



# RESEARCH REPORT ON “‘HATED SPEECH’ AND THE COSTS OF FREEDOM IN INDIA”



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This report has been authored by  
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*"This research was developed as part of the grants made available under project "Challenge: challenging hate narratives and violations of freedom of religion and expression online in Asia", implemented by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) with funds from the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)".*

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***Suggested Citation:*** Raghunath, Preeti. (2022). *'Hated Speech' and the Costs of Freedom in India.* Association for Progressive Communications.



***Trigger Warning:*** Some of the articulations, observations, and experiences presented in this research report could be triggering to those who have experienced hate and related violence of diverse proportions.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I dedicate this report to all those who have been at the receiving end of hate that gets manifested as violence of varying degrees and kinds, and for their extraordinary courage in speaking up against injustices and violations of power. I would like to acknowledge all those individuals and groups who have repeatedly been exemplars of this ability to stand for their truth in the face of dire consequences.

I am immensely thankful to the 15 respondents who took part in this research project, for sharing their experiences and observations and partaking in building solidarity and knowledge together. I would like to thank Sayantani Saraswati for her assistance and help throughout this project. I would like to acknowledge the timely and kind support of the Association for Progressive Communications in enabling this study and trusting me with articulating occurrences around Hate using a newer conceptualization. In particular, I'd like to reiterate my gratitude to Gayatri Khandhadai, Pavitra Ramanujam, and Cho Thazin Aung for their patience, coordination, and support.

I would like to place on record my sincere thanks to my family and friends for their encouragement and solidarity through this project, and otherwise.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report seeks to draw out the analytical category of 'Hated Speech' to define an affective dimension of communication, as also the communicative dimension of hate. This it does, by focusing on those at the receiving end of hate, for the act of speaking up against injustices and speaking truth to power. In other words, this project looks at experiences and observations of what it means to speak truth to power and receive hate as it is manifested through varying degrees of violence, across a variety of instances. Drawing on the responses of 15 interviewees, this qualitative research report presents 3 sections in understanding 'Hated Speech': (a) Forestalling Speech, (b) Speech in Polarised and Reactionary contexts, (c) Speaking For Oneself In One's Voice. The report ends by Enunciating Hope, offering a reflection on possibilities and pathways for solidary-building and reflexive collective action.

### **Highlights:**

- ✚ Draws up the analytical category of 'Hated Speech'
- ✚ Elucidates the continuum of speaking truth to power and associated repercussions manifested through varying degrees of violence
- ✚ Presents experiences and observations from 15 qualitative interviews
- ✚ Presents 3 sections to understand 'Hated Speech' better
- ✚ Ends by Enunciating Hope for Anti-Hate Solidarities

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Earlier in 2021, at the height of the pandemic, Nodeep Kaur, a labour rights activist was arrested and treated with brutality for protesting against the farm laws that the Indian government sought to implement in India<sup>1</sup>. Nodeep had alleged abuse and assault when she was in custody in jail. As I write this, Khurram Parvez, a human rights activist who focuses on violation of human rights in Kashmir, has been arrested for “terror-funding” and “conspiracy”, by the Indian National Investigation Agency (NIA). Activists and others on social media have called the arrest an attempt to “silence and punish human rights defenders”<sup>2</sup>. These instances are examples of how the presence, speech, and activities in favour of the marginalised are often seen as challenging the status quo by those who seek to maintain it, and who react with hate manifested through various means.

The last decade or so has seen a deeper penetration of violence of various kinds in India, ranging from verbal assaults online to the systemisation of hate in various walks of life. The 2020 Democracy Index saw India fall to the 53rd rank, and the category of a ‘flawed democracy’<sup>3</sup>. From ‘WhatsApp lynchings’ based on embodying certain identities and ideas<sup>4</sup>, to incarceration for upholding a cause<sup>5</sup>, the freedoms intrinsic to life in a democracy are increasingly under threat in India. Protests by students in India<sup>6</sup> in the midst of structural reforms that would impact existing access to aspirants of education

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<sup>1</sup> <https://caravanmagazine.in/crime/nodeep-kaur-labour-rights-dalit-activist-interview>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-59383554>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/?utm\\_source=economist-daily-chart&utm\\_medium=anchor&utm\\_campaign=democracy-index-2020&utm\\_content=anchor-1](https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/?utm_source=economist-daily-chart&utm_medium=anchor&utm_campaign=democracy-index-2020&utm_content=anchor-1)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-44856910>

<sup>5</sup> <https://srdefenders.org/india-inhumane-prison-conditions-for-bhima-koregaon-human-rights-defenders-joint-communication/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indian-universities-2010-2020-a-decade-in-protest-101616585103634.html>

from weaker socio-economic backgrounds protests against the exclusion of people living in India by altering conditionalities of citizenship<sup>7</sup>, brutal murders of rationalists<sup>8</sup>, and violence against minorities who practice faiths of their choice<sup>9</sup> are perhaps glaring examples of systemic apathy, induced by hate for certain groups of people who choose to object to another point of view either by occupying space or speaking up. The latter, this report reckons, are communicative acts that challenge the status quo and those who hold power in various ways. These acts of rebuttal and refusal convey dissent and non-compliance with policies and practices that are aimed at consolidating existing hierarchical power structures in society, something that has been carried forward historically and in present times, through the emergence of newer elites as well.

