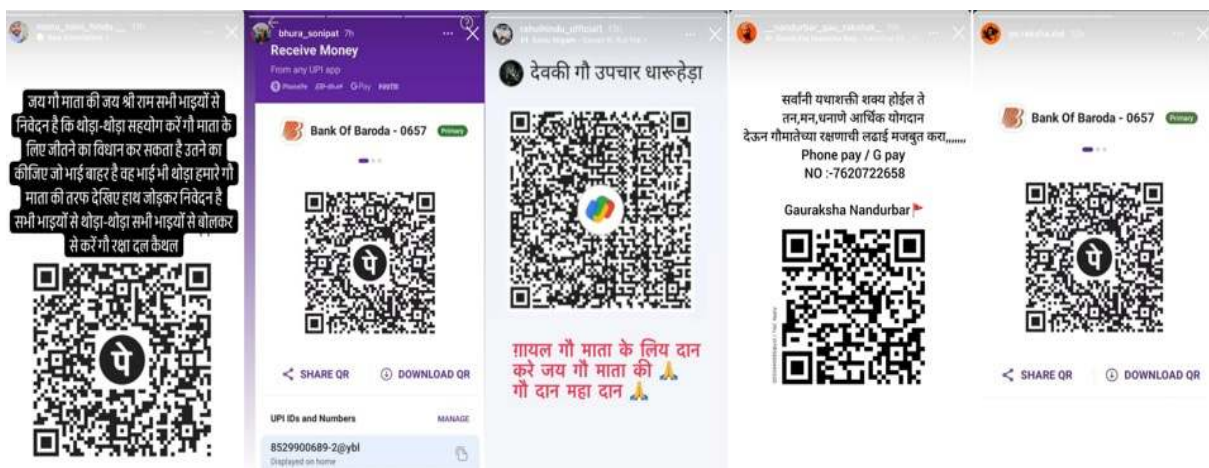
CSOH analyzed the payment methods shared by multiple vigilante Instagram accounts that have posted content on the social media platform with an appeal for contributions and donations.

Several of the accounts shared Google Pay details. Around half of them shared Google Pay QR codes, and the others mentioned Google Pay in their post or caption along with other payment method options. Multiple accounts shared PhonePe details, including PhonePe QR codes. PhonePe is a digital wallet and online payment application in India.

The banks linked to these fundraising initiatives were evident in several of the accounts and their posts. The following eight banks featured in the list: IDBI Bank, UCO Bank, Punjab National Bank, Axis Bank, Bank of Baroda, ICICI Bank, Janata Sahakari Bank - Pune, and Yes Bank.

Interestingly, the Instagram account "@i_monumanesar," which claims to be the "official account" of Monu Manesar, a popular cow vigilante leader accused of multiple murders and currently jailed, routinely posts appeals for contributions through stories.

Such open promotion of Google Pay QR codes and other UPI details by vigilante accounts as a fundraising tool for their violent vigilantism raises concerns and questions not just of Meta, whose platform these calls are being made on, but also of the banks and payment platforms involved in these transactions, such as Google Pay and PhonePe.
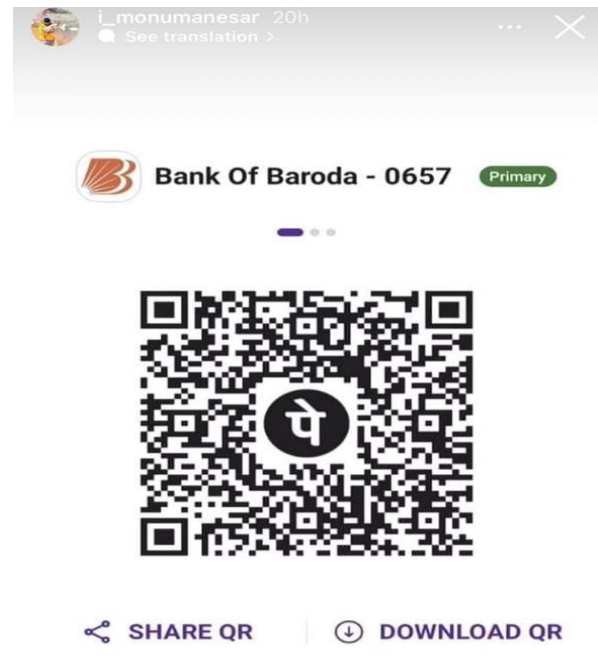
5.2 'Send Gifts' for Cow Vigilante Violence

In May 2023, Instagram launched the Gifts feature for accounts in India. In the months since, dozens of cow vigilante accounts on Instagram have made use of the "Send Gift" feature on the platform, allowing viewers of their content an opportunity to send them money directly via the social media app. Multiple Instagram reels showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle continue to have the 'Send Gift" feature available on them.

(Links to the posts in the screenshots: first from left/archive, second/archive, third/archive)

According to Instagram, "Gifts on Instagram allow you to show appreciation by purchasing stars and sending virtual gifts on eligible reels. Eligible creators may earn money from your gift if they've onboarded to Instagram Gifts and agreed to the Instagram Gifts Terms of Service."[63]

Further, the platform states that the use of Instagram Gifts is subject to a creator complying with Meta's Community Guidelines and Monetization Policies.[64]

And Instagram's Community Guidelines state, "It's never OK to encourage violence or attack anyone based on their race, ethnicity, national origin, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, disabilities, or diseases."[65]

Of the 150 most-followed accounts that had posts depicting vigilantes engaging in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle, CSOH found that 53 accounts (35.3%), had the "Send Gift" option activated on their reels. Out of the accounts posting content of physical violence, at least 45 of the 100 most-followed accounts (45%) that were still operational had the "Send Gift" option activated on their reels.
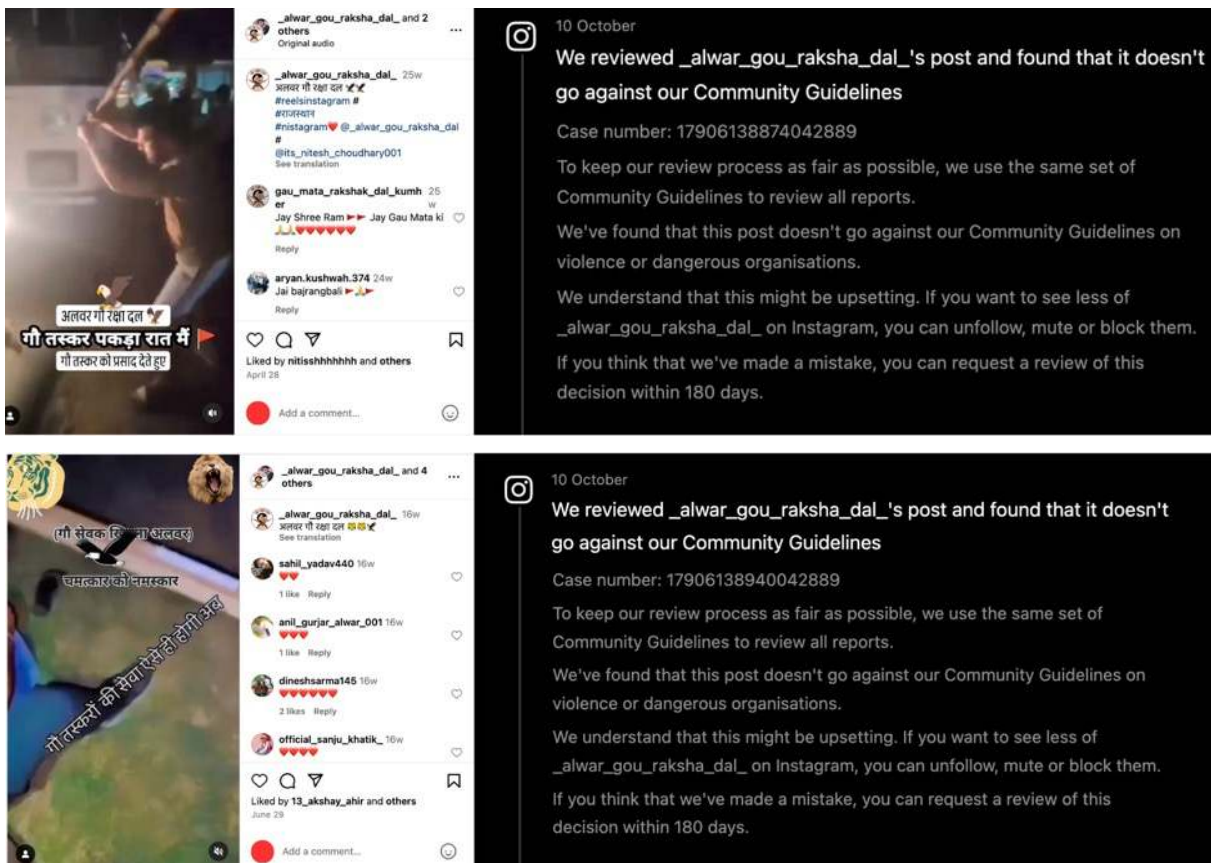
The 'Gift' option is especially prevalent among accounts with larger followings. For instance, out of the accounts posting content depicting physical violence, CSOH found that 26, or more than half, of the top 50 most-followed still operational accounts had the "Send Gift" option activated.

