



**Relationship between Fake News and Knowledge Gap in India: A Study with  
reference to Covid-19 Pandemic**

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**Abstract**

Fake news has become a significant problem in India, with the prevalence of misinformation leading to a variety of negative consequences, including social unrest, health hazards, political and religious polarization, and even violence, particularly true for those who do not have access to quality education or who are not exposed to a diverse range of media sources (Gupta, 2016). While the proliferation of fake news is a global issue, India presents unique challenges due to its large and diverse population of 1.4 billion, as well as a significant knowledge gap that allows fake news to thrive. This study aimed to explore the relationship between fake news in India and knowledge gap with reference to Covid-19 pandemic. The research design used in this study included qualitative interviews with practicing media professionals and a web based survey. The objective of the study was to come up with a deeper understanding of the complex factors of knowledge gap contributing to the prevalence of fake news in India and identify ways to mitigate its negative effects. The findings indicate that to fill this gap, a comprehensive strategy is needed that combines educational, societal, legal and technological aspects, with the elevation of critical thinking, gender equality and involvement and accountability of intermediaries, authorities, media, civil society, and users.

Keywords: Fake News, Knowledge Gap, Media Literacy, Digital Divide, Critical Thinking



## **A Study of Relationship between Fake News and Knowledge Gap in India**

### **I. Introduction**

With an internet penetration of 47% in January 2022 (Basuroy, 2022), fake news has become a significant problem in India, due to the proliferation of misinformation leading to a variety of negative consequences, including social unrest, health hazards, political and religious polarization, and even violence (Sharma, 2018).

A major factor contributing to the spread of fake news in India is the rapid growth of social media, which has become a major source of information for many people (Gupta, 2016). The anonymity and speed of social media platforms make it easy for fake news to spread quickly and widely, with little opportunity for fact-checking or verification (Sharma & Jha, 2019). This has led to the spread of misinformation about a wide range of topics, including politics, health, and science, often with serious consequences.

Another factor contributing to the spread of fake news in India is the political landscape, with some politicians and political parties using fake news as a means of manipulating public opinion and promoting their own agendas (Sharma, 2018). The use of fake news as a political tool has been particularly evident during elections, with candidates and parties spreading misinformation to gain an advantage over their opponents (Sharma & Jha, 2019). The study also found that the spread of fake news was influenced by the political beliefs of the individuals sharing the information, with those on opposite ends of the political spectrum being more likely to disseminate false narratives.

Many people lack the critical thinking skills, knowledge and media literacy needed to differentiate between credible and unreliable sources and discern between credible and fake sources of information, making them more susceptible to believing and significantly contributing to the spread fake news in India (Sharma & Jha, 2019). This is particularly true for those who do not have access to quality education or who are not exposed to a diverse range of media sources or may belong to orthodox and conservative families (Gupta, 2016).

Research has also shown that fake news in India is often targeted at marginalized communities, particularly those who may not have access to diverse sources of information or who may be more vulnerable to believing misinformation (Dutta & Thakur, 2018). For example, fake news about health and medical treatments can have serious consequences for individuals who rely on such information to make decisions about their own health (Gupta, 2016).

A study by Dutta and Thakur (2018) examined the prevalence of fake news among rural populations in India, finding that many individuals lacked the skills and knowledge to differentiate between credible and fake sources of information. This lack of media literacy made them more vulnerable to believing and spreading fake news, particularly in the absence of alternative sources of information. Several studies have also highlighted the role of digital platforms and algorithms in the spread of fake news in India, with algorithms often amplifying and promoting misleading or false content (Goyal, 2020; Shukla, 2019) and creating a filter bubble. Further analysis revealed that individuals



with lower levels of education and those who rely on social media as their primary source of news were more likely to encounter, believe and share fake news.

Fake news is a complex and multifaceted problem in India, with a variety of factors contributing to its spread. Addressing these factors will require a multi-pronged approach, including increased media literacy education, fact-checking and verification efforts, and greater accountability and transparency from digital platforms. By addressing these issues, it may be possible to mitigate the negative impacts of fake news on society and improve the overall quality of information available to the public.