This research report is titled, "Hated Speech' and the Costs of Freedom in India', to highlight two interlinked ideas --- conceptualising the newer analytical category of 'Hated Speech', as a way to understand the communicative acts of those who speak out (the "perpetrated", if you will) and received systemic and systematized hate in turn on the one hand and the idea of freedom and liberation as ideals for human aspiration through time on the other. 'Hated Speech', as will be elucidated further ahead in this report, is different from Hate Speech, in that while the latter focuses on the perpetrator, the former looks at how certain kinds of communicative acts become speech that is Hated. The second idea is that of the 'costs of freedom in India', and showcases how these individuals and groups bear the brunt of engaging in such communicative acts, brutally.

This research report is based on a qualitative study comprising 15 interviews conducted with individuals of diverse backgrounds, who have either experienced or observed communicative acts being at the receiving end of systemic and systematised hate. Devised as semi-structured conversations, the interviews showcase a range of instances along diverse identitarian and sectoral lines, to help understand how the individuals and

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<sup>7</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/lessons-from-anti-kaa-protests-7101411/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dailyo.in/politics/killed-rationalists-mm-kalburgi-govind-pansare-narendra-dabholkar-gauri-lankesh-hindutva/story/1/27103.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/21/751541321/this-is-it-im-going-to-die-indias-minorities-are-targeted-in-lynchings>

groups who carry certain markers of being and belonging are often at the receiving end of hate, in various ways. This is elaborated upon further in the methodology section, with a reflexive note drawing on my experience added.

The report is structured as follows: firstly, the concept of 'Hated Speech' is drawn out and explicated, with examples. This is then followed by zoning in on the contours of the project, and the methodology, before moving on to the empirical narratives and experiences drawing from the qualitative research. The report ends by focusing on enunciating hope and drawing attention to reflections that continue to restore trust in human endeavors that are egalitarian and emancipatory.

## **2. 'HATED SPEECH' - THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Historically, certain kinds of speech emanating from particular quarters and sections of society have been marginalised and left out of what is considered mainstream speech. These forms of articulations have been considered less important and even unwarranted, in the larger scheme of things. To unearth and unravel the potential in such marginalised speech, we mobilise the idea of “Hated Speech”. This proposed research endeavour seeks to make theoretical and empirical contributions by conceptualising this new analytical category and area of exploration. India is home to various kinds of discrimination and inequities. Discrimination based on gender, caste, class, region, and religion, among other identity markers continues to be pronounced, accentuating age-old practices of skewed gender relations, untouchability, and hierarchal segregation of livelihoods and living in South Asia, and practices of internal colonization by the modern nation-state. This proposed project seeks to engage with the complex histories and stories of unequal practices, to highlight inequities in communication affordances. Understanding and locating Hated Speech assumes importance in this context since it provides insight into the communicative landscape, helping unearth systemic and systematised hate and regimes of power and control.

### **DEFINING THE TERRAIN**

#### ***2.1 Hate Speech and Hated Speech***

Hate Speech, as offline and online vitriol has been receiving academic attention in recent times. Ranging from the lawyers working with defining Hate Speech in the context of governing such speech online (Narrain, 2016) to the conceptualisation of

Extreme Speech (Udupa, 2019; Gagliardone, 2019) and its many variants, to studies on disinformation (Shafi and Ravikumar, 2017; Wardel, 2017), the area is perhaps one of the more fertile grounds of academic inquiry today. It seeks to study the phenomenon of the perpetration of hate through communicative action in the online and offline worlds.

However, I seek to distinguish and foreground an altogether different concept --- that of **'Hated Speech'**, as a distinct form of speech act. Hated Speech is speech that is at the receiving end of hate, an interstitial point that lives in a time when a pronouncement is made and is a consequence of "speaking up". At any point in time in the history of ideas, one comes across the heretic, the soothsayer of bad times, and those who speak up against injustices, only to be silenced through the exertion of systemic power. Their acts of speaking out are radical, disturbing the pristine order that is to be preserved through the power that has been consolidated over time. Their speech is Hated. Hated Speech as a new analytical category is not just an exercise in academic jugglery. It is a political project --- one that seeks to *invert the gaze from the perpetrator to the perpetrator*. Hated Speech is inclusive but not limited to a range of *communicative acts* that pertain to speech, written documents, online writing and publishing, art, and artifact. It is characterized by the common quality of posing a challenge to injustices and existing power structures. Further, I seek to call this Hated Speech, and not by any other name that would indicate silencing or the muting of voices, since it is important to recognise the courage, agency, and subversive tactics that are important in practices of vocalising stances against the injustice of various kinds.