6 Failure to Enforce Community Guidelines

We evaluated the effectiveness of Instagram's reporting tool to determine whether the platform's moderators would take action against hateful content once reported. Between October 6 and October 12, we reported 167 posts depicting physical violence using four separate Instagram accounts in India, selecting the "showing violence, death, or severe injury" option under the "violence, hate, and exploitation" category. Each of these posts violated Instagram's community guidelines in multiple ways, including attacks based on "race, ethnicity, national origin, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, disability, or disease." Most clearly, they all contained explicit depictions of violence, death, or severe injury.

Despite these clear violations, Instagram chose not to remove any of the 167 posts, stating that none breached its community guidelines. This 100% refusal to act highlights Instagram's failure to enforce its own policies, revealing a complete disregard for user safety. Such inaction not only undermines the integrity of Meta's community guidelines but also raises serious concerns about the platform's commitment to "safe and open environment for everyone."[66] [67]

गऊ तस्करो को मोर बना दिया

कर दिया काम जय सियाराम

bajrang_dal_rajsthan2 and 5 others
Masoom Sharma, Manisha Sharma, Su...

bajrang_dal_rajsthan2 25w
Bajrang dal rajsthan2

#reelinstagram #viral #gau #trending
See translation

rahulkarhansiaofficial 25w
2 likes Reply

alpeshgiri_hindu 25w
Jay shree ram ji
2 likes Reply

vijay_dumadiya_official 25w
Jay shree Ram
2 likes Reply See translation

Liked by _raghav_dh123 and others
April 23

Add a comment...

16 October

We reviewed bajrang_dal_rajsthan2's post and found that it doesn't go against our Community Guidelines
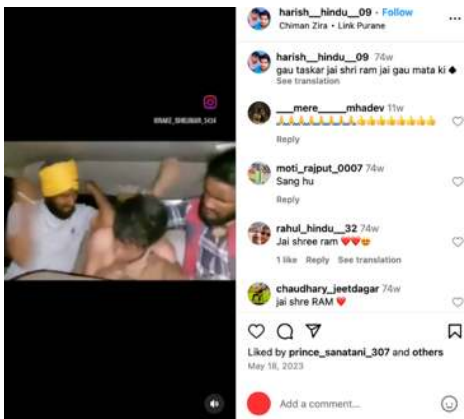
Case number: 17906138985042889

To keep our review process as fair as possible, we use the same set of Community Guidelines to review all reports.

We've found that this post doesn't go against our Community Guidelines on violence or dangerous organisations.

We understand that this might be upsetting. If you want to see less of bajrang_dal_rajsthan2 on Instagram, you can unfollow, mute or block them.

If you think that we've made a mistake, you can request a review of this decision within 180 days.

जीव दया न्युज
@hindu_swarajsena_official2141
छत्तीसगढ़ टिम
गाड़ी 2

एक ओर बड़ी सफलता
8/10/2023

hindu_swarajsena_official2141 and 2 others
Bucks Boy • HINDU SWARAJ (CHATR...

hindu_swarajsena_official2141 54w
@hindu_swarajsena_official2141 follow

अभी तो सस्क्रात है आगे आगे देखो कसाई ओ तुम्हारी खैर नहीं

25 गौवंस

हिन्दू स्वराज सेना
गौ रक्षक दल मनीज हरि रायपुर

कोइ पण व्यक्ति हिन्दु स्वराश सेना मा जोड़ा या भामतु होय तो हिन्दु स्वराश सेना नी ओफीस नो कोन्टेक्ट करो .कोन्टेक्ट नं.9316586960

इतला भाने श्रता जुवो अधयांगा खुन भर्ध आवयी रहयो छे .
गाड़ी भाड़ा ,वकील ई,आतम्होदर ने पैसा आपवा पड़े

Liked by kiru_chavda_007 and others
October 8, 2023

Add a comment...

10 October

We reviewed hindu_swarajsena_official2141's post and found that it doesn't go against our Community Guidelines
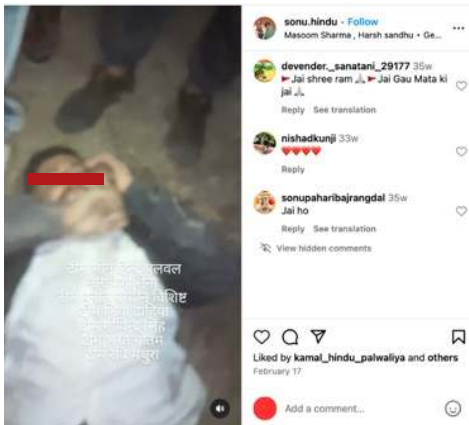
Case number: 17906139036042889

To keep our review process as fair as possible, we use the same set of Community Guidelines to review all reports.

We've found that this post doesn't go against our Community Guidelines on violence or dangerous organisations.

We understand that this might be upsetting. If you want to see less of hindu_swarajsena_official2141 on Instagram, you can unfollow, mute or block them.

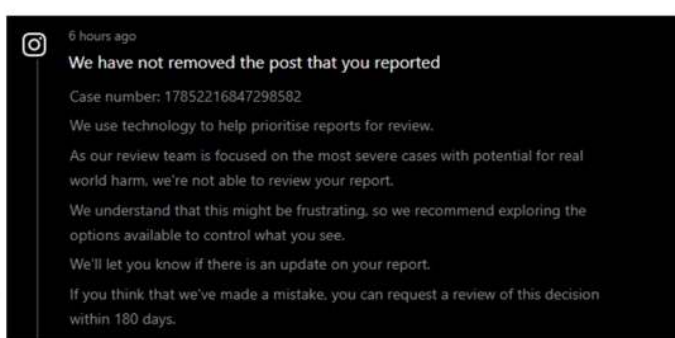If you think that we've made a mistake, you can request a review of this decision within 180 days.