## **II. Methodology**

The study conducted on Relationship between Fake News and Knowledge Gap in India used a research design that included qualitative interviews with practicing media professionals and a web based survey.

The study involved conducting in-depth interviews with 10 practicing media professionals from the news industry in India. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach, which allowed for open-ended questions to explore the interviewees perspectives. Questions asked were pertaining to cause and consequences of fake news, role of critical thinking, education level, gender, digital divide and algorithms, and how to curb fake news.

The study also involved a general online survey of different types of content of fake news prevailing during Covid19 in India from April 2020 to early 2022. A sample size of about 50 debunked fake news stories was considered for the study.

The review of literature involved conducting a comprehensive search of academic journals and news articles to gather information on the topic and considered as a secondary source of data in the study. The review of literature was also helpful in identifying the varied other sociological reason and gaps that could contribute to the prevalence and spread of fake news in India.

The findings from all three were correlated and triangulated in the study for discussion and conclusion.

## **III. Knowledge Gap**

"Knowledge gap" refers to the difference in knowledge or understanding between individuals or groups within a specific domain or subject area (Kirsch, Braun, & Yamamoto, 2002). This can occur due to a variety of factors, including differences in educational backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and access to information (Hakim, 2000). The concept of a knowledge gap has been widely studied in the fields of education, sociology, and psychology, with research showing that it can have a significant impact on academic achievement, economic mobility, and social inequality (Horn &



LaFontaine, 2010; Jencks & Phillips, 1998).

Knowledge gaps can also refer to the lack of information or understanding about a particular topic or issue (Koszalka, 2015). The concept of a "knowledge gap" has been identified as one of the key causes of the proliferation of fake news on social media.

On social media, the knowledge gap can manifest as a lack of critical thinking skills and media literacy among users. Without the ability to critically evaluate the information presented to them, individuals may be more susceptible to accepting and sharing false or misleading information, particularly if it aligns with their existing beliefs or biases (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Research has also shown that fake news spreads more easily on social media than real news, due to the ease of sharing and the algorithms used by social media platforms, which can amplify the reach of false information (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Additionally, the anonymity and lack of accountability on social media can make it easier for individuals and groups to spread false information without facing consequences.

It is important to address the issue of knowledge gap by educating the public on critical thinking skills and media literacy, and by promoting the use of reliable sources of information.

### **Themes That Emerges from The Study**

#### **A. Fake news due to low literacy level**

Fake news has been a significant problem in India, particularly due to the country's relatively low literacy levels.

According to the National Family Health Survey (2019), the literacy rate in India is 74.4%, with a large gender gap, with 82.1% of males being literate compared to 65.5% of females. This low literacy rate is especially prevalent in rural areas, where access to education is limited.

With low literacy levels, many individuals may not have the skills to critically evaluate the veracity of the information they encounter online. This has led to the spread of misinformation and manipulation of public opinion, causing significant harm to individuals and society as a whole.

A study conducted by Dutta and Dutta (2019) analysed the role of social media in the dissemination of fake news in India and found that the spread of fake news on social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp was facilitated by the lack of critical thinking skills and media literacy among the population.

It is very evident from the web based survey conducted of fake news prevailing during the Covid lockdown. Following are some of the stories to cite which became quite popular:

1. Spread of Covid is due to 5G technology network
2. Misinformation regarding vaccines prevailed. Claims that vaccines can cause infertility, alter DNA, or contain microchips to track individuals
3. Drinking cow urine or applying cow dung can cure Covid-19
4. Muslims spreading Covid virus
5. Alternate remedies for Covid



Another study by Jha and Sharma (2020) examined the impact of fake news on political discourse in India and found that fake news was often used to manipulate public opinion and distort the truth about political events.

Findings from web based survey revealed some of incidents like, Political parties in India have a tendency to demean their adversaries, creating an environment that facilitates the effectiveness of disinformation campaigns (Salve. P,2020). Same was confirmed by the media practitioners in their in-depth interviews. They also pointed that the low levels of media literacy in the country made it easier for fake news to spread and for the public to fall victim to it.

