

Under Watch, Under Fire

How young people are navigating
identity and hate in Pakistan and India



Human Rights
Commission
of Pakistan

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I. A. Rehman Research Grant Series



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ISBN 978-627-7602-71-0

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Acknowledgements

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) is grateful to Syeda Armeen Nasim for writing this essay. We would like to thank Irfan Khan for editing the document, Farah Zia and Maheen Pracha for reviewing it, Sunny Zia for managing its production, and Rida Fazal for designing the cover.

Introduction

Across South Asia, the resurgence of ethno-religious nationalism has become a defining force shaping political discourse, social relations, and everyday life. In both India and Pakistan, these narratives increasingly circulate on digital platforms, where young people are not merely passive recipients but active participants—consumers, reshapers, contesters, and amplifiers of ideas that blur the boundaries between the personal and the political. Social media platforms have become the new town squares where history is contested, othering is normalised, and political activism is performed. Yet, the digital realm is a double-edged sword. The same tools used to propagate exclusionary rhetoric also hold the potential to bypass state censorship and foster unprecedented cross-border connections.

This essay examines how young people in India and Pakistan perceive and engage with the rise of ethno-religious nationalism, with particular attention to the role of social media and other online spaces in shaping these dynamics. Drawing on insights from a cross-border online survey, it explores emerging patterns in youth media consumption, digital activism, and modes of self-expression, highlighting both convergences and divergences across national contexts.

Beyond merely diagnosing the polarisation, this essay seeks to identify constructive pathways forward. By analysing the nuanced perspectives of young people, the essay highlights opportunities for cross-border dialogue and youth-led counter-narratives that challenge marginalisation. Finally, it offers a set of practical, actionable recommendations directed at key stakeholders—ranging from policymakers to civil society leaders to technology companies—aimed at transforming the digital space from a theatre of conflict into a platform for sustainable peace.

Background

Religious nationalism and identity-based politics have long shaped the socio-political landscape of South Asia, a natural outcome for a region that is ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse. However, in recent years, these dynamics have intensified to an alarming level. Successive governments in Pakistan have leaned heavily on religious sentiments and featured concessions to extremist groups. For example, the government yielded to violent demonstrations by the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan during the Asia Bibi blasphemy protests ('Asia Bibi', 2018). In 2019, India experienced a parallel consolidation of religious nationalism.

Following the February 2019 Pulwama attack by Jaish-e-Mohammed, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) successfully dominated the nationalist political discourse during the general election campaign, with party officials encouraging voters to translate their nationalism into support for the BJP (Daniyal, 2019). What followed was a series of legislative measures aimed at redefining citizenship and identity along Hindu-majoritarian lines. In August 2019, India's government revoked Article 370, which had granted Jammu and Kashmir special autonomous status within the Indian union, and Article 35A, which had allowed the state to define permanent residents and their associated rights and privileges (Ahmad, 2019). This was followed by the Supreme Court's Ayodhya verdict in November 2019, awarding the disputed land for temple construction ('Ayodhya verdict', 2019). A month later, the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act represented a fundamental shift in Indian citizenship law by making religion an explicit criterion

for naturalisation, offering accelerated citizenship to six religious communities from three neighbouring countries while excluding Muslims, a change that critics argue violates the constitutional principles of equality and secularism (Raimondo, 2020).

The Citizenship Amendment Act provoked nationwide protests in India, one of the biggest being the Shaheen Bagh sit-ins, where the protestors staged a continuous demonstration for over 50 days, making it a prominent symbol of resistance. These protests were met with hate speeches from BJP leaders, including a minister who led chants of 'shoot the traitors' at a rally and a member of parliament who claimed Shaheen Bagh protesters wanted to rape and kill Delhi residents. This was followed by multiple shooting incidents targeting protesters at both Shaheen Bagh and Jamia Millia Islamia University (Puranam, 2020). In 2024, Uttarakhand became the first Indian state to enact a uniform civil code establishing religion-neutral personal laws on marriage, divorce, and inheritance. While the government claimed the law aimed at 'equality, uniformity, and equal rights', opposition parties accused it of being a 'nefarious political design to drive a wedge in society on religious lines', and Muslim organisations rejected it as contrary to Sharia law (Ahmad, 2024). In the years that followed, Pakistan witnessed rising sectarian vigilantism, with increased attacks on the Ahmadiyya community and frequent blasphemy accusations (Amnesty International, 2024). Further, sectarian violence erupted in Kurram in November 2024, resulting in over 50 deaths (Khan, 2024). In April 2025, a terror attack on Hindu tourists in Pahalgam, Kashmir reignited cross-border tensions, culminating in a military confrontation, now called a four-day war, between India and Pakistan, bringing to light again how religious nationalism has domestic and geopolitical implications (Hassan & Beaumont, 2025; Jilani & Reed, 2025).

Literature review

The roots of contemporary ethno-religious nationalism in South Asia lie in the colonial period, when British imperial policies institutionalised communal divisions through mechanisms such as separate electorates and religiously demarcated census categories (Chatterjee, 1993). The Indian National Congress, established in 1885, emerged as the principal nationalist and secular force advocating for independence, though it was often critiqued for being dominated by upper-caste Hindu interests (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012). In response to these perceived exclusions, the All-India Muslim League was formed in 1906, representing Muslim political aspirations and later championing the demand for Pakistan under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah (Jalal, 1994). Around the same time, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was founded in 1925, pushing Hindu nationalist ideas heavily influenced by European fascist movements to create a culturally homogeneous Hindu Rashtra (Andersen & Damle, 2019). The Partition of British India, which led to the creation of India and Pakistan in 1947, was a culmination of these escalating communal divisions, resulting in mass displacement and violence along ethnic and religious lines. The trauma of partition not only created two sovereign states but also ingrained communal identities in the foundational narratives of both India and Pakistan.

Ethno-religious nationalism in postcolonial India and Pakistan. In the postcolonial period, India and Pakistan's trajectories diverged but remained tied to the ethno-religious fault lines they inherited. Pakistan oscillated between military and civilian rule, with ethnic and sectarian divisions intensifying and culminating in the fall of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 after a brutal civil war (Sisson & Rose, 1990). In India, the Congress Party retained political dominance but increasingly faced opposition from Hindu nationalist forces over the years. From the 1970s onward, the RSS and its affiliates, particularly the BJP, gained considerable political traction, reflecting an ideological shift towards the right in India's political landscape (Jaffrelot, 2007).

It is important to note that the diverse ethnic and religious makeup of South Asia does not inherently predispose it to sectarianism or communalism. According to B. M. Jain (2005), it is the

historical entanglements and political manipulation of identity that have established ethno-religious divisions. Jain highlights that the state mechanisms not only tolerate but actively propagate ethno-religious conflicts. The political climate in both these countries, which includes pandering to the elite class, also demands the legitimisation of state authority in response to the threat posed by ‘religious zealots’. The consequences are visible in the form of targeted violence. For instance, in India, the BJP’s tenure has seen unprecedented attacks on Christian communities, particularly in Gujarat, with over a hundred documented incidents in the early years of BJP rule. In Pakistan, the misuse of blasphemy laws continues to serve as a dangerous tool for both personal vendettas and religious vigilantism, reflecting a societal norm of violence justified in the name of religion. Jain emphasises the need to address the psychological dimension of the problem and place greater responsibility on civilian intervention, particularly among the elites.