जीव दया न्युज
@Hindu_Swarajsena_official2141

गोरक्षा दल हरियाणा गोरक्षा दल दिल्ली मे || कसाई पकड़े पांच गाड़ी गो कटे हुए पकड़े जय श्री राम जय गौ माता की लाइक और शेयर करे

hindu_swarajsena_offici al2141 · Follow
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hindu_swarajsena_official2141 56w
कितनी बार Report मैराग video को उतनी बार डालूंगा
@hindu_swarajsena_official2141 follow l'd

#hanuman
#hindu
#hariyana
#hindusawaraj
#gausevak
#gaumata
#gaumaatabachao #
#hanuman
#gaumaatabachao
#gujarat
#maharashtra
#madhayapradesh
#reels

Liked by ig_wolfxplays and others
September 20, 2023

Add a comment...

10 October

We reviewed hindu_swarajsena_official2141's post and found that it doesn't go against our Community Guidelines

Case number: 17906139051042889

To keep our review process as fair as possible, we use the same set of Community Guidelines to review all reports.

We've found that this post doesn't go against our Community Guidelines on violence or dangerous organisations.

We understand that this might be upsetting. If you want to see less of hindu_swarajsena_official2141 on Instagram, you can unfollow, mute or block them.

If you think that we've made a mistake, you can request a review of this decision within 180 days.
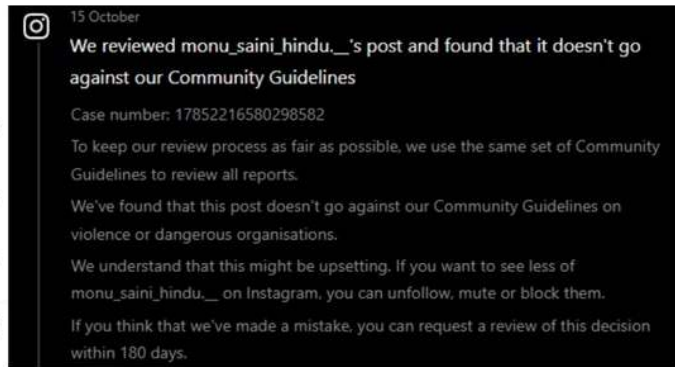
harish__hindu__09 · Follow
Chiman Zira • Link Purane

harish__hindu__09 74w
gau taskar jai shri ram jai gau mata ki
See translation

___mere_____mhadev 11w
Reply

moti_rajput_0007 74w
Sang hu
Reply

rahul_hindu__32 74w
Jai shree ram
1 like Reply See translation

chaudhary_jeetdagar 74w
jai shre RAM
Reply

Liked by prince_sanatani_307 and others
May 18, 2023

Add a comment...

10 October

We reviewed harish__hindu__09's post and found that it doesn't go against our Community Guidelines

Case number: 17906139303042889

To keep our review process as fair as possible, we use the same set of Community Guidelines to review all reports.

We've found that this post doesn't go against our Community Guidelines on violence or dangerous organisations.

We understand that this might be upsetting. If you want to see less of harish__hindu__09 on Instagram, you can unfollow, mute or block them.

If you think that we've made a mistake, you can request a review of this decision within 180 days.

(Links to the posts in the screenshots: [first](#)/[archive](#), [second](#)/[archive](#), [third](#)/[archive](#), [fourth](#)/[archive](#), [fifth](#)/[archive](#), [sixth](#)/[archive](#), [seventh](#)/[archive](#), [eighth](#)/[archive](#), [ninth](#)/[archive](#), [tenth](#)/[archive](#), [eleventh](#)/[archive](#), [twelfth](#)/[archive](#))

7 The Vast Network of Vigilantes

Of the 1,023 accounts which were active at the time of data analysis on follower counts, as many as 119 accounts or 12% of the accounts had more than 10,000 followers.

Forty-nine of those accounts (4.8%) had more than 25,000 followers. 21 of these accounts had more than 50,000 followers. Twelve accounts had more than 75,000 followers, and eight accounts had followings greater than 100,000.

Of the 10 accounts with the highest number of followers, each account had posts showing vigilantes engaging in dangerous high speed chases with trucks transporting cattle. Two of the 10 accounts with the highest number of followers had posts showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle. An Instagram account with "kattar__sanatani__hindu_11" as the handle name and "@Banti_kashyap" as the username, has the third highest number of followers of all the cow vigilante accounts in the CSOH database. This account, with 226,000 followers on Instagram, has posted content showing vigilantes engaging in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle.

Similarly, the account "@bajrang.dal.hindu__" has also posted content showing vigilantes engaging in violence and boasted more than 98,000 followers at the time of data analysis. The 1,023 accounts had an average follower count of 5,741, and a median follower count of 950.
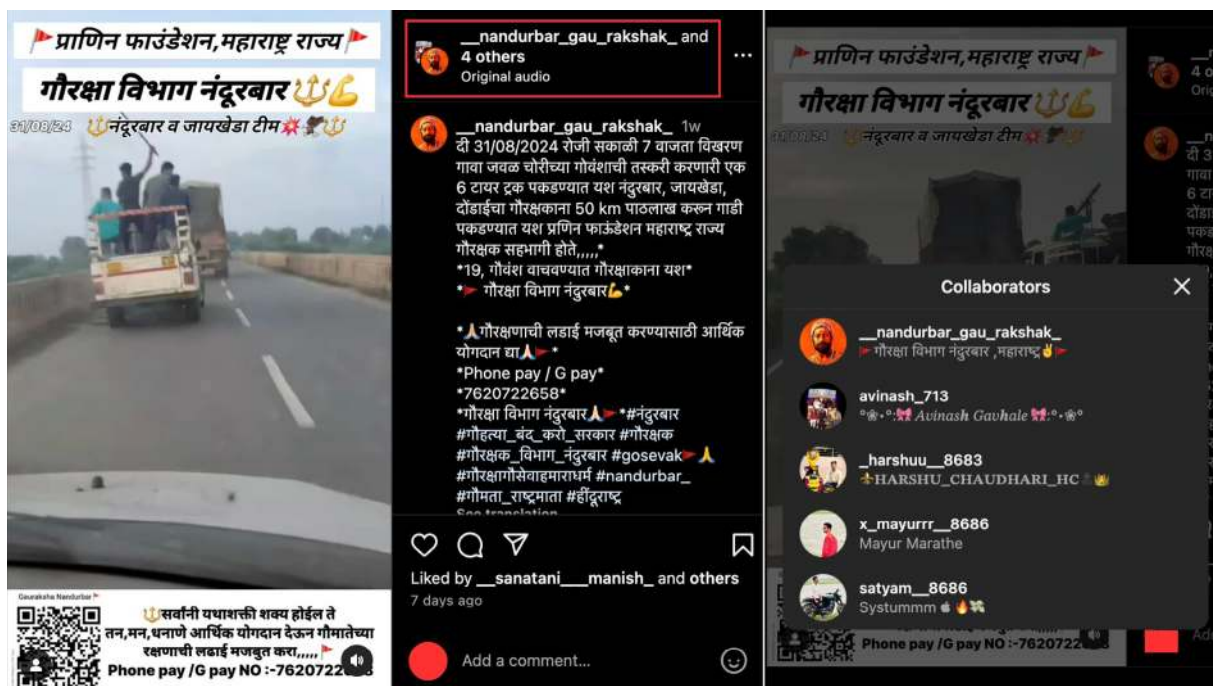
(Link to the post in the screenshot here/archive)

7.1 The Network Effect

The vigilante accounts extensively utilize the collaboration feature on Instagram, with several of their posts appearing as co-posted by multiple accounts. This amplifies the network effect, by making followers of one vigilante account easily gain access to similar vigilante accounts. Each of the co-posting accounts therefore gets to mutually increase the other's reach.This greatly increases their ability to fundraise. For example, take a look at the following post depicting vigilantes dangerously chasing a truck that is purportedly transporting cattle.

