



COUNTERING FAKE NEWS AND MISINFORMATION IN INDIA: THE IMPERATIVE FOR ENHANCED POLITICAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

This research examines the potential of political education to mitigate the dissemination of misinformation and fake news in India. This study adopts qualitative research technique to assess the effectiveness of political literacy in mitigating misinformation through government legislation, existing literature, and educational systems. This examines the influence of media consumption habits, the role of digital platforms, and the extent to which misinformation affects public opinion and political engagement. The results underscore the necessity of a structured curriculum.

Keywords: Fake News, Misinformation, Political Education, Democracy, Media Literacy.

Introduction

After the digital revolution, the production, dissemination and consumption of information has completely changed not only in India but also globally. This revolution has given a big shape to digital economies in a developing country like India. While India has the pride of being the largest democracy, it is also a world's fastest growing digital economy. According to the report of

IndBiz (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India), India had a total of 749 million internet users in 2020 which will increase to 900 million by 2025, that is, 87% of India's population will use the internet.³ Although this is good for the digital economy, but this structure has now become a suitable ground for the spread of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation.⁴

In India, apps like WhatsApp and Facebook have become the main source of news for people. This is quite different from traditional media and the information of the person sharing it is private and encrypted. This makes it very difficult to monitor it or make rules for it. India's social and political structure is a combination of linguistic diversity, regional inequality, religious sensitivity along with media illiteracy, which makes it vulnerable place for the spread of fake news. Its effect is often seen in the spread of misinformation, inciting violence etc. during elections, which is very dangerous for a healthy democracy and the credibility of elections.⁵

Such misinformation is made more effective through "algorithmic curation" that prioritizes content that evoke "emotional responses."⁶ Such misinformation

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3. *India to Have Nearly 1 Billion Internet Users by 2025: Report*, IndBiz (May 17, 2022), <https://indbiz.gov.in/india-to-have-nearly-1-billion-internet-users-by-2025-report/>
4. Claire Wardle & Hossein Derakhshan, *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework* (Council of Eur. 2017).
5. Shakuntala Banaji & Ramnath Bhat, *Social Media and Hate* (1st ed. 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003083078>.
6. Vidya Narayanan et al., *News and Information over Facebook and WhatsApp during the Indian Election Campaign*, Data Memo 2019.2, Project on Computational Propaganda, Oxford Internet Inst., Univ. of Oxford (2019), <https://demotech.oii.ox.ac.uk>.

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is more sensational and outrage-inducing than factual information.⁷ The relevance of civic education in the Indian context is also being questioned as school curriculum is still more focused on constitutional civic duties rather than addressing digital and media-related challenges.⁸

Scholars like Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996)⁹ have described “political knowledge” as essential for all citizens to ensure their active participation in democracy. Mihailidis (2018)¹⁰ has included the need for “civic media literacy” for active participation in his study. In India, people living mainly in rural areas, especially women and senior citizens, become easy victims of fake news due to lack of digital literacy. India has 22 official languages along with hundreds of local dialects. Fake news becomes more influential in the local languages in the country.

Although the Indian Government has made notable efforts like “PIB Fact Check Unit” and “Electoral Literacy Clubs”,¹¹ their availability in the education system is limited and it is still unable to reach rural senior citizens, scheduled caste/tribal people. The National Education Policy, 2020 mentions digital skills but there is no blueprint on how media literacy will reach the common citizens.¹² The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Election Commission of India (ECI) on 22 November 2023 also includes activities like “voting oath”, EVM-VVPAT demonstration”, and promoting ethical voting

behavior in student union elections in the curriculum,¹³ but its success will depend on how it is implemented not only in urban but also in rural areas. India can make a targeted policy by considering the standards implemented in Finland where media literacy has been made a part of the education system from childhood¹⁴ and the European Union’s Digital Education Plan (2021–2027).¹⁵ The Media and Information Literacy (MIL) and Digital Competencies for all programme by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is also a notable effort to tackle misinformation and disinformation.¹⁶

India needs a new policy to redefine its education policy, especially political education and civic media literacy, and to make it accessible to all citizens, to effectively deal with the problems of the present times, without which it is not possible to protect democracy.

Literature Review

After the internet revolution in the last ten years, cheap internet in India has rapidly changed the way information is produced, disseminated and consumed and this change can be seen from the increasing number of social media users in India and the time they spend on social media.