A study by Sinha and Singh (2021) explored the role of traditional media, such as television and newspapers, in the proliferation of fake news in India and found that while traditional media was not the main source of fake news, it did play a role in amplifying and legitimizing false information. In-depth interviews with media practitioners confirmed that many a times there are slips due to urgency to publish.

The findings from a web based survey also revealed, various news sources, including both less popular regional digital news outlets and widely followed national news channels, have played a role in disseminating false information (Niranjankumar& Chowdhury, 2020).

1. Times of India Misreports Agra Woman Fleeing After Coronavirus Tests
2. TV9 Bharatvarsh Falsely Links Mystery Virus In Tomatoes To Coronavirus
3. The Hindu Article Erroneously Links Filovirus Study To Coronavirus
4. Marathi Newspaper Lokmat Falls For Fake COVID-19 Bioweapon Story
5. Zee Hindustan Peddles 2015 News As Recent, Adds False Communal Angle
6. Zee Hindustan Peddles 2015 News As Recent, Adds False Communal Angle
7. AajTak, India.Com Run Fake Tweets As Sushant Singh Rajput"s Last Words
8. Aaj Tak, Times Now Air Video Of 1962 War Memorial As „Proof OfGalwan“
9. IANS Publishes Satire Article On Imran Khan As News
10. Republic TV, Times Now, ABP News Run Old Video As Pak Ceasefire Violation

ANI, TOI Kochi, TV9, Global Times, OPIndia, and News18 have been involved in spreading misleading content (Akbar et al., 2020).

According to a study by the International Fact-Checking Network (2020), India had the highest number of COVID-19 related fake news cases in the world. The spread of false information about cures, causes, and preventive measures led to panic and confusion among the population, hindering efforts to control the spread of the disease.

“The spread of fake news in India has been exacerbated by the proliferation of social media platforms and the ease of sharing information online.” This was emphasised in the in-depth interviews conducted of the media practitioners when asked on the opinion of fake news in India. They further stated that fake news and its spread would further increase in the future. Literacy needsto be increased and accessibility to affordable quality education to masses.



## **B. Fake news due to digital divide**

Fake news has become a significant problem worldwide, and India is no exception. One contributing factor to the spread of fake news in India is the digital divide that exists within the country.

The digital divide refers to the unequal distribution and access to technology and the internet. In India, this divide exists in various forms and has significant implications for individuals and society as a whole.

In the in-depth interviews conducted with the media professionals also suggested that digital divide does exist in India which is quite a cause of information gap. In the rural areas and economically weaker section of the society, some use limited data packs to access internet in their mobile phones, while there are many families who share one mobile phone in the family while there is also a section who do not have mobile phones or internet to access any information, they go by hearsay.

An incident during Covid-19 pandemic sheds light on digital divide in India. “We’ve tried every helpline provided by the government and the only reply we’re getting is there are no beds available. I don’t know what Twitter is and didn’t think of asking for help on social media,” said Yadav one of the persons seeking for help for his Covid-19 affected mother (Sharma & Srivastava, 2021).

One type of digital divide in India is the geographical divide, where access to technology and the internet is limited in rural areas compared to urban areas. According to the World Bank (2020), India has a relatively low internet penetration rate of around 50%. This divide is especially pronounced in rural areas, where access to technology and the internet is limited due to a lack of infrastructure and connectivity.

Another type of digital divide in India is the socio-economic divide, where access to technology and the internet is limited for certain socio-economic groups. This divide is especially prevalent among lower-income groups and marginalized communities, who may not have the financial resources to afford access to technology.

A third type of digital divide in India is the gender divide, where access to technology and the internet is limited for women compared to men. According to the World Bank (2020), there is a significant gender gap in internet usage in India, with only 37% of women being internet users compared to 53% of men. This divide is also especially pronounced in rural areas, where access to education and employment opportunities may be limited for women.