This post is a collaboration between as many as five accounts.[68] The first of those five accounts has more than 13,000 followers and the other four had an average follower count of 2,134 at the time of data analysis. The post leverages the reach and following of each of these accounts, while asking those watching to "provide financial support to strengthen the fight for cow protection." It provides PhonePe and Google Pay details where payments can be made, along with a QR code to facilitate the payment process.

Now, notice the bloodied man in the following collaborative post by "@jk_gau_rakshak_chadwal_kathua" and five other accounts.[69] The video is from an incident that took place in late September 2024, and shows a man being assaulted and badly wounded by vigilantes. Uniformed police also appear to be present in the video.

(Link to the post in the screenshot on the next page)

Exactly the same visuals were shared in more than a dozen differently edited posts and reels published by various accounts. Notice the same bloodied man in the following screenshots from other posts.

Across 13 reels showing clips of the same man, these vigilante accounts have racked up more than 127,000 plays with an average of close to 10,000 plays per reel. Several of the accounts that posted the reel are located in the state of Rajasthan.
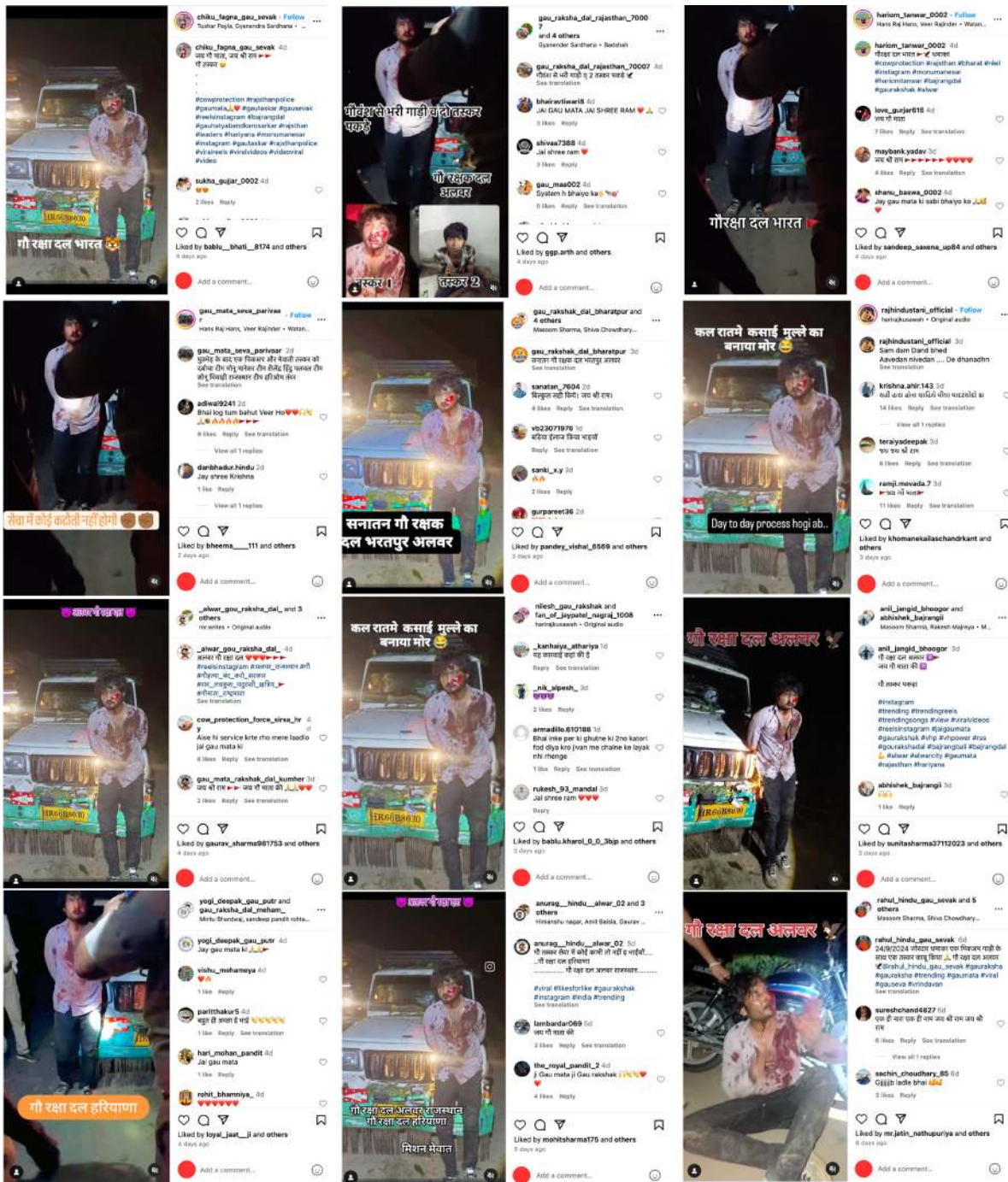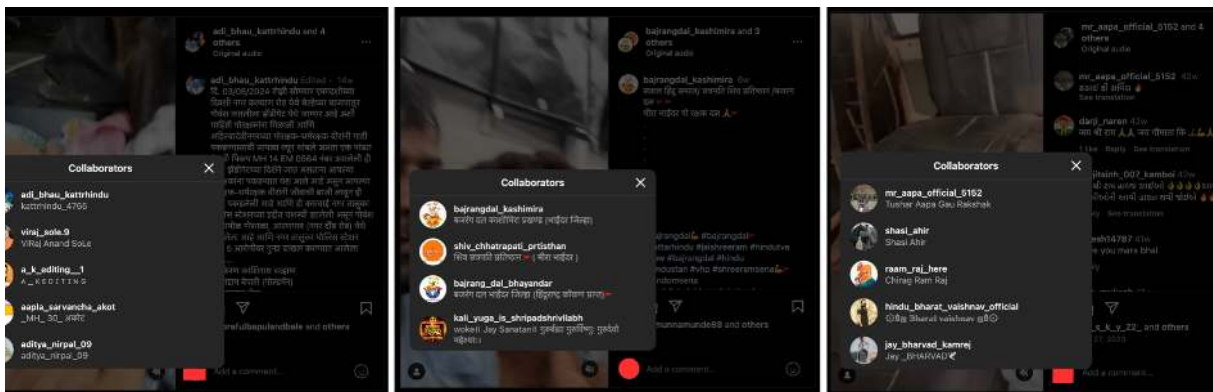

(Link to the posts in the screenshots- 1/archive (Image on page 38), 2/archive, 3/archive, 4/archive, 5/archive, 6/archive, 7/archive, 8/archive, 9/archive, 10/archive, 11/archive, 12/archive, 13/archive)

In another similar example, the following video of vigilantes aggressively interrogating a man whom they claim is a cow smuggler has been posted multiple times across different accounts such as in a collaboration post by "@gau_raksha_dal_haryana_0009" and "@gau_raksha_dal_mewat_." as well as in separate posts by "@gau_sevak_all_india_143" and '@gau_raksha_dal__rewari."[70 71 72]

(Links to the posts in the screenshots: first from left/archive, second/archive, third/archive)

Here are more examples of the vigilante accounts using collaborations to share posts depicting vigilantes engaging in physical violence against people who were transporting cattle.