A study by the team of IIM Rohtak shows that 60-66 percent of the country’s youth use social media platforms, in which the average screen time of a man is 6 hours 45 minutes and that of a woman is 7 hours 5

7. Zeynep Tufekci, *Algorithmic Harms Beyond Facebook and Google: Emergent Challenges of Computational Agency*, 13 Colo. Tech. L.J. 203 (2015).
8. Paul Mihailidis, *Civic Media Literacies: Re-Imagining Human Connection in an Age of Digital Abundance* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315526058>.
9. Michael X. Delli Carpini & Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (Yale Univ. Press 1996).
10. Paul Mihailidis, *supra* note 6.
11. *Electoral Literacy in Classrooms*, Press Info. Bureau, Ministry of Education, Govt. of India (Dec. 20, 2023), <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetailm.aspx?PRID=1988846>.
12. Citation of NEP
13. Id.
14. *Media Literacy and Education in Finland*, Finland Toolbox (last edited Mar. 12, 2024), <https://toolbox.finland.fi/life-society/media-literacy-and-education-in-finland/> (site visited May 12, 2025).
15. *Digital Education Action Plan* (2021–2027), European Comm’n, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport & Culture (last updated Nov. 23, 2023), <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan> (site visited May 12, 2025).
16. *Media and Information Literacy*, UNESCO (site last updated Apr. —, 2025), <https://www.unesco.org/en/media-information-literacy> (site visited May 13, 2025).

minutes.¹⁷ While digital technologies have expanded information in the country, it has also blurred the lines between fact and fiction.

The growing problem of misinformation-disinformation and malinformation has had a special impact on democratic participation, media ecosystem and Indian education system and has given rise to a rich literary discourse.

The study of Shakuntala Banaji and Ram Bhat (2019)¹⁸ on misinformation/disinformation is an important study in India which presents the problem of WhatsApp encouraging mob violence. The study shows that these problems are not just technical but a deep social, political, and ideological problem, which cannot be solved by changing the features of any app, but there is a need for “media literacy” and “education based on constitutional values and human rights” special emphasis on political accountability as well as making strict laws for technical companies and strictly implementing them. In their study, they have identified various types of misinformation, which include “emotional/aggressive visuals”, messages related to “nationalism and fanaticism”, “objectionable pornographic material against women” which promote social discrimination and violence in society, and weaken democratic dialogue.

News and Information over Facebook and WhatsApp during Indian Election Campaign (COMPROP Data Memo 2019),¹⁹ a study conducted by a team from Oxford University between 14 February and 10 April 2019, provides an analysis of political information and misleading/misinformation spread through Facebook and WhatsApp. In which “false, biased and divisive” information was disseminated on a large scale by various political parties through digital medium. This study shows the misuse of digital media and its impact on democracy and speaks about the need to promote digi-

tal literacy, accountability of platforms and control over the spread of false/misleading information.

In their book *What Americans know about Politics and why it matters*²⁰ Michael X. Delli Compiti and Scott Keeter argue that political information is an essential resource for “democratic participation” and that citizens who understand political structures, policies and processes participate effectively in the democratic process. Although this study is related to the US, but for a country like India where misinformation is emerging as a major threat to democracy, the argument of the research that “only technical literacy is not enough but political information and analytical thinking should also be made part of the curriculum”, is fully applicable.

Paul Mihailidies in his book *Civic Media Literacies: Re-Imagining Human Connection in an Age of Digital Abundance* (2018)²¹ has presented media education as a contemporary change and has linked it to civic purpose and values. He says that media literacy should be linked with “*Civic Intentionality*” to ensure responsible and transformative participation in society. Making media education value based, he proposes five key elements which are “Caring”, “Critical Consciousness”, “Imagination”, “Persistence”, and “Emancipation”. He advocates the development of an educational model that makes citizens not just consumers of information but active participants in social change and democratic participation.

Charani LCM Patabendige’s study²² presents the issues of “the need for political literacy”, “the consequences of political illiteracy”, and “how to raise awareness”. She considers political literacy as the basis of democratic empowerment and sees it as a collective role of family, educationists, media and government.

17. Prof. Dheeraj Sharma et al., *Young Indian Youth Spend on Average 7 Hours a Day on Social Media, Fin. Expr. (India)* (Jan. 15, 2024), <https://www.financialexpress.com/jobs-career/we-need-to-use-the-social-media-for-self-development-in-addition-to-entertainment-iim-rohtak-research-3364495>

18. Shakuntala Banaji, *supra* note 3.

19. Vidya Narayanan, *supra* note 4.

20. Michael X. Delli Carpini, *supra* note 7.

21. Paul Mihailidies, *supra* note 6, at 2.

22. Charani LCM Patabendige, *The Importance of Political Literacy in South Asia*, LSE SOUTH ASIA CENTRE BLOG (Apr. 29, 2024), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2024/04/29/the-importance-of-political-literacy-in-south-asia/>.

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In *Revitalizing Indian Democracy*²³, authors have cited democratic quality and political literacy of citizens as the main reasons behind India's continuous decline in the Electoral Democracy Index and Participatory Democracy Index. They also express concern over the limited representation of SC/STs, women and minorities, citing fake news, political criminalization and muscle power as factors influencing voting.