National identity, media, and the politics of ‘othering’. Further building on this, Rehman (2025) argues in her comparative study of religion and national identity formation in India and Pakistan that both countries have internalised religion as a cornerstone of national identity, albeit in different forms. In Pakistan, religious nationalism has remained central to state-building processes, while in India, Hindu nationalism has gained ground through successive electoral cycles. Rehman further argues that the formation of national identities in both countries, though differing in the degree of religious emphasis, has been shaped by the legacy of communalism enabled under British colonial rule. Today, Hinduism and Islam serve as dominant identity markers in India and Pakistan, respectively, underpinning sovereignty, nationalism, and increasingly exclusionary and hegemonic cultural narratives. In both cases, ‘othering’ is used as a political tool to justify historical grievances and legitimise religious nationalism.

Rehman also highlights the critical role of media in shaping identity, noting how mass media and education have historically influenced political consciousness, particularly among youth. This observation connects to broader research on the influence of media on political identity. Govindrajan et al. (2021) expand on this by describing a ‘meteoric rise’ of right-wing regimes such as India’s BJP and Pakistan’s PTI, both of which mobilised collective victimhood against an ‘imagined other’. These regimes invoked ‘historical injury’, drawing on memories of invasions, colonialism, and partition, to consolidate caste, ethnic, and religious differences into rigid hierarchies. In India, for example, Hindutva narratives fuel Islamophobia and anti-minority violence, while in Pakistan, Islamist nationalism draws on the legacies of past Muslim empires. As Govindrajan et al. argue, such majoritarian politics continually recast complex histories such as colonial rule, partition, and wars as irreconcilable religious conflicts, defining belonging through polarising myths of violation. The literature, therefore, consistently points to a reconfiguration of national identity around increased religious polarisation, rooted in historical processes of communal mobilisation and colonial manipulation (Thapar, 1989).

Youth political engagement in digital spaces. While existing literature maps the historical and structural dynamics of ethno-religious nationalism, a steadily growing body of research shifts attention to youth agency, particularly in digital spaces, highlighting emerging sites of political contestation and resistance. Recent studies have shown that South Asian youth are not merely passive recipients of nationalist narratives but are actively shaping political discourse online.

Mahmood et al. (2020) document how a generation of ‘social media-savvy youth’ in Pakistan uses online platforms to create public discourse and pressure political actors. Surveying university students aged 18–29, they find that youth increasingly discuss political issues, spotlight social problems, and mobilise for change through social media activism. Similarly, in Bangladesh, Tamim Anowar (2024) demonstrates that platforms like Facebook and YouTube have ‘revolutionised’ activism by enhancing organisational efficiency and expanding mobilised efforts around women’s rights, labour rights, and other social causes, despite censorship and digital divides.

Scholars have also noted the diverse and creative forms this digital activism can take. Barendregt and Schneider (2020) introduce the concept of ‘banal activism’, observing that much of youth political expression in Asia is embedded in everyday, routine online interactions – through humour, memes, and pop culture references – that nonetheless carry significant political weight. Dogra and Tripathi (2024) extend this analysis to India, showing how internet memes have become a ‘potent form of political satire’ among Indian youth, offering light-hearted yet impactful commentary on socio-political issues. While such digital expressions can serve as tools of resistance, they also risk reinforcing polarisation, underscoring the dual-edged nature of digital engagement.

Taken together, this body of literature showcases that youth are actively engaging with, shaping, and sometimes resisting nationalist narratives, not just through formal activism, but also through informal, everyday online interactions. It suggests that understanding modern nationalism requires paying attention to how young people engage with politics in digital spaces.

Cross-border solidarity and contestation. Building on this focus on youth and digital spaces, a smaller set of studies has examined how digital platforms mediate cross-border relationships, particularly between India and Pakistan. While state narratives emphasise hostility, researchers have highlighted moments when youth use digital spaces to foster dialogue and solidarity.

Civil society initiatives such as Aman ki Asha [a desire for peace], India and Pakistan Friendship Lounge, and Aaghaz-e-Dosti [the beginning of friendship] have used digital platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp to support cross-border peacebuilding. For instance, Saeed Ahmed Rid (2019) highlights how Aman ki Asha, a joint initiative by The Times of India and the Jang Group, employed media cooperation to promote people-to-people contacts and build peace between India and Pakistan. This initiative aimed to counter the nationalistic narratives often perpetuated by mainstream media and to provide a platform for citizens to engage in dialogue and understanding.

Similarly, Aaghaz-e-Dosti, founded in 2012, has organised virtual assemblies and peace marches to connect youth from both nations. These events, such as the annual midnight peace vigil, have been instrumental in promoting dialogue and challenging the prevailing narratives of hostility. For example, during the 2020 virtual assembly, peace activists from both sides of the border emphasised the need for cooperation and understanding, highlighting the shared cultural and historical ties between the two nations.

However, the same digital platforms also serve as spaces of contestation. Javed & Javed (2023) note how social media algorithms in Pakistan reinforce echo chambers, amplifying nationalist and sectarian content while silencing dissent. In India, similar trends are visible with coordinated troll campaigns and algorithm-driven outrage cycles. Even moments of compassion can quickly be hijacked by nationalist forces online, as seen when peace posts go viral for the wrong reasons, becoming targets of harassment.

Data collection

This study has employed digital ethnography as its primary method of data collection to explore youth perceptions of ethno-religious nationalism, through social interaction on popular social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram.

A digital survey was used as the primary data collection method to elicit detailed responses and capture perspectives in a safe, anonymous manner. Basic demographic data, including country of residence, religious and ethnic identity, education, and political leanings, was collected. The survey was divided into three sections: personal beliefs about the rise (or absence) of religious and ethnic

conflicts; lived experiences of religious division and narratives; and traditional and social media regarding our views of ethnic identities and conflict.

Limitations

This study was conducted entirely virtually, as the political situation and an active conflict were unfolding at the time of data collection. This also made in-person interviews and focus groups unfeasible. There were certain limitations around data collection through the survey. Responses from India were particularly limited, resulting in a data pool that may not be fully representative of South Asia's broader demographics. Moreover, the participant sample comprised educated, English-literate individuals from urban middle and upper-middle-class backgrounds. Therefore, the study does not claim to reflect the grassroots views or experiences within the region. There was also a limited time window for data collection amid rising tensions between India and Pakistan, which impacted the scope and methodology of this study. Finally, although the study had originally envisioned addressing ethnic dynamics as well, this was not possible in the limited time available and given the constraints presented by the data that could be collected. Instead, the essay prioritises the more immediate and pervasive ways in which religious identities shape youth experiences of surveillance, polarisation and hate.

Positionality

The research data presented here was collected amid escalating tensions between India and Pakistan in May 2025—a context that informs the essay's positionality. In between navigating the worsening of diplomatic ties between the two neighbours, sourcing information while witnessing censorship unfold in real time, and compiling this study, I was reminded of why this work remains important now more than ever. As a young person and a woman, born and raised in Karachi, I have witnessed first-hand how violence shapes and reshapes the narratives we tell ourselves. How it permeates everyday life and moulds our personhood and our communities, how it ends up defining our alliances and our enemies, and how we become the subject of the narratives—religious, political, communal, linguistic, ethnic—we choose to believe. This research has therefore been undertaken with the hope of humanising us all and giving voice to us, the regular people shaped by these narratives. The idea is to remind ourselves of our humanity and all that brings us together, and to allow us to witness each other beyond the binaries of 'us versus them'.