## ***2.2 Situating Hated Speech***

Hated Speech can easily be understood as what it is not --- it is not an aberration of hate speech nor is it the past tense of hate. To be sure, here, it is being mobilized as a verb, an act of certain speech being actively hated. It involves being at the receiving end of the active perpetuation of systemic and institutional hate, in the face of a speech act that seeks to present truth to power. It comprises pre-emptive efforts of silencing and shutting down or assaulting and asserting domination over certain possible speech, as also the post-facto infliction of the machinery of the system as an exercise of authority is culling out what is considered unwarranted. In other words, understanding Hated

Speech is also linked to the gradation of how a certain speech act is perceived --- ranging from mildly disturbing of the normal order to the threatening of existing dominant notions and the wide spectrum that lies in between. More importantly, it is tied to the individual(s) engaged in the specific speech act and the construction of speech, replete with contextual attributes. To be sure, it is individuals who hold non-normative ideas and identities and who pose a threat to those who would like to protect mainstream structures of power and control, who are Hated for their presence and pronouncements against such structures. To reiterate, the location of individuals and groups and their communicative acts come under the purview of Hated Speech.

### ***2.3 Intersections with Free Speech***

One of the areas that Hated Speech intersects with is that of Free Speech. Several tenets of free speech and expression find articulation and validation in the concept of 'Hated Speech' as well. This can be seen in the ways in which free speech is often at the receiving end of hate, and ends up being curbed. That certain kinds of speech and expression are not free and come with steep costs, eggs one to understand the root causes behind the lack of freedom. Hate for speech from certain quarters is the answer. The key difference between Free Speech and Hated Speech is that the former is a legal-normative category, while the latter seeks to highlight the affective dimension of communication and is more likely to be the root cause behind unfree/censored/struck down speech.

### **3. FOCUS OF THE PROJECT**

Drawing from the above understanding, this project focuses on Hated Speech and various instances, experiences, and observations along these lines. The project advances Hated Speech as an analytical category and seeks to empirically present experiences and observations associated with it. However, what this project does not do is offer regulatory or policy outcomes, since this is a qualitative socio-psychological study, at this present moment. Instead, the report tries to end with a short section called Enunciating Hope, where pathways for solidarity with respect for difference even in the pursuit of common goals, are reflected upon.

The report is styled as a narrative one, interspersed with quotes from the respondents, engaged thematically. The narrative seeks to present degrees of hated communicative acts, together called 'Hated Speech'. I chose to adopt a narrative approach with thick description (Geertz, 1973) of data culled out from the interviews, to allow the readers to acquaint themselves with the interviewees' ideas, observations, and experiences, with my authorial voice mediating this connection that this report established between the readers and the 15 interviewees. In keeping with this idea, I have chosen to not overtly offer interpretation, but merely make guiding posts alongside this conversation between the interviewees and the readers.

## **4. METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS**

### ***4.1 Qualitative Research***

This research project draws on the broad philosophies of interpretivism and deliberative-dialectical pedagogy (Raghunath, 2020), to engage with the lived experiences of Hated Speech in India. In doing this, this research report is based on 15 qualitative semi-structured, conversational interviews conducted over 6 months. Further, all the respondents barring one interviewee have been anonymised, as per their preference. It is important to note now that since the research period coincided with the second wave of the pandemic in India; the interviews were primarily conducted online. Appointments were sought with individuals and the interviews were conducted over video and telephonic calls. Further, they were transcribed and analysed, to allow for engagement with the thematic aspects emerging from the conversations.

The interviews aimed to capture lived experiences and observations of the experiences of speaking out and being at the receiving end of hate. The idea was to capture resistance, resilience, and calls for reparation, as possible ways of looking at experiences in dealing with Hated Speech. This is in line with the understanding that there exists tremendous courage and agency by those who “speak out”, in various ways and through various forms.

It becomes imperative here to mention the lived experiences of the Principal Investigator of this research project, which led to the conceptualising of this category of ‘Hated Speech’. The PI was at the receiving end of virulent hate that was manifest as extreme harassment, both mental and physical, for being a person of her ideas that also entailed, among other things, speaking out against discrimination against fellow students at a premier university in India. This lasted a few years, and while she extricated herself from the situation, it not only left her in a dire state but also an

indelible impression and the resolve to continue speaking up, even if the communicative acts she engages in are threatened and hated.