(Links to the posts in the screenshots: first from left/archive, second/archive, third/archive)

The proliferation of such posts, and the clear sense of impunity evident therein, effectively serve to   promote these groups and work as a potential tool for recruitment for the vigilante groups themselves.
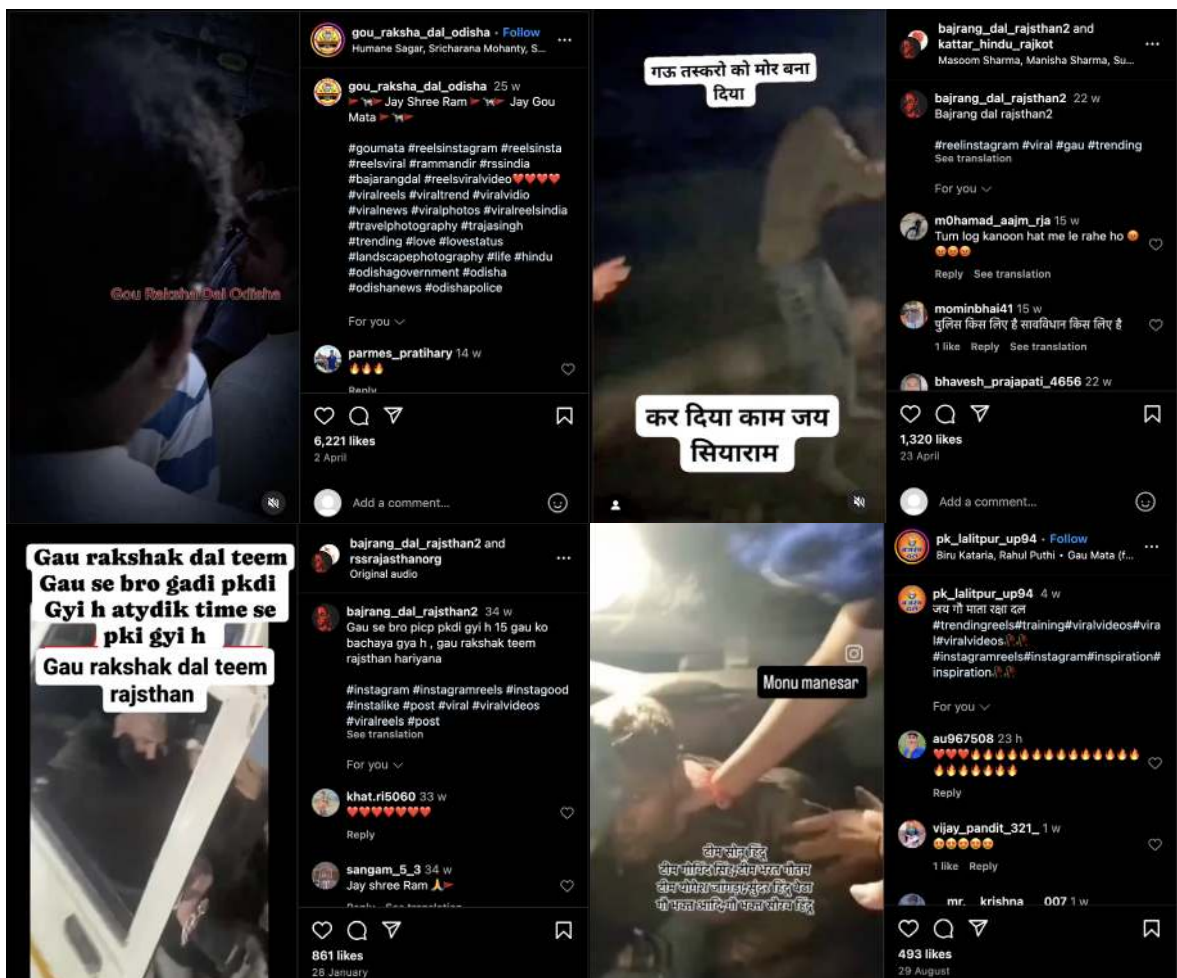
And, despite the fact that these accounts violate Meta's community guidelines, Instagram remains a central platform for hundreds of these cow vigilante accounts to showcase their violence, amplify their reach, and seek funds and support for their continued vigilantism.

8 The Use of Hashtags

The data analysis further highlights the strategic use of hashtags by vigilante accounts, underscoring their effectiveness in spreading their message and increasing engagement. By examining a collection of hashtags used across 121 posts that depict physical violence, a clear pattern emerges that demonstrates how these accounts leverage both popular and niche hashtags to expand reach of their posts.

Of these 121 posts, we analyzed 405 hashtags in total. Most of the accounts frequently employ generic and high-traffic hashtags such as #viral (6.4 million posts), #instagram (1.4 billion posts), #viralvideos (196 million posts), #reels (10.4 billion posts), and #instagood (11.5 million posts). The number here indicates the total number of posts/reels under each hashtag as of October 20, 2024. This deliberate strategy, known as "hashtag hijacking," involves using widely popular and trending hashtags to maximize visibility. By tagging their content with these popular hashtags, vigilante accounts maximize the likelihood that their posts will appear in broader search results and on the "explore" pages of users who may not be specifically seeking such content. This tactic broadens their audience and enhances the visibility of their posts.

(Link to the posts in screenshots: first/archive, second/archive, third/archive, fourth/archive, fifth/archive)

More notably, there is significant use of religious and cultural hashtags like #hindu, #ram, #jaishreeram, #hanuman, and #जयश्रीराम. These tags are deliberately employed to tie their activities to religious sentiments and cultural identity. By invoking these themes, they aim to resonate with individuals with similar beliefs, potentially increasing engagement and support.

(Link to the posts in the screenshots: first/archive, second/archive, third/archive)

Hashtags explicitly promoting cow protection and related activities, such as #गौहत्या_बंद_करो_सरकार ("Stop cow slaughter, government"), #गौमाता_राष्ट्रमाता ("Cow mother, nation's mother"), #कट्टरहिन्दू ("Hardcore Hindu"), and #हिंदुत्व ("Hindutva"), emphasize their focus on cow protection and Hindu nationalist ideology.

Additionally, the hashtag #monumanesar appears multiple times among the vigilante posts. Monu Manesar is a cow vigilante leader, currently in jail for his role in the murder of two Muslim men in 2023. By including the hashtag #monumanesar, these accounts not only leverage his prominence to amplify their message, but also support him and his actions.

These hashtags have collectively generated 175,363 posts, with 59,407 specifically centered on "cow protection" and play a crucial role in engaging audiences interested in the cause and in fostering a community around their mission.

(Links to the posts in screenshots: first/archive, second/archive, third, fourth/archive, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth.)