Findings and discussion

The survey was primarily designed to create space for reflection, amplifying individual voices and offering deeper insight into how ethno-religious tensions tangibly affect people's daily lives, both online and offline, as they navigate their identities. While the study's limitations have been acknowledged, it is important to emphasise that by allowing respondents to share their lived experiences and to voice their opinions on these matters, the research uncovered a rich tapestry of experiences from a diverse youth population across the two countries.

Perceptions

When asked to expand upon how they have perceived an increase in tensions related to ethnic and religious identities, respondents offered a range of perspectives rooted in their own lived experiences. A clear distinction emerged between Pakistani and Indian youth in how they described these shifts. Pakistani respondents focused more on the experiences of religious or ethnic minorities in a Sunni-majority state. At the same time, their Indian counterparts emphasised growing hostility toward Muslims that has gradually deepened over the years

Pakistani perspectives

Several Pakistani respondents described a marked shift in community dynamics, from childhood memories of mixed neighbourhoods to present-day experiences of visible sectarian divide. One respondent reflected on this transformation:

I was born and raised in a neighbourhood with a mix of ethnic and religious groups. I had never witnessed any incidents of intolerance while growing up. However, a few years ago, I noticed a chalking on a wall that read 'Sunni Mohalla' and sensed a sudden change in the behaviour of the neighbours. Although everyone still gathers for each other's religious festivities, an undercurrent of intolerance can be felt. There is also a growing sense of hesitation about expressing oneself in public.

This captures the physical marking of territory along sectarian lines, signalling an end to previously shared public space. The respondent notes that while communal practices still exist, an 'undercurrent of intolerance' is now present in everyday interactions, showing self-censorship and caution.

Shia experiences. The lived experiences of Shia Muslims in Pakistan emerged as a recurring theme across responses from Pakistan, with many describing a lifetime of defending their identity and navigating sectarian prejudice from childhood:

As a Shia, I have myself experienced many incidents which, although not violent, show the hatred towards us. I have heard numerous baseless rumours about my sect which are spread to make people hate us. Also, as a child, I faced issues from some hateful people, though many of my friends and others treated me with love. But many people showed hatred. I have seen writings of 'Shia kaafir' on the walls of my locality. Also, people justifying heinous crimes like murder and rape of Shias is what I have seen on social media.

This comment highlights the scope and severity of sectarian hostility: the everyday microaggressions (graffiti declaring Shias as infidels) and the more insidious normalisation of violence on social media, where crimes against Shias are openly justified. The respondent's account also highlights the ambivalence of their social experience, acceptance from some peers and explicit

hatred from others, showing how sectarianism operates unevenly but persistently across social contexts. Interestingly, these patterns were not only observed by those directly affected:

While I haven't personally experienced direct incidents, as someone from a minority community, I often feel the impact of prejudice and hatred—whether through social media, everyday interactions, or even in college environments. For example, during Youm-e-Hussain at our college, some students made dismissive and inappropriate comments. Although the gathering was peaceful and focused only on mourning, their remarks seemed insensitive and could easily hurt the sentiments of those observing the day.

Anti-Ahmadi persecution. Among Pakistani respondents, the persecution of Ahmadis emerged as one of the most consistently cited examples of religious discrimination, not as an exceptional event, but as an ongoing, normalised feature of daily life. Multiple participants, regardless of their own sectarian identity, considered anti-Ahmadi violence and systemic exclusion as the prime example of Pakistan's deepening religious intolerance. One respondent described the discrimination as a 'witch hunt' carried out by the supporters of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). The pattern of hostility extends far beyond isolated incidents.

One respondent listed how the Ahmadis are discriminated: 'Restraining Ahmaddiya from practising their religious beliefs, including illicit crackdowns on Eid-ul-Azha, demolishing of minarets [from their worship places], and so forth'. The surveillance and criminalisation of religious practice, from monitoring Eid celebrations to physically destroying their places of worship, shows how the state and, in a way, the general populace actively polices Ahmadi identity at every level. Perhaps most horrifying and sad was one respondent's assessment of the community's existence in Pakistan:

The minorities are not living in this country but are just surviving until a mob decides to kill them.' This distinction between 'living' and 'surviving' shows the precarity of Ahmadi life in Pakistan, a state of vulnerability where the ever-present threat of violence overshadows daily existence.

The weaponisation of the blasphemy laws. Multiple respondents identified the misuse of blasphemy laws as a particular mechanism of terror against Ahmadis and other religious minorities. The blasphemy laws have become tools of social control and personal vendetta. One participant explained: 'Minorities are trapped under the guise of blasphemy and lose life or property. This contributes to fear and social distance between the majority and minorities.' One respondent, who identified as a Pakistani Sunni Muslim, recalled reading about a recent case of five Hindu minors who, according to their parents, were kidnapped and forcibly converted to Islam. These accounts align closely with the literature on interreligious tensions in Pakistan.

The comments and responses by the participants reflect the broader trend, showing how structural violence translates into everyday experiences of marginalisation, fear, and self-censorship. Their narratives lend support to Jain's (2025) argument that ethno-religious violence in South Asia is not an inevitable outcome of diversity, but rather the result of deliberate political manipulation and state mechanisms that tolerate or actively propagate sectarian divisions. The graffiti, rumours, destruction of religious places, signage barring certain groups from entering, and institutional indifference described by respondents are all manifestations of structural complicity.

Indian perspectives

Respondents from India painted a picture that ranged from assertions of India's historically pluralistic character to observations of accelerating polarisation. Unlike Pakistani respondents, who predominantly discussed minority experiences within a religiously defined state, Indian respondents focused on the erosion of secularism and the mainstreaming of anti-Muslim sentiment under the current political environment.

Coexistence and conflict. Several respondents began by acknowledging India's legacy of religious coexistence, even as they recognised its fragility. One participant framed this tension:

Society in India is generally very liberal, where people coexist well. There are conflicts, but people generally recognise the importance of religious and social identities within communities, and the 2024 election was a testament to this. Narendra Modi couldn't win a majority solely because of his anti-Muslim rhetoric and promises to change the constitution. People rejected that vehemently, and the coalition is significantly fractured and purely strategic. But social media, on the other hand, has gone way out of hand. Discriminatory posts, videos, and content are present across the apps. The top comments on Instagram and FYP (for your page), curated by X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook's algorithm, seem to fuel tensions by keeping rage-baiting and controversial themes on the run. These were topics that the app's media team would have removed a few years ago.

This response captures a critical distinction: while electoral outcomes in 2024 suggested some pushback against explicitly communal politics at the ballot box, digital spaces have become increasingly toxic. The participant's observation about how social media platforms fuel tensions by promoting controversial themes points to a disconnect between grassroots pluralism and online extremism. What was once moderated or suppressed has now been algorithmically prioritised, creating echo chambers of hate that exist in parallel to, and increasingly shape, offline reality.

The emboldening of bigotry. Multiple respondents described a shift in how prejudice is expressed publicly. Where discrimination once operated through coded language and private behaviour, it has now become overt and performative. According to an Indian respondent who identified as Hindu:

People used to be scared to blurt out hateful things, but now they boast about it and are comfortable with it. If we resist, we are called names. The family next to my house refuses to sell or even rent their house to anyone from a different caste or religion. I am currently in Bangalore and have recently rented a three-bedroom house with two other people. Like in so many houses in South India, there is an additional sink for dishes outside the kitchen. This is for domestic workers of a different caste, as people don't want them in their 'pure' kitchen spaces. My flatmate caused a scene after our utensils were mixed up, as she is a vegetarian and I am not. Being from a privileged caste and class, most of my experiences are not first-hand. But I've seen people being increasingly hateful ever since the government started enabling it. They take pride in it, believing it shows their loyalty to whatever they believe in.