## **4.2 Empirical Focus**

By seeking to document experiences of those who speak up and bear the costs, strategise and negotiate, one creates deliberative spaces for an understanding of dealing with speech that is hated, and as a result, shut out, dealt with using aggression, sees the deployment of institutional apparatuses to intimidate and silence and is even criminalized. This research seeks to empirically study, understand and operationalise this analytical category of Hated Speech by examining the phenomenon at various levels. Towards this end, I spoke to a range of individuals with varying (a) experiences and (b) observations of what could be called Hated Speech, ranging from reflections on student politics in university campuses in India and how caste, class, gender, religion, and fundamentalism play out in these sites, to experiences of the prolonged internet shutdown in Kashmir, and working with migrants who were rendered invisible during the pandemic despite making urban spaces with their hands and hard work, to experiences of using art and expression to call attention to regional disparities of various kinds. These conversations revealed the ubiquitousness of the category of 'Hated Speech' as something that can be used as a lens to understand a diverse range of circumstances and experiences in India, with taking on the status quo and entrenched structures of power.

## **4.3 Limitations**

The development of the idea of 'Hated Speech' has been an effort in delineating an analytical category and is usually more of an academic endeavour. Many cases and scenarios can be studied using this lens, with this report setting the ground for such studies. As a corollary, one limitation in bringing together a new conceptual apparatus for a research report is that it takes some time and critical mass to gather around the concept for it to be validated. I faced this issue during the process of conducting the interviews when the nuances of the concept of 'Hated Speech' would often get misunderstood for hate speech. I had to constantly bring the focus back on those at the

receiving end of hate for speaking up and ensure that the conversations did not go back to the perpetrators instead. Another limitation of this research was in getting respondents to speak on hate and persecution on religious grounds, which was difficult to get, since I could not meet the potential respondents in person and establish contact and trust to the extent required for them to open up on this very controversial aspect, given that this research was primarily conducted through online and telephonic interviews on account on the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 5. UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES: AXES AND INTERSECTIONS

The interviews conducted to qualitatively engage with understanding the experiences associated with Hated Speech were primarily hinged on the axes and intersections of gender, caste, region, and religion in India. These aspects play out in various ways, in conjunction or singularity, colouring the lives and/or observations of the interviewees. As mentioned, 15 interviews were conducted, to help elucidate the lived experiences of those who speak truth to power, and face repercussions of varying degrees and kinds, besides how individuals and groups use a range of communicative acts to subvert authoritarian tendencies and fundamentalist ideologies. What follows is a thematic engagement with some of the key ideas that emerged from the desk research and interviews. The three sections below allow us to engage with instances of Hated Speech, showcasing a slice of such observations and experiences.

### *5.1 Forestalling Expression and Presence*

One of the key aspects of the communicative dimensions of hate and how it manifests, is through measures of **forestalling speech**. By forestalling, one refers to how speech and presence from certain quarters are shut off or disallowed. This can be seen in the manner in which certain sections of the population are meted out selective treatment, be it as shutting down the internet in Kashmir or in the manner in which migrant workers were treated during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in India. This can be seen in the manner in which books by authors who are said to offend majoritarian sentiments are banned<sup>10</sup>, stand-up comedians are jailed<sup>11</sup>, cartoonists are implicated with sedition

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<sup>10</sup> <https://sflc.in/read-me-not-list-banned-books-india>

<sup>11</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/when-jesters-are-jailed/articleshow/80187877.cms>

charges<sup>12</sup>, and an expression that pertains to the demanding of legitimate rights is met with violence. I spoke to individuals who reflected on the forestalling of speech that happens because of hating any kind of engagement with people from certain groups of society, by those who seek to maintain the status quo.

### ***Voices of Kashmir: Met with Belligerence***

In 2019, the northernmost state of Jammu and Kashmir was reorganised through the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019, to form the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. The former state has been riddled with issues of international territorial disputes for decades. In carrying out this reorganisation, several individual and collective freedoms were suspended in the region. Digital media became an important part of life in the region over the last decade and was one of the first casualties in this process.

One respondent spoke about their experience with the internet shutdown in Kashmir<sup>13</sup>. A resident of Kashmir spoke about the harrowing situation in the region, and the repercussions of the internet shutdown:

*“Internet came to Kashmir in 2010 for the first time. In 6 to 7 years, it became central to communication in the valley and political discourse, especially since there were hardly any private media or alternative spaces for people to voice their concerns. Social media emerged as an alternative for Kashmiris, especially since it served as the node for the preservation of our cultures and networking, not just for politics. The present government in India and the valley understands the importance of the internet and its centrality to communication. Shutdowns started happening in 2016, and in 2019 they shut it down for six months after the abrogation of Article 370. After that, they resumed it on 2G speed from January 2020. This can be contested on the lines of net neutrality. The first time around when there was a complete shutdown, it was very chaotic and difficult. We were in complete isolation, and information was completely*

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/anti-corruption-cartoonist-aseem-trivedi-arrested-on-sedition-charges-115575-2012-09-09>

<sup>13</sup> <https://thewire.in/government/jammu-and-kashmir-internet-shutdown-jkccs>

*cut off. Even international media was banned, and people had no choice or access to information. The mental health of those in Kashmir was very affected. Children couldn't connect to their parents. If you see, heart attacks have become very common among the youth in Kashmir, and this is alarming. In addition, there was a loss of 4000 crores for the industry here. The hate for our freedom of expression and speech is manifest in all these very dehumanising actions. There is a lot of surveillance to scrutinise who was saying what and it is on a rapid rise here. ”*

A researcher studying internet shutdowns observed that with governance increasingly being digitised and the internet becoming central to our lives during the pandemic, shutting down the internet is a very crippling act. They suggested it is not only an impediment to access services, but violates the fundamental right<sup>14</sup>. India is a country with one of the highest number of internet shutdowns in the world, with rights-based civil society organisations calling to #KeepItOn<sup>15</sup>.

