

# THE FORECAST AFTER A FAKE NEWS CAMPAIGN IN TAMIL NADU

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An official team from Bihar, officials from Tamil Nadu and the police in a meeting with migrant workers | Photo Credit: ANI

In early March, [a malicious online disinformation campaign](#) led to law-and-order issues and made media headlines across the country. Over a period of four days, there was a concocted and continuous narrative about migrant workers hailing from Bihar being subjected to violence in Tamil Nadu. Though the Tamil Nadu police responded with alacrity and countered these false claims with factual reports, on-the-spot investigations and personalised appeals, the spectre of disinformation that has been highlighted should not be disregarded so easily. The propagation of fake news will be one of the biggest threats to democracy in an election season, when most information is likely to be consumed through social media sources. As such, this issue should be ranked high as any other in terms of potential to destabilise democratic institutions.

On March 1, at a public meeting in Chennai to mark the 70th birthday of the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and president of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), M.K. Stalin, various national leaders such as Indian National Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, Jammu and Kashmir National Conference leader Farooq Abdullah, Deputy Chief Minister of Bihar Tejashwi Yadav and Samajwadi Party Chief Akhilesh Yadav were present. It was a significant political event as it brought together a group of leaders from parties that are opposed to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The next day, video clips of migrant workers leaving Tamil Nadu for Holi holidays and festivities began to be shared to say that there was an exodus from the State because of incidents of violence.

Editorial | [Home and away: On rumours and fake news about migrant workers in TN](#)

To nurture this narrative, stray news stories about the death of a migrant worker were seeded online in order to build a wider campaign that there was targeted violence in Tamil Nadu against North Indians. Social media handles of BJP office-bearers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh shared the disinformation on social media while some media outlets such as Dainik Bhaskar, a large media group, projected these stories as news, without attempting to verify the authenticity of these clips. It was left to fact checkers (Alt News) to step in and break the cycle of disinformation on social media.

In order to contain the spread of fake news, the Government of Tamil Nadu used the services of

its various officials including the head of the police force to present the truth. The Tamil Nadu police put out a specific clarification that the video clips being circulated were both false and mischievous. Mr. Stalin also assured the Chief Minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar, that there was adequate protection for migrant workers in Tamil Nadu. Helplines were set up by the Tamil Nadu government at the district level, particularly in the areas with a concentration of migrant workers. Mr. Stalin visited a surgical glove manufacturing unit near Tirunelveli and interacted with its migrant workers who were from Jharkhand, reassuring them about their safety. A high-level government delegation from Bihar also visited Tamil Nadu and confirmed first hand that there was no truth to the rumours about migrant workers being targeted in the State. In this particular instance, the response of Tamil Nadu was a textbook case of rebuttal to stop the spread of disinformation and contain its symptoms. However, the malaise of disinformation runs much deeper. When one looks at what is happening in other parts of the world, it is apparent that disinformation campaigns have the potential to unfairly manipulate social and political outcomes.

Keeping this in mind, several countries have already felt the need to have in place robust responses to disinformation. The European Union (EU) has put out the Code of Practice on Disinformation 2022. Some of the strengthened initiatives of the EU Code include transparency in political advertising, empowerment of fact-checkers and researchers, tools to flag disinformation, and measures to reduce manipulative behaviour. The United Kingdom has proposed enacting an Online Safety Bill which will expect social media platforms (intermediaries) to actively monitor problematic content. Even as the U.K. Bill is being reviewed by a committee in the House of Lords, there are already calls from a number of companies, including WhatsApp and Signal, to scrap the legislation in the interest of privacy. During the progress of the U.K. Bill, the provisions to monitor “legal but harmful” content have already been replaced with greater onus on social media platforms to enforce their terms and conditions in accordance with their policies.

On the other hand, there has been little or no serious discussion on the menace and the extent of disinformation in India. The Union of India has only employed knee-jerk measures such as Internet shutdowns across jurisdictions without due regard to the doctrine of proportionality. This response, to put it mildly, is over-simplistic, non-transparent and autocratic. A more studied, comprehensive and calculated set of legislative actions is required if there is to be a balance between allowing free speech under Article 19 of the Constitution of India, and protecting citizens from falling prey to malicious disinformation.

In the case of *Tehseen S. Poonawalla vs Union Of India (2018)* the Supreme Court of India had held that it is the duty of the Union and State governments to take steps to curb dissemination of “irresponsible and explosive messages and videos having content which is likely to incite mob violence and lynching of any kind”. Many people can recollect the panic India witnessed in many instances as a result of fake news during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Supreme Court in *Alakh Alok Srivastava vs Union Of India (2020)* dealt with A Public Interest Litigation on the plight of migrant workers walking thousands of kilometres back home when the country went into its first lockdown. Such instances illustrate the real dangers to public order as a result of the dissemination of fake news.

Rather than coming up with a robust framework to tackle the root causes of disinformation, the Union has granted itself greater powers to strike down any content that is found to be unpalatable. With the use of Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, the Union Government has blocked access to any information online that it considers necessary in the interest of the sovereignty and the integrity of India, the security of the state or public order. More recently, the Union brought out the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, or IT Rules, 2021, to regulate content by online publishers of news and social media intermediaries. The recent draft amendments to the IT

Rules, 2021, empower the Press Information Bureau, which functions under the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to 'flag inaccurate and fake news related to government bodies on social media platforms' amounts to disinformation. It is apparent that the focus has more to do with containing criticism against the Union Government and its leaders than about blocking fake news as such.

The spate of disinformation projecting discord between Tamils and migrant workers residing in the state of Tamil Nadu is nothing but an attempt to incite communal disharmony between the two groups. It is unfortunate that several social media handles that belong to BJP office-bearers as well as some media outlets propagated these untruths without any regard for consequences. However, it is the timing of the campaign, especially after the March 1 event, which points the needle of suspicion to the BJP and its affiliates. Though the overall damage this disinformation campaign has caused was contained on this occasion, it serves as an ominous indicator of what lies ahead in the lead up to the general election in 2024, where voters will rely on information through social media more than any other source.

**Article inputs by Arunpandiyar S.**

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