According to a report by the World Bank (2020), India has a high level of digital connectivity, with over 600 million internet users. India has a relatively low internet penetration rate of approximately 50%. While urban areas have relatively high levels of internet penetration, in rural areas, only 35% of the population has access to the internet.

The digital divide in India has had several consequences, including the unequal distribution of information and the ability to access and share it. With a large portion of the population in rural areas lacking access to the internet, they may be unable to verify the veracity of the information they encounter. This has led to the spread of fake news and misinformation, causing significant



harm to individuals and society as a whole.

Many internet users use limited data packs due to which they access the internet in a limited way. This constraint can make it difficult for individuals to access credible sources of information and to verify the accuracy of the information they encounter.

### **C. Fake news due to belief system**

A contributing factor to the spread of fake news in India is the influence of belief systems on individuals' perceptions and acceptance of information. This leads to collective illusion and confirmation bias.

Belief systems, such as religion, political ideology, and cultural values, play a significant role in the acceptance of fake news in India. These belief systems can influence individuals' perceptions of the world and shape their attitudes towards certain issues. This can lead to the acceptance of fake news that aligns with their beliefs, even if it is not supported by evidence.

During Covid-19 pandemic people in India using cow urine and cow dung as prevention and cure for Covid-19 clearly suggests confirmation of belief system which could be irrational.

As revealed in the in-depth interviews conducted with the practicing media professionals, belief system plays a vital role in the believability of fake news. Anything that is aligned to personal beliefs is pretty much accepted without even verification. This clearly shows confirmation bias. This phenomenon could even happen while publishing any information by media persons in the main stream media. So the media professionals need to be very cautious.

According to a study by the Ministry of Home Affairs (2019), India is a diverse and multi-religious country, with Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and other religions coexisting. Religion plays a significant role in shaping the cultural and social norms of India, influencing individuals' beliefs, values, and practices.

Another aspect of belief systems in India is the influence of political ideology. India is a democracy with a diverse range of political parties, representing different ideologies and interests. Political ideology shapes individuals' perceptions of the world and their attitudes towards certain issues, influencing the way they vote and participate in politics.

Cultural values also play a significant role in shaping belief systems in India. India is a country with a rich cultural history and a diverse range of cultural practices, customs, and traditions. These cultural values shape individuals' beliefs, values, and behaviours, influencing the way they interact with others and participate in society. The influence of belief systems in India has significant implications for society. Belief systems can shape individuals' attitudes towards certain issues and influence their behaviours and actions. This can have a positive or negative impact on society, depending on the nature of the belief system and its alignment with social norms and values. (Chaudhuri & Agnihotri, 2019) The spread of fake news in India has been exacerbated by the proliferation of social media platforms and the ease of sharing information online. With the influence of belief systems, individuals may be more likely to share fake news that aligns with their beliefs, leading to the rapid spread of misinformation.



#### **D. Fake news due to lack of critical thinking**

There is a very evident relationship between critical thinking skills and the spread of fake news in India. This is because fake news is often created with the intention of manipulating people's opinions. In order to do this effectively, the creators of fake news must be able to identify the target audience's vulnerabilities and exploit them. Lack of critical thinking also leads to collective illusion and confirmation bias.

Lack of critical thinking leads to fake news consumption and circulation (Babii, 2020). This is because people are not able to think for themselves and instead rely on others to do the thinking for them. This leads to them being easily manipulated and fooled by fake news sources.

An incident of a large majority of people participating in groups in ringing metal plates and clapping and chanting "Bhag Corona Bhag" (Run away Corona, run away) at 5pm on a said date, nationwide in India, to fight off Covid-19 without following the government's instruction of social distancing, is an example of lack of critical thinking.

As revealed through the in-depth interviews with the media practitioners when asked to give their opinion on the question of critical thinking, they opined that, a lack of critical thinking also leads to people blindly following others, even when those others are clearly in the wrong. People tend to refuse to question certain actions or words, and instead just follow it blindly. This is dangerous for the society as a whole, as it leads to people making bad decisions based on false information.