This account highlights several disturbing dynamics. First, fear gives way to pride, as bigotry shifts from something concealed to something openly displayed as evidence of ideological purity. Second, the respondent's observations regarding separate sinks and segregated utensils illustrate how caste-based purity practices continue to operate even within ostensibly cosmopolitan urban settings such as Bangalore. The government's culpability in enabling hate directly connects this to political sanction from structural forces, rehashing the argument by Govindrajan et al. (2021) about how right-wing regimes mobilise collective victimhood and legitimise previously taboo expressions of prejudice.

Muslims as the primary target. While caste discrimination remained a persistent theme in Indian responses, the increase in hostility directed at Muslims was also an important theme that emerged. Respondents described a climate where Muslim identity itself had become suspect, with one Indian respondent who identified as a Shia Muslim recounting:

I have seen (and experienced) a difference in the treatment of people coming from a Muslim background. They are severely stereotyped, be it terming them as ‘terrorists’ or name-calling them. Some politicians stereotype them as jinkay ziyada bacche hotay hain [those who have more children] in their public speeches. I have personally experienced being treated one way before my name was known, followed by an immediate shift in tone, vocabulary, and non-verbal cues once my name was revealed.

This response captures the violence of everyday Islamophobia, the sudden shift in tonality, the change in vocabulary, and the gestures that signal exclusion. As Rehman (2024) notes, such ‘othering’ is used as a political tool to justify historical grievances and legitimise religious nationalism, portraying Muslims as a danger because of their alleged hyperfertility, which is said to undermine Hindu demographics. These are not random prejudices but carefully created tropes that are central to Hindutva ideology. The reference to political speeches that normalised dehumanising language is also important to note here. When political leaders openly use communal stereotypes on stages, they grant permission for such language to be used more widely. This is what Gandhi (1998) identified in postcolonial contexts, where state power operates not through overt coercion but through the gradual normalisation of exclusionary ideologies. Another Muslim respondent elaborated on the nature of this hostility:

When I was a grade two student, my friends teased me about 9/11. They said things like ‘Did you enjoy it?’ and ‘What have you done?’ referring to the Twin Towers attacks. Similarly, I was called a Pakistani supporter who must have enjoyed Pakistan’s victory over India in a cricket match in 2002.

The fact that a seven or eight-year-old child was held accountable for 9/11, an event that occurred when they were barely old enough to understand it, reveals how anti-Muslim sentiment has been internalised across generations. Similarly, the equation of Muslim identity with Pakistani loyalty, even in the context of a cricket match, shows how Indian Muslims are perpetually cast as outsiders.

Spatial segregation and self-censorship. The normalisation of anti-Muslim sentiment has concrete spatial and behavioural consequences. One respondent described their navigation of public space:

I used to attend the Durga Puja at Chittaranjan Park. I have stopped doing so since the organisers decided not to give Muslim shop owners their stalls for the festival. I also feel unsafe going there, thinking about the consequences if someone finds out that I am a Muslim. I also feel unsafe in metros and even during train travel, conversing with people, as I feel afraid of disclosing my religious identity.

This account shows how communal exclusion operates in multiple areas: economic (Muslim vendors denied stalls), social (festivals becoming spaces of implicit segregation), and psychological (the constant calculation of when and where it is safe to reveal one’s identity). The respondent’s withdrawal from Durga Puja represents the destruction of what were once sites of intercommunal participation. Another Indian participant, reflecting on their reluctance to express identity, noted:

I can tell people that I am an Aga Khani Ismaili without having to put in much thought, but the moment I tell them that this is a sub sect of Shias who are Muslims, I see that stereotypical gaze and subtle shifts in tones and expressions and wanting to cut short the conversation politely.

Historical erasure and state violence. Several respondents pointed out that rising tensions are rooted not only in current politics but also in the systematic erasure and rewriting of history. One Sikh respondent explained: ‘Many incidents from Sikh history were never taught to us. Many books on Sikh history are banned in India, so recently Sikhs from abroad started putting information on social media, which helps to understand my own history and form a better opinion for politics in

my own state'. This suppression of minority histories, whether Sikh, Muslim, or Dalit, is central to the Hindutva project of constructing a singular, sanitised national narrative. By banning books and controlling curricula, the state shapes what can be known and remembered. Thus, making resistance to communalism difficult when the historical precedents for such violence have been systematically erased from public memory and record.

A Dalit respondent also described the persistence of caste-based violence despite constitutional protections: 'Reading about at least two Dalits being killed or harassed every day scares me. Makes me wonder if I could ever work in the remote villages of India. Maybe I would be one of them whom the upper caste people mistreat'. This recognition of vulnerability, from an urban, educated Dalit, underscores how ethno-religious and caste-based hierarchies remain dangerous despite decades of action and legal safeguards. The fear is not abstract but grounded in daily reports of atrocities that marginalised groups face in India.

The role of political sanction. Across responses, there is a consensus that the current political climate has not only fostered prejudice but also legitimised and amplified it. One respondent summarised it as follows: 'I feel the majority community in India has always been full of hatred and bigotry. Not all of them, but definitely most. It is just that the current media and regime have given them a platform to showcase their hatred out in the open'.

This assessment, that prejudice has been permitted to surface, aligns with the literature on how right-wing populism operates. As Govindrajan et al. (2021) argue, regimes like the BJP mobilise 'collective victimhood' and invoke 'historical injury' to justify present-day exclusions. The difference between past and present is not the existence of bigotry but its open celebration, its algorithmic amplification, and its institutional endorsement.

Another respondent reflected on their family's transformation: 'Everyone knows the big stuff. But I have seen my parents spewing hateful rhetoric against Muslims that they would have never said 15 years ago.' This intergenerational shift, where parents who once coexisted peacefully with Muslims now echo communal talking points, demonstrates how effectively media and political narratives have reshaped public consciousness. It also validates the concern raised by Rehman (2024) and Govindrajan et al. (2021) about the role of mass media in constructing and reinforcing religious nationalism.

Indian respondents' accounts reveal a society caught between its secular constitutional ideals and an increasingly assertive Hindu nationalism. Unlike Pakistan, where religious identity is constitutionally enshrined, India's self-conception as a secular democracy makes the current scenario particularly jarring for those committed to pluralism. The shift is gradual rather than abrupt, representing a slow mainstreaming of hatred that has intensified during the BJP's tenure and is rooted in longstanding histories of communal violence and caste hierarchy.

What emerges most clearly is the role of political and media institutions in legitimising prejudice. The emboldening of bigotry, the algorithmic amplification of hate, and the rewriting of history all point to structural forces actively producing division. As Jain (2025) argues, these are not organic outgrowths of diversity but deliberate political strategies. The respondents' testimonies, from various castes, religions, and regions, offer a ground-level view of how such strategies play out in everyday interactions, spatial segregations, and the constant vigilance minorities must maintain to navigate an increasingly hostile environment.

Personal experiences

Incidents of discrimination based on ethnicity or religion

Respondents reported experiencing multiple layers of discrimination in India, related to their religion, caste, or skin colour. They described how their Muslim identity is often politicised,

particularly in contexts such as sports or discussions about Pakistan. One respondent noted: 'We are still seen as Pakistani supporters, especially during India-Pakistan cricket matches. During the recent war between India and Pakistan, some of my so-called Hindu acquaintances deliberately tried to portray me as pro-Pakistan. Similarly, my family members also have faced such subtle discrimination in their lives'.