Regional hashtags like #rajasthan, #haryana and #alwar indicate a targeted approach to mobilize support and coordinate activities within specific geographical areas.
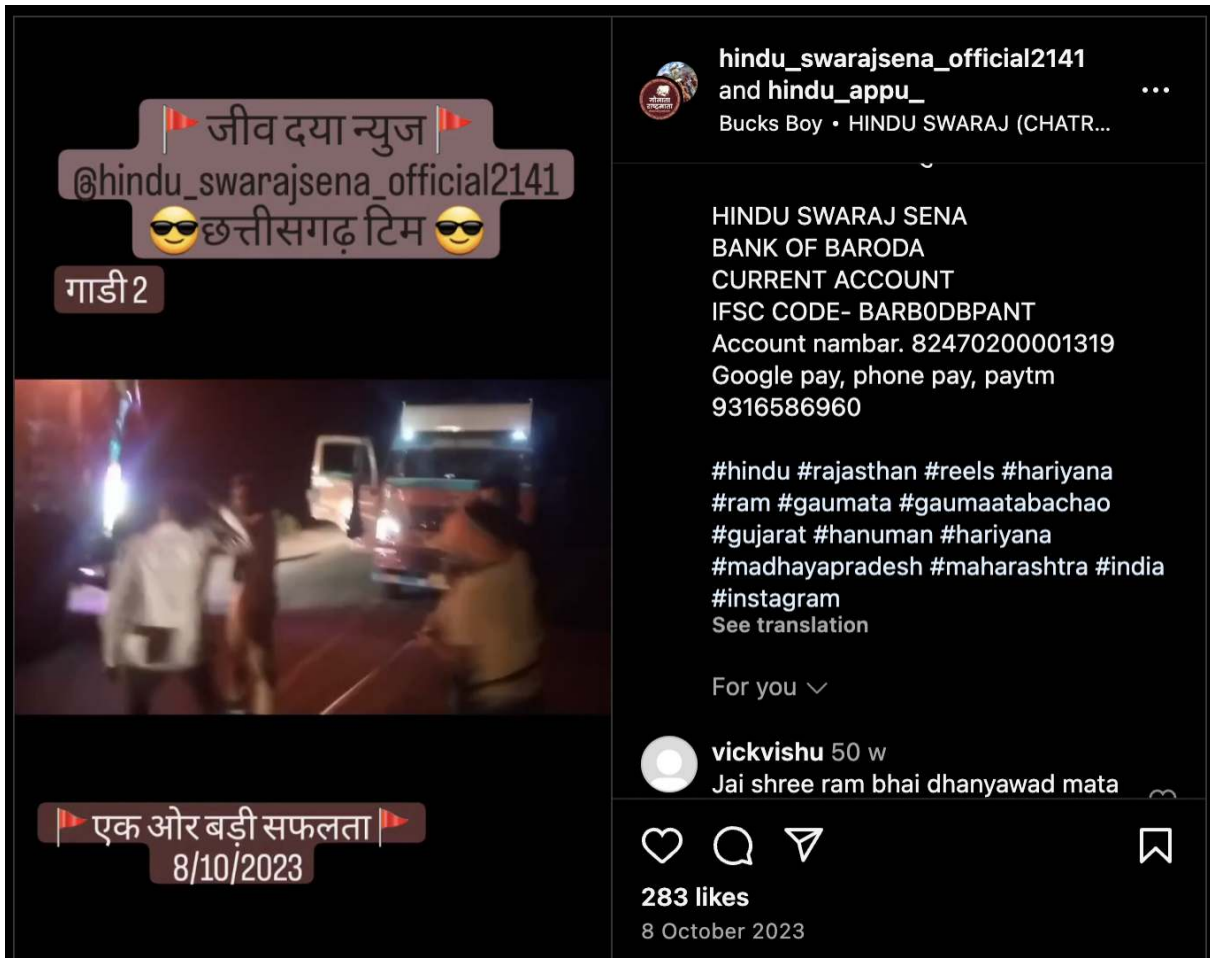
(Link to the posts in screenshots: here/archive)

Furthermore, the inclusion of hashtags associated with certain organizations and ideologies—such as #bajrangdal, #hindutva, #hindurashtra, and #बजरंगदल—reflects their ideological alignment with specific movements or groups. This association amplifies the movement's reach within like-minded circles and reinforces narratives that resonate with their target audience.

(Link to the posts in screenshots: first/archive, second/archive)

The repetition and consistency of these hashtags across multiple posts and accounts has a network effect, amplifying the visibility of their content. By tapping into trending hashtags and combining them with specific thematic tags, the vigilante accounts increase the likelihood of their posts being discovered by a broader audience. This strategy is effective: it increases their reach and enhances the potential for recruitment and support.

Despite the fact that this violent content violates Meta's community guidelines,, the strategic use of hashtags remains a potent tool for Hindu nationalists/cow vigilante groups. It enables them to showcase their activities, propagate their messages, and rally support. The proliferation of such content underscores the challenges in moderating and controlling the spread of violent content, particularly when it is veiled within popular and culturally significant hashtags.

9 Meta's Complicity

The unmitigated spread of violent accounts produced and shared by cow vigilantes from across India reflect the Meta's abject failure and complicity in popularizing such content. Meta is fundamentally complicit, due to their clear lack of accountability and failure to address the violent content shared on their platforms by cow vigilantes. Despite the widely reported involvement of such accounts in numerous instances of violence against Muslims, they continue to operate unchecked and with impunity on Meta-owned social media platforms. Our analysis in this report reveals a string of failures by Meta that allow for hateful content to proliferate and normalize vigilante violence. We draw attention to the marked increase of highly graphic and violent content on the platform, uncensored content that draws significant engagement from Meta's user base. We also highlight how vigilante accounts use Meta's platform to fundraise by sharing QR codes to payment apps or bank details, and through the "Send Gift" feature, all of which directly enrich these groups and allow them to continue their violent activities.

In 2018, the Indian Supreme Court issued a set of guidelines and directives to state governments and police forces to address the issue of lynchings, which are clearly linked to the actions of Hindu nationalist affiliated vigilante groups.[73] The court's order reflected an awareness of the growing threat that these groups pose,and acknowledged their impact on the lives and livelihoods of minorities in India. However, there has not been a corresponding acknowledgement by Meta of taking the issue of vigilante violence on its platform seriously, an indifference that has resulted in events such as the widely publicized Monu Manesar case referenced in the introduction. Manesar's brazen exercise of vigilante violence against Muslims offers a glaring example of how vigilante accounts merge offline and online hate through their actions. This is relevant as a key aspect of vigilante action is not only the immediate threat to life and property of the victim, but also the wider climate of fear, surveillance, and coercion that is created through such action.

Meta is in a crucial position because its platforms play a central role in the proliferation of vigilante content. By allowing these accounts to evade community guidelines and avoid any strict sanctions, Meta allows them to valorize vigilante action, Meta also routinely facilitates monetary gain for these accounts through its platforms. In this section we look at two areas where Meta's policies have, willfully or otherwise, failed to keep up with the growth of hateful and violent content on its platforms despite repeated reporting and advocacy.