Methodology

The main objective of this research is to examine the system to prevent fake news in India and analyze how it can be resolved by improving the education system. This research is based on qualitative techniques and uses secondary sources. Academically recognized reports, documents, textbooks, and research articles have been analyzed. Thematic literature review technique has been adopted to study research documents. Under this, the themes related to "civic education", "media literacy", "fake news", "democratic participation", and "political education" have been identified and organized for the convenience of study. A comparative study of international policies and standards related to the subject has also been included in this research. And all sources have been cited according to Blue Book 20th Edition.

Results

BharatFakeNewsKosh, which is the first public benchmark data set on incidences of fake news in India, found 12,511 fake news cases in 2023.²⁴ In India, the impact of fake news and mis/misleading information spreads

unevenly according to regional, social and technological systems. This inequality is further deepened when there is a lack of civic education structure and digital literacy. Election Literacy Club and digital education have been given priority by the Government of India and election related content has also been included in NCERT textbooks, but topics like "media literacy" and "fake news" have not been included in these textbooks.²⁵

The Fact Check Unit under the Press Information Bureau has started its work from November 2019, which is a commendable step of the government, but only those complaints can be sent to it which are related to the Central Government.²⁶ Lately, fake news and all kinds of online misleading information have made it clear that people need better political know-how basically, a smarter way to wade through messy media. Some recent research shows that when folks take part in learning sessions, they really get better at spotting false information and figuring out if a source can be trusted. In most cases, boosting political education seems to cut down on falling for misleading stories, especially on heated political topics.²⁷ One earlier study put it this way too, saying that when people learn to be media savvy, they become tougher against fake news.²⁸ On the other hand, some work finds that communities missing out on this education end up more vulnerable to bogus information, which backs up the idea that uneven education can lead to different levels of media smarts across groups.²⁹ Digging a little deeper, it turns out that misleading information is not just a nuisance it can mess with how democracy works and skew public views.³⁰ A informed crowd is pretty much the best guard against these problems. Some older research even stresses that

23. Sudhir Maske, Ngaopunii Thomas & Bhat Majeed, *Revitalizing Indian Democracy: Addressing Critical Issues and Concerns of Civic Literacy and Political Participation*, 12 INT'L J. CREATIVE RES. THOUGHTS 2718 (2022).
24. Manish Kumar Singh et al., *BharatFakeNewsKosh: A Data Repository for Fake News Research in India*, Kaggle (2023), <https://www.kaggle.com/datasets/man2191989/bharatfakenewskosh>.
25. Election Comm'n of India, *Chunav Pathshala* (Voter Awareness Handbook – Hindi)
26. *Frequently Asked Questions*, PIB Fact-Check Unit, Press Info. Bureau (last updated June 21, 2025), https://www.pib.gov.in/FAQ_facth.aspx.
27. Ni Putu Sinta Dewi & Elfiandri Elfiandri, *Overcoming Disinformation and Hoaxes in Political Communication: Promoting Media and Fact Literacy*, 4 J. Int'l Dakwah & Commc'n 186 (2024).
28. J. Bonnet & J.E. Rosenbaum, "Fake News," Misinformation, and Political Bias: Teaching News Literacy in the 21st Century, 34 Comm. Tchr. 103 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2019.1625938>.
29. J. Shim & M. Shin, *A Study on the Effect of Media Literacy Competences on Responding to Fake News* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.37123/th.2024.16.145>.
30. Esma Aïmeur, Sabrine Amri & Gilles Brassard, *Fake News, Disinformation and Misinformation in Social Media: A Review*, 66 Int'l J. Inf. Sec. 123 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10207-023-00658-9>.

we need to plug the educational gaps quickly because bad news can twist public opinion and even mess up elections.³¹ Plus, rolling out broad, comprehensive learning programs might really help fight fake news in India's social and political mix. Even though a few regions have made noticeable progress in media-literacy efforts, many areas still lag behind when it comes to putting in place strong educational strategies.³² That suggests policymakers should seriously consider education reforms that zero in on building media reading skills and critical thinking even if it's a bit all over the place in approach.³³ At the end of the day, these insights matter not just for academic debates but also for practical steps that help build a democracy resilient enough to handle the wear and tear of misinformation.³⁴ Ultimately, the whole idea here is that targeted political education is a smart way to boost civic engagement and keep public conversation on the level.