Respondents also reported experiencing discrimination within regions of India based on skin colour, which extends beyond verbal abuse to exclusionary actions that affect their personal and educational lives. One respondent shared:

Coming from Eastern India and living in Northern India, I faced discrimination based on skin colour, language, caste, and religion. People are casteist and openly ask, 'Which religion do you follow? What caste do you belong to?' before letting you enter their house. I remember when I was in school, a Brahmin woman, mother of one of my classmates, would not reply to my namaste (greeting) or would completely ignore me in public. It brought shame and a sense of hatred towards people like her. Even talking to that classmate, it always felt like he had a lot of caste pride.

It is obvious that caste- and colour-based discrimination permeates everyday social interactions, shaping experiences of inclusion, belonging, and self-esteem from childhood onward. Such incidents of individual discrimination are not limited to India but extend to Pakistan as well. Sectarian identity can expose individuals and families to both overt and subtle forms of discrimination, affecting their safety and social participation. Respondents from the Shia minority described experiencing faith-based bullying, social exclusion, and accusations of being anti-national. One Pakistani respondent expressed the following:

As part of a Shia household, besides faith-based bullying at school, the family received threatening letters from the TTP in the early 2000s. Further, non-Shia neighbours sought police support to restrain the family's religious practices, including organising majlis in Muharram. I have been accused in the past of being anti-Pakistan and pro-Iran for expressing political opinions critical of Pakistan's security apparatus.

Another form of othering is experienced through social exclusion of non-Muslim groups, even when there are familial or religious ties. Respondents reported that this discrimination often intersects with skin colour and religious identity and can manifest in cultural practices emphasising 'cleanliness' or 'purity', such as not sharing utensils or food. One respondent noted:

I am a Muslim born to a converted Christian mother and a Muslim father. My father's side of the family always made us feel othered because of our skin colour and our religion, even though we were Muslims. My mother's side of the family is always labelled as not fit to be socialised with or to be shared cutlery with because they're Christian.

Safety in expression

Respondents highlighted that social, religious, and gendered contexts often constrain freedom of expression. Several described how voicing opinions on sensitive topics, such as the weaponisation of religion, social justice, or minority rights, can provoke discomfort, judgment, or even subtle intimidation from family and peers. One respondent, who identified as a nonresident Indian atheist, shared the following account:

I am vocal about how I feel about the weaponisation of religion, and there are many people I talk to who do not like to hear such opinions. I know some of my uncles to be extremely religious, and I can see how their demeanour changes when

I express my opinions. And I am equally aware that there are people in my social circle who feel that way. I have had friends ask me if I have converted when I express any kind of empathy towards Muslims or other dispossessed and disadvantaged people.

Safety in expression is also mediated by social privilege, gender, and sexual identity. According to an Indian respondent, 'I am from a privileged background, both in terms of religion and social standing and caste. So, I have never felt unsafe expressing these identities; my reasons for feeling unsafe in India mostly have to do with being a woman and being part of the queer community'.

Respondents from minority or marginalised communities emphasised the importance of caution, strategic discretion, and constant self-monitoring when expressing their views in public, academic, or professional settings. They described how even seemingly neutral statements could be misinterpreted or politicised, potentially leading to social ostracism, professional consequences, or verbal harassment. As one Pakistani participant explained: 'I am always careful about expressing my religious views, especially given the polarised and intolerant nature of Pakistani society these days. I make an effort to know my audience before sharing any opinions so that I do not get reprimanded for my views'.

Among respondents in both Pakistan and India, freedom of expression is often constrained by identity markers, including religion, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. While the methods of restriction may differ across contexts, the underlying mechanism remains the same. Even individuals belonging to the dominant religious group can face limitations due to other aspects of their identity. In both countries, societal norms and state apparatuses regulate speech, placing individuals under constant scrutiny as they are judged against and policed according to the perceived standards of being a good, loyal citizen.

Media narratives

How people engage with social media

Participants described vastly different experiences across social media platforms, with each space creating distinct forms of political discourse. One respondent described the landscape thus:

WhatsApp is a platform for sharing all kinds of nonsense. Facebook is all about a yellow background with black foreground, presenting breaking news-style content. And tons of memes. It is above moderately polarised. Twitter strikes a balance, allowing every individual to share. However, past experiences have made it very clear to me that you can easily get mobbed if you post something that is very liberal or challenge the popular narrative. YouTube is very different from the rest. The reason is that it is a video platform, and the algorithm can change very quickly. The categories are vast. I am not sure about how polarised YouTube is, to be honest.

Others pointed to X (formerly Twitter) as particularly toxic since its rebranding, noting increased hostility in political debates. The shift toward newer platforms was seen as offering a temporary respite from polarisations. However, this was attributed more to their relative newness and fewer users than to any structural differences in how the platforms worked. Instagram and Facebook, when kept private, functioned as echo chambers, insulated from opposing views but also safer from confrontation. A respondent said:

I have seen that X (ever since it became X) is the most polarising platform. Everyone is constantly fighting, as seen most notably in the recent debate on Baloch activism. BlueSky, perhaps due to its newness, is calmer. Though my Instagram and Facebook are private, the views I encounter there aren't too different anyway.

The role of anonymity was repeatedly highlighted as enabling extreme behaviour. As one participant observed:

I think people make use of anonymity to post disrespectful comments. Some pro-Muslim Instagram handles post narratives which favour their views. Likewise, some pro-Hindu accounts post only certain acts which favour their views. However, I have never seen any of my friends post anything polarising on social media. Usually, whoever does that prefers to avoid showing their face and name in public.

Such selective curation, in which certain accounts amplify identity-based grievances while individuals maintain public neutrality, underscores both the performative character of online politics and the risks inherent in visible dissent. The non-symmetrical participation across national and religious lines was also noted:

The divide is so wide that social media platforms facilitate the concealment of identities, allowing anyone to go to extremes. Be it Pakistani Muslims or Indian Hindus, there is always a clash. However, Indian Muslims always need to protect themselves by saying they are Indians, and if they take a contrarian position, their opinion is rejected. Pakistani religious minorities barely intervene as their absolute number is very low, and those who do are famous for some reason. So, the conversation always seems toxic, biased and extreme.

Bridging divides

Despite the polarisation, participants also shared instances in which social media enabled meaningful cross-community connections. For some, platforms like X (formerly Twitter) facilitated friendships across religious and ethnic lines, exposing them to perspectives they wouldn't encounter otherwise:

Although I joined Twitter to support a local cricket team, it has given me so many online friends from different communities—Christians, Muslims, Ambedkarites, and from various language groups in the country—and I am grateful for that. Talking with them made me look at situations from so many different perspectives that I would never have known existed. I had also made some friends on the other side of the border, but over time (especially during times of conflict), our friendship faded because I criticised Pakistani actors. This is unfortunate, but I hope one day there can be a common ground.

Others credited X with raising awareness about marginalised communities, particularly through feminist and minoritarian networks:

Twitter made me realise how different all ethnic communities are, and how we should respect them all. After learning stories, particularly of women, mostly from groups like Soul Sisters, I gained more respect for women. Men have made the lives of women miserable, and social media can help that change. I also realised that the Ahmadiyya community is probably targeted the most by religious mobs.