Critical thinking skills are essential for evaluating the veracity of information and making informed decisions (Machete & Turpin, 2020). In India, the level of critical thinking skills among the population varies among different divides, including geographical, socio-economic, and gender divides.

**Geographical divide:** According to a study by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (2020), the quality of education in rural areas is often lower than in urban areas due to a lack of resources and infrastructure. According to a study by the World Bank (2020), India has a relatively low literacy rate of approximately 74%, with a significant divide between rural and urban areas. This divide can hinder the development of critical thinking skills among individuals in rural areas, leading to a lower level of critical thinking skills compared to urban areas.

**Socio-economic divide:** According to a study by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (2019), lower-income groups and marginalized communities often face barriers to education, such as a lack of financial resources, leading to a lower level of critical thinking skills.

**Gender divide:** According to a study by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (2018), there is a significant gender gap in education in India, with lower enrolment and retention rates for girls compared to boys. According to the World Bank (2020), there is a significant gender gap in literacy in India, with only 65% of women being literate compared to 82% of men. This divide can hinder the development of critical thinking skills among women, leading to a lower level of critical thinking skills compared to men.





### **E. Algorithms amplifying fake news**

According to a study by the Centre for International Governance Innovation (2020), social media algorithms have played a significant role in the spread of fake news in India. These algorithms are designed to personalize users' feeds and prioritize content that is likely to engage them. However, this can lead to the amplification of fake news, as false information is often more sensational and provocative, leading to higher engagement (Maher, 2022).

When asked on the internet algorithms in the in-depth interviews with the media professionals, the opinions that came in was that algorithms certainly create filter bubbles. To stay out of it, ideally people could use two different accounts on social media to access different content to avoid filter bubbles.

Social media platforms have also been criticised for various issues such as privacy breaches, data misuse, spam, harassment, disinformation, and fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Brennan & Johnson, 2020). Fake news can be defined as "deliberately misleading or fabricated information presented as if it were real news" (Phillips, 2018, p. 4). Fake news can have negative impacts on individuals, society, and democracy, such as causing misinformation, polarisation, mistrust, and violence (Bovet & Poussin, 2019; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). In India, fake news has been reported to have fuelled communal riots, lynchings, suicides, and other forms of harm (Dasgupta, 2020; Jones, 2018).

One of the factors that has been identified as contributing to the spread of fake news on social media is algorithms (Lazer et al., 2018). Algorithms can be seen as sets of rules or procedures that are followed by computers or other automated systems to perform specific tasks or solve problems (Pasquale, 2015). Social media algorithms are the sets of rules or models that are used by social media platforms to filter, rank, and recommend content to users based on various factors such as their interests, preferences, behaviours, and connections (Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, & Adamic, 2015). Social media algorithms can affect what users see, when they see it, and how they perceive it (Boyd & Marwick, 2011).

### **IV. Conclusion**

Control of the spread of fake news on social media in India requires a multi-faceted approach that involves not only technical but also social, legal, and educational measures, and that engages the participation and responsibility of various stakeholders such as platform companies, governments, media, civil society, and users.

As per this study conducted with reference to the Covid-19 pandemic, to address the issue of fake news in India, several measures are proposed.

Increase literacy rates, particularly in rural areas, to improve the ability of individuals to critically evaluate the information they encounter. This can be achieved through initiatives such as improving access to education and promoting critical thinking skills.

Educate the population on how to identify fake news and to encourage the use of credible sources.



This can be done through campaigns and media literacy programs.

Stricter regulation of social media platforms to prevent the spread of fake news. This includes the implementation of fact-checking mechanisms and the removal of false information.

Address the digital divide by increasing access to the internet in rural areas. This can be achieved through initiatives such as expanding broadband infrastructure and providing affordable internet access.

Another solution is to increase access to affordable education, particularly for lower-income groups, rural areas and marginalized communities. This can be done through initiatives such as subsidies, expanding infrastructure and e-learning initiatives. Education would develop and elevate critical thinking skills.

There have been calls for initiatives to promote gender equality the participation of women and girls in education, such as through the provision of education and training programs.

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