### ***Migrant Labour: Hated Presence***

Migration and mobility have been constant throughout history, with the rapid urbanisation of India only accentuating the movement of people within the country to its urban spaces. During our exploration of the issue, a respondent who worked with migrants on the ground during the pandemic spoke about the hatred for the bodily presence of the migrant worker in urban spaces. This is symbolised by the images of the long walk by the migrants in India during the height of the pandemic in 2020<sup>16</sup>, through the figure of the silent but very present migrant worker, in a brutal fashion:

*“COVID-19 showcased how the migrant worker is not cared for at all. Urban spaces are unimaginable without their labour, but the pandemic showed us how they were rendered invisible. Even ration was not fairly given to them. As a society, we failed*

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/access-to-internet-fundamental-right-review-suspension-supreme-court-rules-on-communication-shutdown-in-kashmir/story-M9locBfOPADxEeiAbHh6MK.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton/>

<sup>16</sup> *The migrants in India were left to fend for themselves, and move back from cities to their places of origin, by undertaking a walk of thousands of kilometers, at the height of the pandemic.*

*them during their time of need. For instance, there was discrimination in the amount of ration and food being given out, and there was hoarding by those it was not meant for. The othering, the “us” and “them” language became so prominent, in my experience, during the pandemic.”*

When asked what was it about the migrant figure that invoked hatred, the respondent said:

*“It is about the migrants taking away local jobs. They indeed need the labour, but the anger at them taking away the jobs is quite high. This was manifested clearly during the pandemic. The importance of the migrant worker was clear when some states called them “guest workers” to mitigate any hate towards them, underscoring the need for such labour”*

Migrants and labour not only constitute a glaring class issue but intersect with their caste location in Indian society.

### ***Cast(e)ing Hate: Invisibilisation and Exclusion***

An age-old consolidation of practices based on graded inequality, caste is possibly one of the most vicious webs that constitute the reality of life in India and indeed, the larger South Asian region and the corresponding diaspora. An anti-caste scholar spoke about how the Hindu systematic social order is driven by caste practice, and how it is rooted in hating the presence and expression of those who are stigmatised as lower castes:

*“When religion denies Liberty, Equality, Fraternity selectively to some people, it is important to emerge out of such a social order and embrace practices that are not in alignment with such an order.”*

The scholar also spoke about how this hate is manifested in the spatiality of caste:

*“Ambedkar spoke about leaving caste-based occupations in villages and migrating to cities. However, caste does not leave you in cities as well. Cities have segregation. Even when they are renting out a flat to you, they ask you in very smart ways about where you are from, whether you are a vegetarian or a non-vegetarian, what is your*

*surname. In certain cities, your caste is asked even when they allocate flats if you're interested in purchasing one."*

The respondent also indicated as to what it is about some groups that received hate:

*"This is rooted in a feudal mindset. Whom will the perpetrators rule over, they have a lot to lose if caste is not practised. Today, we see enclaves are being created in the name of privatisation of education with no constitutional provisions of reservation. This is another manifestation of how some people are constantly excluded. COVID-19 introduced another level of untouchability, with certain groups being at the receiving end. All this is about who is worthy to occupy certain spaces and who is not."*

Though there have been relentless efforts in recognising caste hate speech and getting social media platforms to recognise and take action on account of it<sup>17</sup>, besides many other efforts by organisations in South Asia and the diaspora, the interrelations of caste, hate and communicative acts continues to a sordid reality in forestalling speech in India.

The above instances offer a glimpse of the various quarters of the country's landscape of hate and expression. What follows is an exploration of yet another degree of Hated Speech, through a glance at the polarisation and the reaction atmosphere that we are witness to in India.

## ***5.2. Speech in Polarised and Reactionary Contexts***

Social media platforms are often caught in caste, gender, religion, and other controversies. In 2019, hashtags like #CasteistTwitter and #JaiBhimTwitter were trending because the Twitter accounts of many activists were suspended or restricted. There have been cases where social media accounts of various activists have been blocked, such as that of Sanjay Hegde's<sup>18</sup> Twitter account, which was frozen and brought back only after he deleted the tweet that was found to be 'objectionable'<sup>19</sup>. Twitter is also the space that registers caste-related hate in a big way. For instance, Dalit writer

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<sup>17</sup> <https://idsn.org/idsn-report-on-caste-hate-speech-launched/>

<sup>18</sup> *Sanjay Hegde is considered an anti-establishment voice.*

<sup>19</sup> <https://theprint.in/india/sanjay-hegde-can-return-to-twitter-if-he-deletes-objectionable-post-but-he-wont/313911/>

Huchangi Prasad was assaulted for so-called “anti-Hindu” writings<sup>20</sup>. Religion-based Twitter attacks are another facet of dealing with hate online. One such event was the Twitter storm over the Kamlesh Tiwari murder<sup>21</sup>.