Instagram, in particular, was praised for enabling deliberate exposure to difference. One participant described curating their feed to include a wide range of lived experiences:

I follow a wide range of pages and people on Instagram. I followed deaf people, schizophrenic people, blind people, people with rats and turtles as pets, people with niche hobbies I can't even dream of; people from remote African villages and what they eat, 'fit checks' from a random Indonesian girl, parenting and birthing pages, *hijabi* women, linguistics pages and so on. I don't agree with all their content all the time. I only follow them for exposure. For example, if it's some religious

person or polyamorous, I know I'm not that at all, but I just want to know what their norm is, so I am not surprised every day in my life. If the person is just being themselves without putting others down, I follow them. I followed numerous pages on caste to unlearn my own biases. I learnt about the importance of reservations and the association between caste and veganism. I came across many reels on how Muslim families usually celebrate Ramadan, and that was also a fun learning experience. I learnt how men, no matter what religion, are self-righteous and leave no chance to mould religion in a way that suits them.

Challenging biases

For several participants, social media played a direct role in shifting previously held beliefs. One respondent recounted moving away from anti-religious stances after listening to women who practiced strict purdah:

When I was first starting to discover atheism, I used to be very anti-religion, specifically religions where women were oppressed in the name of modesty. My opinions changed significantly when I listened to actual *hijabis* talk about their experience and realised these sorts of things aren't necessarily that black and white. I am still not sold on organised religion, no matter which religion it is. However, I now understand that even so-called 'oppressive' religions can still mean different things to different people.

Digital spaces also facilitated exposure to histories and atrocities that mainstream institutions actively suppress. Participants mentioned learning about everyday discrimination against Muslims in India, caste violence, and Sikh history through social media: 'Pages that report day-to-day atrocities against the Muslim community in India have helped me further understand how biased the mainstream media is and how intolerant the country has become toward minorities'. Similarly, podcasts and YouTube content were credited with deepening understanding of marginalised ethnic movements within Pakistan:

I have benefitted from several podcasts that have been instrumental in providing a better understanding of the experiences of other ethnicities, such as the Baloch and Pashtuns. There were many important moments where previous imperfect understandings were shattered, and I gained a deep insight and empathy for the people and their movements.

These examples point to a counter-narrative function of social media, where youth actively seek out and engage with content that contradicts official or dominant histories, using digital platforms to reclaim suppressed knowledge and construct more inclusive political understandings.

Together, these insights reveal a layered and contradictory relationship with the media. Young people have expressed overwhelming scepticism towards both mainstream media and political parties, especially regarding their handling of identity-based issues. However, young people are also actively working against this distrust by selective participation on social media. Some engage regularly and critically, while others remain cautious or withdrawn. Platforms like Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) have been identified as both echo chambers and sites of exposure, spaces of polarised and potential solidarity. The practice of intentional exposure—curating feeds to encounter difference—represents a form of resistance to the manufactured consent that postcolonial states perpetuate. Rather than passively consuming hegemonic narratives about religious and ethnic 'others', young people are actively seeking alternative knowledge. However, they remain constrained by platform algorithms, state surveillance, and the very real risks of visible dissent. This engagement with media, both as a site of harm and a tool for learning, showcases the dual-edged nature of youth political expression in contemporary South Asia.

Possible solutions and the way forward

The research reveals worrying trends of rising ethno-religious polarisation in India and Pakistan. Respondents in Pakistan describe neighbourhoods once mixed across sects and religions becoming visibly segregated, with an ‘undercurrent of intolerance’ persisting even as communities nominally celebrate each other’s festivals. In India, many respondents observe an erosion of historic pluralism and a mainstreaming of anti-Muslim sentiment under current political influences. In both contexts, marginalised groups—Shia, Ahmadi, Christian and Hindus in Pakistan; and Muslims, Dalits, and other minorities in India—report daily experiences of exclusion, prejudice and sometimes violence. Social media and digital platforms further amplify divisions: algorithms often prioritise ‘rage baiting’ and hate content, while anonymity enables extreme speech and harassment. Importantly, participants also highlighted the potential for positive outcomes, noting that cross-community dialogues and friendships can form online when individuals deliberately seek out diverse perspectives.

This report synthesises these findings to recommend concrete, stakeholder-specific interventions. Each set of recommendations is actionable within the stakeholders’ authority, sensitive to the different realities in India and Pakistan, and highlights shared challenges and opportunities. The goal is to promote inclusive policies and practices, reduce discrimination, and foster sustained inter-community dialogue.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are put forward to policymakers and government institutions:

- **Strengthen legal protections and law enforcement:** The governments of India and Pakistan should ensure that laws against religious/ethnic discrimination and violence are robustly enforced. In Pakistan, this means preventing misuse of blasphemy and anti-terror laws that target minorities and marginalised groups. In India, it involves implementing and enforcing legislation against hate crimes and mob violence, including ensuring that cases of lynching are promptly investigated. Training for police and judiciary on religious sensitivity can help ensure that minority communities feel protected.
- **Promote inclusive public policies:** Both governments should review policies that may marginalise minorities and instead adopt initiatives that highlight pluralism. For example, India’s education or cultural ministries should emphasise its secular foundations and history of diversity in official narratives, addressing the concern that secularism feels eroded. Pakistan’s government should reinforce its constitutional commitment to minorities (e.g. ensuring security to minority places of worship). State institutions should promote multi-faith gatherings and cultural festivals to foster a more inclusive society.
- **Establish interfaith and interethnic councils:** Formal consultative bodies at national and local levels (e.g. interfaith commissions or minority-rights ombudsmen) should create channels for dialogue and accountability. Bringing together leaders from different communities and government officials would help address grievances before they escalate. These bodies could monitor hate crimes and recommend policy changes. For example, a joint India-Pakistan or regional council (even a non-government one) could work on shared frameworks to protect religious freedom and learn from each other’s best practices.
- **Support community safety initiatives:** Policies should empower local efforts to reduce tensions. This might include funding community policing programmes that involve local leaders, or disaster-response-style rapid teams to defuse communal flare-ups. Ensuring that

minority-majority neighbourhoods have shared public spaces (parks, schools, markets) could counter the segregation trend noted by respondents.

- **Digital governance and oversight:** Governments should work with tech companies to combat online hate. They should enact or enforce regulations requiring transparency reports on hate content removal. Educational campaigns funded by the state could raise awareness of digital literacy, helping citizens identify misinformation and hateful propaganda on WhatsApp and other social media platforms.

The following recommendations are put forward to educational institutions and curriculum designers:

- **Integrate diversity and inclusion into curriculum:** Schools and universities should teach about religious and cultural plurality as core values. Curriculum designers in India and Pakistan can develop modules on the histories and contributions of all communities, with a special focus on the marginalised groups. Textbooks and lessons should address issues of prejudice directly. For example, class discussions on the harmful effects of casteism, colourism or sectarianism can counteract the everyday discrimination students report. Including stories of local communities working together can provide positive role models.
- **Promote safe campus dialogue:** Educational institutions should facilitate interfaith and intercultural dialogue among students. Universities and schools can host panel discussions, cultural exchange events, and joint community service projects that involve students from different backgrounds. This builds on the finding that shared activities (such as festivals) persist even when trust is low. Anti-bullying policies must explicitly protect religious and ethnic minorities; schools should take steps when students report being ostracised.
- **Teacher and staff training:** Educators and administrators should receive training on inclusivity and implicit bias. Given the evidence that students self-censor and fear discussing religion, teachers need skills to moderate sensitive topics respectfully and encourage free, respectful expression. Workshops can equip teachers to recognise and address microaggressions (such as ignoring salutations based on caste) and to counter them with empathy and facts. Gender and diversity sensitivity training can help create an environment where women and transgender persons, who reported additional constraints, feel safer to speak.
- **Support critical thinking and media literacy:** Since youth noted how social media spreads ‘nonsense’ and hate, schools should teach digital literacy. The curriculum can include lessons on identifying fake news, understanding algorithmic bias, and using social media responsibly. Students might analyse real examples of online polarisation (as many respondents observed on X/Instagram) and discuss strategies for verifying information.