9.1 Meta's Policy Enforcement Failure

"In an effort to prevent and disrupt real-world harm, we do not allow organizations or individuals that proclaim a violent mission or are engaged in violence to have a presence on our platforms. We assess these entities based on their behavior both online and offline – most significantly, their ties to violence"

— Source: Meta Policy Rationale for Dangerous organizations and individuals.[74]

The above paragraph from Meta's policy rationale document highlights an admirable and comprehensive objective to combat the use of its platforms for spreading hateful conduct that may or may not translate into real-world harm. The findings laid out in this report highlight the obvious contradiction and failure in the actual enforcement of this aim by Meta. As the report highlights, Instagram is rife with accounts of vigilantes who use their platform to promote hateful content, publicize acts of actual violence against minorities, and glorify the use of violence by vigilantes. The failure of Meta to classify and designate these accounts as part of its policy is a clear failure of enforcement.

There have been widely published reports by the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and Human Rights Watch, among others, that have highlighted the ways in which Meta has failed to fulfill its policy objectives linked to the spread of hate speech and violent conduct in India.[75][76][77] A critical aspect of this inaction is linked to the political incentives in appeasing the Indian government and the potential for significant economic gain from operating in the world's most populous nation. In the past, Meta executives have been exposed for having ties to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, which reflects a clear potential for partisan bias, given the ideological, political, and material alignment between vigilante groups and the wider Hindu nationalist organizational structure.[78]

In addition to this, the *WSJ* has reported that Meta's internal reports highlighting the hateful content spread by RSS affiliates like the *Bajrang Dal*, a Hindu militant youth group, recommended a complete ban for these groups on Meta's platform. However, Meta "balked at removing the *Bajrang Dal* from the platform following warnings in a report from its security team that cracking down on the group might endanger both the company's business prospects and its staff in India and risk infuriating Mr. Modi's political party."[80] In such a context, it is no surprise that Meta has been inconsistent in comprehensively applying its own policies to content by these accounts. Nonetheless, it is crucial to review Meta's policy to highlight the ways in which hateful content is allowed to flourish on the platform using examples from the dataset compiled by the CSOH team.

According to the policy rationale quoted above, Meta states that it designates groups or individuals between two tiers. Tier 1 includes "entities that engage in serious offline harm – including organizing or advocating for violence against civilians, repeatedly dehumanizing or advocating for harm against people based on protected characteristics or engaging in systematic criminal operations."[81] Tier 2, on the other hand, includes "Violent Non-State Actors that engage in violence against state or military actors in an armed conflict."[82] Given the findings of , we can unequivocally argue that vigilante groups in India lie squarely within the criteria for Tier 1 organizations. These groups and individuals regularly engage in serious offline harm, organize and advocate violence against civilians, primarily Muslims, and promote and produce hateful content targeting Muslims based on their protected characteristic, i.e., religious affiliation.

Meta's policy rationale with regard to dangerous organizations further includes two aspects that make its inaction with respect to accounts in India particularly glaring. This includes their focus on removing a "Hate Entity" which is defined "as an organization or individual that spreads and encourages hate against others based

on their protected characteristics." In addition to this, Meta also includes "Hateful Ideologies" as part of its dangerous groups and individuals rubric. Here, they add that "we recognize that there are certain ideologies and beliefs that are inherently tied to violence and attempts to organize people around calls for violence or exclusion of others based on their protected characteristics." It is curious to note that Meta's own example of such ideologies includes Nazism, which might be an obvious case, but also others such as White supremacy and White nationalism — more recent manifestations of ethno-nationalist political developments in the United States and beyond. In this vein, it is inexcusable for Meta to not include hateful ideologies such as Hindu nationalism, or the Islamophobic and genocidal ideology that led to the massacre and displacement of Rohingyas in Myanmar, a much-publicized case of Meta's policy failure. The discrepancy in definition and application reflects an inherent disregard for an understanding of hateful ideologies and their tenets beyond the Western world, complicated further by the financial incentives of operating in these markets.

One of the reasons we highlight Meta's failure to classify these accounts under its policy is that when individuals or groups are within Tier 1, Meta removes all posts linked with what it terms "Glorification," "Support," and "Representation" linked to these accounts. While the subsequent section of the report focuses on the subject of support, it is important to note the role that glorification plays in promoting hateful content here as well. As outlined above, the presence of vigilante outfits on Instagram facilitates their popularity within the public realm while also facilitating avenues for political and material support to these groups. In light of this, glorification of such violence serves to normalize Islamophobic beliefs and attitudes among viewers of these accounts, which is then further amplified on the platform through the network of collaborations between these accounts.

According to Meta's policy rationale, glorification takes three forms that are deemed harmful and merit removal. These are:

1.   Legitimizing or defending the violent or hateful acts of a designated entity by claiming that those acts have a moral, political, logical or other justification.

2. Characterizing or celebrating the violence or hate of a designated entity as an achievement or accomplishment.

3. An aspirational statement of membership or statement that you would like to be a designated entity or the perpetrator of a violating violent event.

10 Conclusion

The unchecked proliferation of violent content by cow vigilante groups on Meta's platforms underscores a profound failure of the company to uphold its own community guidelines and to take responsibility for the real-world consequences of the content that it hosts in the Indian context. Despite clear directives from the Indian Supreme Court and widespread reports highlighting the dangerous activities of cow vigilante groups, Meta's inaction reflects its troubling complicity, driven in part by political considerations and economic incentives in one of its largest markets. This has profound implications for the safety of minorities, inter-community social relations, the rule of law and order, and democracy in India.

The power of Meta to impact Indian society is directly connected to India's importance for Meta. Instagram is the third most popular social media platform in the world and India is its biggest market in terms of users, boasting a staggering 362 million users as of January 2024.[83] India is also home to the largest number of users for two other Meta entities, Facebook and WhatsApp. Facebook has over 378 million users in India and WhatsApp usage is projected to reach almost 800 million users by 2025. India is also the largest market for Meta's AI chatbot.[84] [85] [86] [87]

Meta's revenue from India in 2023 was more than 27 billion rupees ($320 million). Meta's past record of hesitation in addressing hateful content generated by Hindu nationalist and Hindu far right accounts as well as the economic value of the Indian market for Meta are cause for serious concern. The key challenge for Meta, as for other social media firms operating in India, is that cow vigilante initiatives and accounts share the underlying ideological commitments of the Hindu nationalist BJP government and Hindu nationalist organizations. As our report has revealed, these groups have also been enabled, supported, and empowered by state-level programs in BJP-ruled states, to act as proxies for state authorities with regard to cow protection movements.

Additionally, over the past decade, the BJP government has been relentless in cracking down on media organizations that have been critical of its policies, part of a broader and serious erosion of press freedom in the country.[88] India ranked 161 out of 180 in terms of press freedom in 2023, according to Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index, falling 25 places during a decade of Modi rule. The Modi government has also weaponized the use of digital technologies and platforms, with one set of rules applying to accounts that promote Hindu nationalist ideology, including hateful content, and another to accounts critical of the government and Hindu nationalist policy.[89] The Modi government has also threatened punitive and retributive action against social media firms whose actions they disapprove of.[90]

This context might explain the systematic failure on the part of Meta to enforce policies designed to combat hate speech and violence given that some clear remedies are already available to the corporation. The potential categorization of vigilante organizations as Tier 1 threats under Meta's guidelines, for instance, should prompt immediate action, yet cow vigilante accounts continue to flourish,

raising serious concerns about the platform's commitment to user safety and ethical governance. The platform not only allows the glorification of violence but also enables financial support for these groups through features like "Send Gifts," further entrenching a culture of violence and intimidation. The inconsistencies in Meta's application of its policies, particularly regarding the classification of ideologies that incite violence, indicate both indifference and a lack of nuanced understanding and responsiveness to the complexities of hate groups operating outside the U.S. This oversight perpetuates a dangerous environment where hateful ideologies, including violent Hindu nationalism, are allowed to thrive unchecked.