### ***Walking on Egg-shells: Shackling Expression***

A respondent who works as a writer in the digital media space spoke about how one needed to be very careful in the usage of words since things today keep getting misconstrued or taken out of context. They suggested they avoided anything remotely politically sensitive since these are polarised times.

*“People react to things quickly and are very reactionary, less understanding, and more polarized in their opinion. I think that these organizations have such advice to give to their writers since writing begets a lot of hate, especially online. I think most journalists, and most female journalists, especially have faced this at some point. People who write on queer movements or women's movements, or on anything that is against the mainstream political opinion that is in India right now, there is a greater tendency for them to get hated and threatened.”*

The writer also spoke about the consequences of standing up for certain ideas:

*“The hate has real-life consequences. And I think as a woman, at some point, it gets normalized for us to see such messages. And we eventually design our minds in such a way that we ignore this. I know about this as a fact for almost every journalist, almost every female and queer journalist has gone through similar horrifying experiences at some point. Organizations have told me to not use inflammatory language, just not refer to political leaders directly, and if I'm referring to someone by any chance, we are asked to make it sound like it is not the author's opinion, but someone else speaking. So it keeps the author safe in these spaces.”*

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<sup>20</sup> <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/dalit-writer-huchangi-prasad-assaulted-for-anti-hindu-writings/articleshow/49505609.cms>

<sup>21</sup> <https://theprint.in/india/anti-muslim-tweets-cause-storm-twitter-kamlesh-tiwari-murder/309771/>

I also spoke to a speech artiste who works with slam poetry, who voiced her concerns on how certain topics or themes could not be broached, in her artistic endeavour.

*“If I want to write poetry on religion, I am a little skeptical. It is because it is like judging someone or something. People will not appreciate you. Even an audience that is sensible will judge poetry on religion. People are against such poetry. If the poetry is titled, “mai musalmaan hoon (I am Muslim)”, the Hindus would not read or listen to this poetry. It's not just with Hindus, it is with all the religions...”*

She also speaks about her gendered experience with writing and reading out verses, and being exposed to hate on Instagram, for instance.

*“As a woman poet, you cannot express emotions or experiences in poetry, as the audience will judge you. If one wants to write something sensual or about body positivity, a woman poet will hesitate, but if it is a boy, he will be appreciated. This has been my experience.”*

### ***Denying Existence***

One of the most important aspects that emerged from the interviews was the idea of the entire existence of people and their experiences being denied and negated, due to their background or political and/or sexual orientation. Few respondents spoke about such experiences, with one highlighting the mindset behind such acts:

*“They don't want to understand anything progressive, because then they will have to question their own identity. People are in their comfort zones, and when they are around people like us, they feel uncomfortable. They feel these people are now taking up our spaces that were denied to them for the longest time, and they can't tolerate it. They find it hard to believe and accept that even after going through so much harassment and atrocities, these people are coming up with flying colors. I do not conform to gender binaries and a couple of days ago, the US Consulate wanted to feature my story on their Instagram page. When I checked, there were hate comments. There were threats, rape threats, for just a picture of me in formal wear. People cannot understand that despite major problems, many of us are rising above them to be*

*resilient. We know how to recover. We know how to fight back. And this is something which these people are having problems with. The LGBTQI+ community has always been denied an existence..."*

### ***Campuses as Polarised Spaces***

One of the most articulate and energised spaces in the life of politics in India are university campuses. As spaces that see the forming of worldviews, coming face-to-face with plural ideas, and critical thinking, certain university campuses have been sites that see contestation of various kinds. The move towards skill-based and technical education as a policy versus the existence of critical humanities and social sciences brings to the fore contested ideas of being apolitical as opposed to being politically conscious.

One of the respondents shared experiences and observations of studying in two institutions of higher education in India, marked by differences in the exposure to everyday politics.

*"I was pursuing my MA at an IIT and we would interface quite a bit with the engineering students, many of whom found us to be unnecessarily political. The MA programme was addressed by monikers such as Master of Arguments and Musalmaan ka Agent (Agent of Muslims). Whatever we would raise our voices about, we would find that it was taken personally by them and they would think we were blaming them. This especially gets reflected in online spaces, especially in an anonymised fashion, where the online self takes on newer and bolder articulations by those who hold dominant normative ideas. We had to be careful about our tone, and we tried to bridge the gap by starting a Gender and Sexuality Club to increase awareness. However, nobody would turn up for the meetings. We eventually went to talk to people in the hostel mess, basically with the idea that nothing can be achieved by being confrontational."*

However, things took a turn for the worse, the respondent said when the Rohith Vemula incident shook up campuses across India.