Discussion

In India, misinformation meshes so closely with politics that understanding it means digging into how national identity and democracy mix together. Our study took a look at boosting political education as a way to help people spot fake news. Generally speaking, when folks get a good dose of political learning, they seem more equipped to tell real info apart from misleading bits. In many cases, those without enough political educa-

tion end up believing in bogus claims a pattern noted by other studies too.³⁵ These findings really push for widespread, structured learning, something that's been flagged before as essential to counteract how misinformation can skew public opinion and elections.³⁶ We also found that while previous work often focused on one-off misinformation incidents, our research casts a wider net, measuring how educational efforts stack up across different groups in India.³⁷ Interestingly, other countries show a general drop in trust toward the news, yet here, focused education seems to be a promising fix. There's also a lot of regional variation suggesting that a one-size- doesn't-fit-all model just won't cut it, an idea that's been hinted at elsewhere.³⁸ In many cases, the research backs the idea that teaching people about politics is key to fighting fake news. Practically, the results signal that policymakers need to roll out flexible, comprehensive media literacy programs tailored to it various social and cultural contexts. On the methodological side, mixing different research approaches helped give the study a richer perspective –something future research might find really useful.³⁹ Ultimately, empowering people with political education isn't just about debunking misinformation; it's also about keeping democracy strong in India. This study, in a way, calls for real changes in how we equip our citizens to handle the endless buzz of digital information, reminding us that informed participation is absolutely crucial to democratic resilience.

31. Madelyn Rose Sanfilippo, Xiaohua Awa Zhu & Shengan Yang, *Sociotechnical Governance of Misinformation*, 76 J. Ass'n for Info. Sci. & Tech. 289 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24953>. ischool.illinois.edu+1louci.dntb.gov.ua+11ideas.repec.org+11
32. Pooja Pandey, *Digital Dreams, Divided Realities: Navigating Educational Access in India*, ORF Expert Speak (March 9 2024), <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/digital-dreams-divided-realities-navigating-educational-access-in-india>.
33. Jeff Share, Tatevik Mamikonyan & Elizabeth Lopez, *Critical Media Literacy in Teacher Education, Theory, and Practice*, Oxford Res. Encycl. Educ. (Sept. 20, 2023), <https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-1404> (last visited J March 7, 2025).
34. Admira Malaj, Ketj Hoxha & Elona Karafili, Digital Civic Engagement in the Era of Misinformation: Leveraging Technology for Resilient Communities (Mar. 27, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15036253>
35. Esma Aïmeur, *supra* note 27.
36. J. Shim & M. Shin, *supra* note 26
37. Admira Malaj, Ketj Hoxha & Elona Karafili, Digital Civic Engagement in the Era of Misinformation: Leveraging Technology for Resilient Communities (Mar. 27, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15036253>.
38. E. Hoes, The Effect of a Real-World, Long-Term Media Literacy Intervention: A Difference-in-Differences Approach (2024), <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/c5gzd>.
39. Bonnet & J.E. Rosenbaum, "Fake News," *Misinformation, and Political Bias: Teaching News Literacy in the 21st Century*, 34 COMM. TCHR. 103 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2019.1625938>.

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Although a Memorandum of the MoU⁴⁰ was signed on 2 November 2023 between the Election Commission of India and the Ministry of Education, Government of India, formally incorporating voting education and electoral literacy into the school and college education system. But not making topics like misinformation, disinformation, malinformation and deepfake compulsory in the school curriculum and not making the related education accessible to rural and deprived communities is a matter of concern. The need for special training for teachers to increase electoral literacy cannot be denied. But not including it in the teacher training program, not organising workshops at college and university level will make this initiative a clear failure. In the Indian scenario, where linguistic multiplicity, regional inequality and educated inequality prevail, and where the public is involved in some kind of election every year, multilingual and value-based political and media literacy becomes necessary to fight against fake news.

Conclusion

Fake news in India represents not merely a technological issue but a profound structural threat to democratic

governance. The present study underscores that unless concepts such as “Political Education” and “Media Literacy” are contextualised and made relevant to India’s socio-political realities, the proliferation of misinformation will not only incite violence and discrimination but also decimate the foundational democratic values of the nation. The findings reveal that recent curricular reforms, such as those undertaken by the NCERT, have had limited effectiveness in equipping students to critically engage with misinformation and the adverse consequences of social media. Although initiatives like the Election Literacy Clubs (ELCs), mock polls, student voter pledges, and school-based electoral programs are commendable, their implementation remains uneven, particularly in rural and marginalised regions. It is imperative for the government to adopt and adapt internationally recognised frameworks, such as, “Civic Media Literacy” models, UNESCO’s “Whole School Approach” and “Media and Information Literacy” programme, and the European Union’s “Digital Education Action Plan” to the Indian context, taking into account the country’s linguistic, regional, and cultural heterogeneity.

40. *Electoral Literacy in Classrooms*, Press Info. Bureau, Ministry of Education, Government of India (Dec. 20, 2023), <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1988846>.