The following recommendations are put forward to civil society organisations:

- **Facilitate inter-community dialogues and events:** NGOs and community groups can organise local peacebuilding initiatives. These might include youth exchange programmes between majority and minority neighbourhoods (e.g. joint sports tournaments, art/cultural workshops, or local “twinning” of schools across a religious divide). Such activities build on the cross-community connections that some participants valued online, translating them into real-world relationships. Civil society can also sponsor interfaith discussion circles where community members share personal stories of faith and identity in a moderated, respectful setting.
- **Public awareness and advocacy campaigns:** Drawing on the vivid personal accounts in the research, CSOs can run campaigns highlighting shared humanity. For example, social media campaigns or street theatre can dramatise stories such as a Shia or Ahmadi child’s

experience of prejudice, raising empathy among broader audiences. Civil society can also publish reports and host public forums to keep issues of discrimination in the national conversation, pressuring governments and institutions to act. Advocacy groups should monitor hate incidents and support victims (e.g. legal aid for those unjustly accused under blasphemy laws, or for students discriminated against by schools).

- **Capacity building for youth leadership:** NGOs can train youth leaders in conflict resolution and community organising. Programmes could teach skills in dialogue facilitation, leadership across divides, and non-violent activism. By empowering young people to lead local initiatives—such as neighbourhood committees or online discussion groups—they can leverage human kindness and empathy and scale it up.
- **Partnerships and networks:** Civil society can form cross-border or pan-regional networks dedicated to communal harmony. Joint India-Pakistan youth platforms (virtual or through third-party venues) can continue friendships forged online or create new ones. Similarly, partnerships between NGOs of various ideological backgrounds can be forged to show a united front against extremism. These networks can exchange best practices (e.g., from international community policing successes) and collaborate on projects, such as joint charitable initiatives that serve mixed communities, demonstrating solidarity.

The following recommendations are put forward to media platforms and technology companies:

- **Stronger content moderation and policy enforcement:** Social media and news platforms must commit to identifying and removing hate speech, false rumours, and violent threats. Companies should improve their moderation algorithms and reporting systems to flag content that dehumanises any religious or ethnic groups. Transparency reports should be public, showing how hate content is addressed, to build user trust.
- **Algorithmic changes to reduce echo chambers:** Platforms should adjust their recommendation systems to expose users to a wider range of perspectives. Tech companies should enable exposure to 'a wide range of lived experiences' and encourage following diverse voices. For example, after a user follows primarily one community, the app might suggest credible voices from other communities or fact-checkers. Algorithms should not solely prioritise engagement alone; they should also downrank extremist content that incites fear or hatred.
- **Support for digital literacy and counter-narratives:** Social platforms can partner with educators and NGOs to launch initiatives that teach users how to discern credible information. For instance, integrating tips into the app (as some platforms do) or hosting verified content hubs on communal harmony. Companies might also amplify counter-narratives by highlighting stories of interfaith cooperation or minority contributions (leveraging the same mechanisms they use to boost polarising content). Responding to the finding that algorithmic feeds' fuel tensions by keeping rage baiting', platforms have a role in promoting calm, fact-based dialogue on contentious issues.
- **Regulating anonymity for abuse:** Since anonymity was noted to embolden extreme speech, platforms could require stricter identity verification for accounts, or more actively police anonymously posted threats. Measures such as limiting message reposting or penalising accounts that frequently spread hate can reduce mob-like behaviour. Public campaigns (possibly co-hosted with civil society) can encourage users to use platforms responsibly and report hate content.

The following recommendations are put forward to religious and community leaders:

- **Public denouncement of intolerance:** Leaders of all faiths and communities should explicitly condemn violence and hate speech. Given that some respondents saw even family

members react negatively to empathy for other communities, religious leaders have a powerful role in modelling acceptance. Joint statements by Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, and other religious bodies against communal violence can send a strong message that extremism is not sanctioned by religion. Sermons and speeches should stress shared values of compassion and remind followers of pluralistic teachings.

- **Interfaith engagement and joint community events:** Grassroots religious leaders can organise and participate in events with other faith communities. Simple acts like inviting neighbours of different faiths to celebrate each other's festivals or participating in interfaith prayer services build familiarity and trust. Community leaders can also jointly organise charity drives, demonstrating that cooperation across communities benefits everyone.
- **Education within communities:** Leaders should teach against prejudiced cultural practices. For example, addressing the issue of 'purity'-based exclusion (refusing to share food with converts or lower castes) requires speaking out that such practices have no moral basis. Religious institutions can hold workshops for families on tolerance and encourage community members to read inclusive religious scholarship. Highlighting religious texts and traditions that celebrate pluralism can counteract narrow, exclusionary narratives.

Conclusion

Ethno-religious harmony in India and Pakistan will not improve through any single actor alone. The qualitative findings from young people in both countries make clear that solutions must be multifaceted and collaborative. Policymakers must uphold the rule of law and inclusivity; educators must foster critical, empathetic citizens; civil society must actively bridge divides; media and tech companies must prioritise human dignity in their platforms; and religious leaders must champion coexistence in their sermons and actions. Each stakeholder can implement the steps above within its own sphere of influence, but all share the goal of ensuring that diversity becomes a source of strength rather than division.

Ultimately, participants' own words point to hope: even amid cycles of mistrust and suspicion, there remain examples of mutual celebration and online connection that demonstrate India's and Pakistan's shared plural heritage. By heeding the insights of affected communities and working in concert, both countries can create environments where every citizen truly feels they are living, not merely surviving under fear.

Postscript

Undertaking this research study became a practice of listening with empathy and openness to diverse perspectives, and, in turn, became a shared dialogue as participants reached out to hold conversations and discuss concerns about the unfolding situation. It allowed for a deep empathetic insight into the everyday experience of those who constitute the region we know as South Asia. What this 'ongoing' conversation continues to reveal is that indeed ethno-religious nationalism continues to be on the rise across India and Pakistan. It has a real-time impact on the lived experiences of people, continuing to threaten minorities of both countries, and, as the events of May 2025 showed, it brought two nuclear-armed states to the brink of war. In an age of information (which now also constitutes an age of disinformation) and the rise of generative AI, it remains imperative to counter the narratives of hate that seek to divide with the tireless work of fact-checking, educating, researching, and continuing to hold space for narratives of hope, peace, and the shared love for humanity above all.

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Appendix: Data insights

Participant demographics

This study draws on insights from 87 participants across Pakistan and India, including a significant number from diaspora communities. This section provides an overview of the sample's location, age, gender identity, religious and caste identity, educational background, occupation, and political leanings.

Location and residency. The majority of respondents identified with Pakistan, accounting for 70.1 percent (61 participants), while 30.9 percent (26 participants) were from India. Within these groups, the sample included both residents and non-residents, with 44 participants from within Pakistan and 17 identifying as non-resident Pakistanis. From India, 12 were resident Indians, while 14 respondents were non-resident Indians. This composition results in a more dominant presence of Pakistani youth perspectives in the dataset.

Age distribution. Participants predominantly fell into the younger age brackets, with 41.4 percent aged 18 to 24 and 46 percent aged 25 to 29. Only 12.6 percent belonged to the 30–35 age group.