*“IITs are not considered political spaces. When there’s an issue, they make it administrative and give bureaucratic solutions. They consider us trouble. For instance, they had developed an app called Fluttr, which was a campus twitter-like app. This space turned toxic when we announced a candlelight march in the aftermath of Rohith Vemula’s institutional murder. This is when we realised that dialogue was not possible, especially when death is mocked.”*

The respondent also spoke about how moving to a political campus like JNU in New Delhi for higher education changed things for him but brought newer issues and a set of observations.

*“When entire institutions are attacked and caricatured, your identity is constantly attacked as well, even if you are slightly articulate. For instance, I have childhood friends who are now part of entities that promote majoritarian ethnonationalism and spread hate against anyone who doesn’t agree. They map and track you. I have a Kashmiri Muslim friend who is not approached or spoken to by the left-wing political parties on campus since they assume certain things about her because of her religion and background.”*

### ***Not a Matter of Joke***

***The last few years have been India becoming thin-skinned and outraging over comedy<sup>22</sup>! The recent cases of comedians Vir Das and Munawar Faruqui, who critiqued those in power and associated majoritarian ideas, are grim reminders that all is not well with the country’s funny bone. I spoke to a stand-up comic, to gauge the mood:***

“The topics you choose reflect your background and politics. A lot of times, we want to say things, but there’s a lot of self-censorship, besides externally imposed bans and filters. What happens is, people do not see the context or the narrative, but just pluck

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<sup>22</sup><https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/censorship-in-comedy-why-is-india-scared-of-its-comedians-and-their-political-humour-533385.html>

out words from a comedy set and go with it. Your location decides what you can say a lot of times, and sometimes the internet ensures your jokes go beyond such considerations of the region and lands you in trouble. There has been a consistent rise in controlling speech, especially about jokes on religion. Indian stand-up comedy has a history of making light of such things, but since the rise of ethnonationalist majoritarianism, we see major curbs.”

The comic about “outrage culture”:

*“Comedy is not neutral. When you perform comedy, people size you up --- who is this person and what is their background in terms of religion, caste, and gender. Once they know you are “not one of them”, you are marked. They take offence constantly. If you’re a woman or gender non-conforming, rape threats are common. If you are a Muslim, you get death threats. Social media is the site where such intimidation and threats are issued.”*

In effect, the polarised nature of social and associated online interactions came to the fore through conversations with the interviewees, with them highlighting the fact that dialogue was increasingly laborious and even impossible in the face of extremely divided perspectives and viewpoints.

### ***5.3 Speaking For Oneself In One’s Voice***

Despite the above explanation of polarised and reactionary contexts, it is incredible when people speak up. Speaking up has the power of unsettling existing structures of power that have been consolidated over time, and as we see, it is precisely for this reason that it invites hate. The List of Sexual Harassers in Academia (LoSHA) by Raya Sarkar (now Steier) did exactly this, creating ripples in Indian academia, known to be one of the most hierarchical, toxic, and closed spaces. This was followed by #MeToo in India<sup>23</sup>, as with the rest of the world, shaking up spaces across diverse walks of life, exposing fault lines.

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<sup>23</sup> [https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/41/commentary/lessons-metoo.html?fbclid=IwAR22f6hN\\_1-ZBqQWwJR9cO6v\\_OzCD3sckKriz1-mIfgA4phPvXmly4kPtWo](https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/41/commentary/lessons-metoo.html?fbclid=IwAR22f6hN_1-ZBqQWwJR9cO6v_OzCD3sckKriz1-mIfgA4phPvXmly4kPtWo)

I spoke to individuals with experiences and observers of such instances of speaking up. One respondent spoke about how LoSHA exposed and dislodged not just sexual harassment, but also the insecurities of the feminist movement, throwing it into an intergenerational tussle:

*“LoSHA was so important for so many people in so many ways. And for me, it was a space where I could be on the outside and look at what was happening because I was in the university system. I was not in any of those spaces when these conversations were happening and I did not know a lot of the actors involved. So for me, it was interesting in different ways because social media was the space where I got introduced to feminist politics and feminist movements in India. And obviously for a while, what I had learned was also followed by who I am. I am a Brahmin, an upper-class, educated person. I do not have to deal with a lot many questions that have been asked. Not just in LoSHA, but before that, when the Rohith Vemula institutional murder had taken place. LoSHA became very important to me because that was a moment where a lot of the fault lines within the feminist movements themselves were being seen. It was obvious that something like LoSHA would get backlash from men. But it was surprising to see that kind of backlash coming in from the older feminists, and those who had self-appointed themselves as the voices of the feminist movement. It was very interesting because even in their statement; they talked about the work that they had done to bring due processes in place, but they never mentioned Bhanwari Devi. They talked about what they had done for the feminist movement for women to access institutional justice. But they did not talk about what exclusions that these so-called legal justice systems inherently have.”*