The potential destruction to the social fabric of India cannot be underestimated. The inaction of Meta on cow vigilante accounts contributes to real physical danger, threats to life, and a near-permanent state of precarity in which Indian Muslims and other minorities find themselves. This inaction incentivizes others to join these groups or start similar ventures for financial gain and popularity. It also erodes faith in democratic institutions, law and order, and the possibility of justice and, indeed, contributes to the weakening of these institutions through complicity in the actions of cow vigilante groups. None of this augurs well for Indian democracy and severely undermines the claim of Meta that its platforms enable human connection, strengthen community, and improve the lives of users.

Accordingly, the evidence presented in this report calls for urgent and meaningful action from Meta. Their responsibility is not just to remove harmful content but also to foster a safer digital landscape that actively combats hate and supports the principles of justice and equity. To that effect, the subsequent section outlines some recommendations for Meta.

11 Recommendations

I n light of the report, we recommend some of the following steps for Meta to consider for its platforms in order to reduce the prevalence of cow vigilante accounts on Meta platforms:

1. Designation, Classification and Effective Action

a. Designate accounts identified as engaging in vigilantism under the name of cow protection as Tier-1 dangerous organizations: Actions of these accounts with respect to their involvement in offline harm through the organization and enactment of violence is clear ground for these accounts to be designated as Tier-1 dangerous organizations. Such classification can offer one way through which vigilante accounts and activity can be curtailed through social media while also ensuring that the ability of these accounts to recruit, influence, and fundraise through Instagram is severely limited.

b. Explicitly classify and identify cow vigilante "chases" as content that displays vandalism and hence violates Instagram's community guidelines: Most of these dangerous high-speed chases involve threats of physical harm and vandalism. Our report suggests that this content almost always includes slurs against marginalized communities and is often associated with violence against Muslims. Classifying it as such may improve Instagram's use of artificial intelligence technology to detect and remove any violations of its community guidelines.[91]

c. Immediately disable the "Send Gift" option for all cow vigilante accounts, including all accounts identified in the report: These gifts enable such violent accounts to fundraise for their activities, making the production of violence a financially viable activity.

2. Steps for Proactive Detection and Removal

a. Proactively detect hate accounts and remove from the platform: While it may not be possible to detect, identify, and remove every single instance of hate content from the platform in real time, Meta should be more proactive about removing accounts that create such content. Moreover, the platform should also ensure that repeat offenders are not allowed back on the platform by creating new accounts.

b. Increase monitoring of accounts associated with cow vigilantism: Under the garb of cow "protection," thousands of accounts are openly promoting violence against marginalized communities. It is imperative that Instagram explicitly recognizes that this is an area of concern and treats these accounts in a manner akin to its treatment of White supremacist groups in the United States. For instance, Facebook has explicitly banned White supremacist and White nationalist content from its platforms, and has flagged common slogans and imagery used by such

groups.[92] The platform should implement a similar policy for cow vigilante content.

c. Cross-platform Media Matching Services (MMS): MMS banks are a collection of "hashed" content, used primarily to detect and take scaled action on media (e.g. image, video) across Facebook and Instagram that violates Meta's Community Standards.[93] Meta needs to ensure that its MMS services can correctly identify cow vigilantism.

d. Allow "batch reporting" of cow vigilantism-related content on Instagram: Meta should allow users to submit evidence of multiple violations by the same account in a single report. As our report shows, there are several cow vigilante accounts that repeatedly violate Instagram's community guidelines. This policy, previously recommended in other contexts by PEN and the Anti-Defamation League, will allow for users to identify such coordinated and repeated patterns of behavior and report them in a single instance.[94] [95]

3. Improving Transparency and Accountability for Moderation Decisions

a. Increase diversity of the team which enforces Instagram's community guidelines: Social media corporations, including Meta and its entities, should have adequate representation of marginalized communities within the Indian context, including Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, other religious minorities, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), women, and members of the LGBTQI+ communities.

b. Ensure that all Meta employees re sponsible for the monitoring of content are not associated with the government or a political party: In the past, Meta's monitoring practices in India have been questioned due to interference by then Facebook India policy head Ankhi Das. A Wall Street Journal report found that Das had allegedly made several decisions to prevent any action against anti-Muslim hate speech.[96] The paper's reporting found that Das openly supported the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in internal messages. Similarly, Meta India's current vice-president and Head of Public Policy, Shivnath Thukral, previously worked for Narendra Modi's election campaign in 2013, and has previously owned a stake in Opalina technologies; a company that currently works for Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister's office and the BJP.[97] Thukral's father currently has a stake in the company. Meta should ensure that its key decision-makers are not politically partisan in their implementation of Instagram's community guidelines.

c. Provide a comprehensive explanation for why reported content is not considered to be a violation of the platform's policy: Typically, Instagram's response to reports is very brief and does not fully elucidate the platform's reasoning for determining that a particular incident does not violate its policy. A more detailed explanation will help increase the transparency of the platform and will hopefully ensure that civil society organizations can better understand the policies of these companies and effectively hold them accountable.

d. Conduct, issue, and fully release an Annual Human Rights Assessment

about the impact of Instagram on human rights in India: In the past, Meta has commissioned such human rights assessments, but delayed the release of the full report.[98] For complete transparency, the corporation should commission annual reports on the impact of Instagram on human rights in India and should release the reports as soon as they are ready.

e. Increase transparency of decisions on content moderation, particularly in the Indian context. At the moment, Meta does not publish complete data on its content moderation practices. This is concerning because multiple reports, including this one, have shown clear inconsistencies in the platform's decision-making about hateful content.[99] At the very least, the corporation should make this data available to independent researchers so that they can help identify inconsistencies and errors in the company's moderation policies.

4. Stakeholder Engagement

a. Work closely with civil society groups: Meta must work closely with research organizations, academics, and journalists who have studied and worked on the menace of cow vigilantism in India to develop a robust plan for curbing the use of Meta platforms in enabling and glorifying such violence. This roadmap should also have clear accountability mechanisms to ensure that social media companies cannot escape responsibility.

b. Add resources for content moderation with specific information about the Indian context: In particular, Meta should collate a list of experts who have experience in studying and analyzing far-right Hindu nationalist hate in India. Meta should also add more trained moderators who have expertise in identifying far-right hate online in India. Moreover, Meta should also provide its current moderators with updated training on far-right hate in India by domain experts and ensure that they can identify and remove such violent or inflammatory content. CSOH is open to providing such training, should Meta seek assistance.

c. Refer the aforementioned cases of cow vigilante content to the company's oversight board: The oversight board is in charge of making final binding decisions on Meta's content moderation policies across Facebook, Instagram, and Threads. Yet, only three India-related cases have been addressed by the Oversight Board in its history, and none of them have pertained to cow vigilante content.[100]

5. Action by Payment Platforms

In addition to Meta, payment platforms and financial institutions should close down the accounts that glorify cow vigilantism and promote hateful and violent content. In particular, Google Pay should identify the accounts of violent cow vigilantes and blacklist them from their platform. Other financial institutions named in the report, including IDBI Bank, UCO Bank, Punjab National Bank, Axis Bank, Bank of Baroda, ICICI Bank, Janata Sahakari Bank - Pune, and Yes Bank, should do the same.

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