Gender identity. A majority of participants identified as women (56.3 percent), followed by 41.4 percent who identified as men. Additionally, 2.3 percent identified outside the binary, either as non-binary or under other gender identities. This representation of women and gender minorities offers a necessary counterbalance to traditionally male-dominated political discussions in the region.

Religious identity. In terms of religious affiliation, 65.5 percent identified as Muslim, reflecting the religious majority within Pakistan and a notable presence among Indian respondents. Within this group, participants represented a range of sectarian identities, including Sunni, Shia, and other minority sects. 17.2 percent identified as Hindu, while 2.3 percent identified as Christian and 1.1 percent as Sikh. Additionally, 13.8 percent identified as atheist, agnostic, or non-religious, reflecting a meaningful minority of secular or irreligious voices in the sample.

Caste and ethnic identity. Caste and ethnic identities reflected a wide range of backgrounds. Pakistani participants represented groups such as Punjabi, Urdu-speaking (Muhajir), Sindhi, Syed, Memon, Gilgiti, Chitrali, Baloch, Saraiki, and Rajput. Among Indian respondents, caste and ethnic categories included Brahmin, Dalit, Kshatriya, Kayastha, Tamilian, Bengali, Gujarati, Reddy, and other regional identifiers. Several respondents from both countries noted hybrid or multi-ethnic identities, illustrating the fluidity and complexity of identity within the modern South Asian context.

Type of residential area. Reflecting the survey's digital nature, an overwhelming 85.1 percent lived in urban areas. Semi-urban residents accounted for 13.8 percent, while only 1.1 percent came from rural areas. Therefore, the study highlights the dominant perspectives of city-based youth, particularly those with greater access to online political spaces and discourses.

Educational background. The participant group was predominantly highly educated. Nearly 52.9 percent were either current undergraduate students or had completed an undergraduate degree. Another 36.5 percent had attained or were pursuing a master's degree or higher education, including MPhil and PhD degrees. 10.2 percent reported having completed high school or vocational diplomas (professional diploma). This high educational profile is consistent with the tendency toward political engagement on social media.

Current occupation. Participants were split mainly between students (34.5 percent) and employed or self-employed individuals (57.4 percent). About 8 percent identified themselves as currently

unemployed or not working. This mix includes participants balancing educational and professional pathways while engaging with socio-political issues.

Political leanings. This section allowed participants to self-identify their political leanings in their own words, without being boxed into predefined categories, and that really came through in the responses. The majority of participants leaned towards progressive ideologies, with many explicitly identifying as liberal, left-wing, socialist, radical left, or Marxist. Several respondents expanded on these labels, explaining their views around anti-capitalism, scepticism towards state institutions, or a preference for systemic change and community-led alternatives. At the same time, a good number of participants indicated more fluid or mixed positions, using terms such as liberal-leftist or democratic socialist. Some responses pointed to a more centrist, moderate, or even conservative orientation. Some participants distanced themselves from strict labels altogether, describing their politics as rooted in empathy, social justice, or refusing to be boxed into one camp.

Overall, there was a clear trend towards progressive politics, but what really stood out was the nuance in how people thought about their political identities. Many respondents were critical of rigid categories and instead framed their politics in terms of lived experiences and values.

In summary, the participant demographics reflect an urban and educated group of young people, predominantly from Pakistan but with meaningful representation from India and diaspora communities. The diversity in gender, religion, caste, and political identities captures a broad spectrum of youth experiences across South Asia. However, it is important to acknowledge the sample's limitations, particularly its urban and digitally connected skew, which likely amplifies the perspectives of university-educated youth with access to online spaces. These demographic insights provide necessary context for interpreting the themes and narratives that emerge in the following sections, helping situate individual experiences within broader socio-political dynamics.

Perceptions of ethno-religious conflict

The survey began by exploring public perceptions of ethno-religious nationalism in respondents' respective contexts. An overwhelming 89.7 percent reported noticing an increase in tensions related to ethnic or religious identities within the past five years, highlighting a growing concern across communities.

When asked who they believed was responsible for this rise in tensions, allowing for multiple selections, respondents pointed to a range of influential actors, as shown in the table below. These findings suggest a perception that ethno-religious conflict is being shaped not only by institutional structures but also by powerful figures and platforms that shape public narratives.

Table: Respondents' perceptions of ethno-religious conflict

<i>Factor held responsible for rise in tensions</i>	<i>Percentage of respondents</i>
Media (TV, print, and social media)	85.1
Political leaders	80.5
Religious leaders	79.3
Education system	46.0
Historical rivalries	44.8
Economic inequality	31.0
Foreign influence	29.9

When asked whether religious and ethnic minorities are treated equally in their countries, 74.7 percent of respondents said no, while 20.7 percent answered maybe. Taken together, this indicates an abysmal state of equality and inclusion and underscores the marginalisation of minority groups.

Personal experiences

When asked if they or their community had experienced ethnic discrimination or religious-based violence, the responses were nearly split, with 47.1 percent responding with no, and 52.1 percent reporting that they did face discrimination and violence. This shows that while discrimination is pervasive, it is not experienced uniformly, highlighting the varying privileges some groups have over others.

Most participants (83.9 per cent) indicated that they had observed an increase in hate speech or discrimination against religious or ethnic groups. This figure indicates a visible, growing pattern of hostility across social, political, and digital spaces. When asked about feeling safe while expressing religious and ethnic identity in public spaces, about 41.5 percent responded ‘sometimes’, 35.6 percent ‘always’, and 17.2 percent ‘rarely’. In this context, safety is contextual, particularly for those who have rarely felt safe; there is a more pervasive sense of exclusion and fear that their identity could mark them as a target in both subtle and overt ways.

A total of 40.2 percent of participants reported avoiding certain places, events, or public behaviours because of their religious or ethnic identity. This indicates how, for the majority, the expression of identity in public is not just about personal belief or practice but is also shaped by fear and the anticipation of potential discrimination.

Media narratives

In this section, we explored participants’ views on media, politics, and their own political expression. The survey included a line of questions around whether participants express political opinions on social media, which platforms they use most frequently, their perceptions of media coverage of religious and ethnic minorities, and whether they feel political parties use religion or ethnicity to divide people.

Coverage of religious and ethnic minorities. A strong consensus emerged regarding perceptions of media bias. 87.4 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the media is biased in its coverage of religious minorities, while 90.8 percent felt similarly about coverage of ethnic minorities. This perception of bias was dominant across participants from both Pakistan and India, pointing to a broader mistrust in media institutions when it comes to fairly representing marginalised identities.

Political exploitation of identity. Responses were even more unified on the role of political parties. 95.4 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that political parties use religion to divide people, and 96.5 percent said the same about ethnicity. The responses show that young people overwhelmingly believe identity-based divisions are a deliberate political strategy across both countries.

Social media use and political expression. When it came to expressing personal opinions on political issues online, the responses were mixed. About 35.6 percent of respondents said they actively express political views on social media, while 42.5 percent said they do so ‘somewhat’, often qualifying their participation as occasional or issue-based. The remaining 21.8 percent reported not expressing political views online at all. Among the social media platforms, Instagram emerged as the most frequently used, followed by X (formerly Twitter) and WhatsApp. A smaller subset mentioned Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, or Tumblr, but these were far less common. X

(formerly Twitter) was associated with more active and direct political expression, while Instagram and WhatsApp tended to host more passive, story-based or private discussions.