The respondent also raised some questions for reflection on why speech from some quarters was hated:

*“I was a lawyer before my current academic engagement and I had worked with young women who were facing sexual harassment when the 2014-15 Criminal Amendment Act had come about. That was the first time that things like street harassment were being recognized as sexual harassment, which was not even being recognized before. When you talk about Hated Speech, it also brings up the question of*

*who hates that speech, right? Whose feathers are you ruffling when you're saying something? What about the role of privileged women in negating many other women's experiences?"*

The act of speaking up cannot be measured solely by the success of the repercussions for those who perpetrate hate. Just mustering the will to put one's experiences out there, despite knowing that it would invite wrath, makes it a successful endeavour. The repercussions, however, have not always been favourable:

*"With the #MeToo movement in India, sometimes people just delete all the social media and disappear for two years. Those same people have resurfaced, and I've seen them become popular all over again. Can you imagine that people who have been named not by one or two people but by many women have resurfaced? Because it's become like that now...very short-term memory, because there is so much going on constantly. There are so many things that we're doing, even in the social media space."*

A stand-up comic, who uses comedy to make commentary on social issues, spoke about how it is important to bridge the gap between the audience and the comic, for successfully doing comedy. However, in recent times, as explained in the above sections, self-censorship and compromises seem to be demanded on comics:

*"We constantly have to face the litmus test when we prepare the material for our comedy performances, whether one must compromise or bring one's authentic voice...that is the struggle."*

The act of speaking up has taken various forms and hues, going back to rebellions, protests, and movements against internal and extraneous colonial enterprises.

### ***Hating Histories: Erasures, Movements, Memories***

I spoke to three scholars with personal stakes that lie at the intersections of identity, region, and movements in India. Laying the ground for this kind of work, a scholar reiterated thus:

*“Protests are a mode of political expression, participation, and persuasion. They come with a communicative repertoire in a democracy and stand for collective participation. It is about the defiance of authority that has been consolidated over time. It is at this point that one witnesses the birth of the political subject.”*

The movements that the scholars have studied and engaged with are to do with Adivasis and statehood for Jharkhand, and the student movement and ULFA in Assam. Their observations and experiences showcase the need to look at how subversive and protesting speech, though hated, continues to strike at the heart of colonising tendencies<sup>24</sup>. A scholar, an oral historian, spoke about the politics of fixing identity:

*“People have normalised hate so much, and do not even realise they’re expressing hate or are discriminating. When you see the indigenous populations of our country, they have been strewn across states. They do not have one state and are living across various states that were divided according to languages. I belong to the Santhali indigenous community. I prefer the term “indigenous” to “tribe” since the latter has colonial connotations as well. Such terminology is also important to consider. For instance, the term “Adivasi” has gained momentum now, but many living in the hills in the Northeastern states prefer the term “tribe”. It is constitutionally valid as well. Now, if you see the caste certificate given to the indigenous population, most do not fall into the caste fold. But their certificate says “caste” certificate, and you are defined as a tribal person. These aspects need to be questioned.”*

Another scholar who studies art and culture in the Jharkhand statehood movement suggested the following, helping outline the communicative practices that go into such peoples’ movements, which stay resilient through decades to realise demands:

*“The struggle goes back to the Adivasi Mahasabha of 1938, which demanded a separate state for the tribals to be carved out of what was then Bihar. Then one sees the efforts of the leader of the Jharkhand Party, who in 1948 tried including those other than the people who lived in the region. In 1956, the State Reorganisation Commission rejected the demand for a separate state based on the potential state not*

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<sup>24</sup> <https://thewire.in/history/santal-hul-revolution>

*having a singular language, since the reorganisation of states was done along linguistic lines. It was then that they brought in the idea of Akhand Jharkhand, where they spoke about all the people living in the region, cutting across identities. They made it pluralistic, focusing on the autonomy of the state."*

Orality has been an important aspect of most indigenous populations. As someone from the Santhali indigenous population and an oral historian themselves, the respondent spoke about the politics of language and scripts:

*"Many people in my community, especially the elders, prefer orality over textuality. The written forms of Santhali are not heartily accepted by the people. It first started with the missionaries --- the British missionaries, then the Dutch missionaries, the Norwegian missionaries --- they used the Roman alphabet with diacritics. Then came the Devnagri script, then the Odia or the Utkal script, and then the Bangla or the Eastern Brahmi script. Santhali is spread across five states, and the politics of scripting have some powerful lobbies involved. They seek to define the language.*

The scholar also spoke about the politics of archiving oralities and associated erasures:

*"When we digitise oral histories, and then the digital archives are taken down by the funding organisations after a few years, what happens to all that knowledge and all those experiences and histories? We need to ask these questions. We need sustainable ways of archiving our oral histories, we need to decolonise the way it is being done."*

Another scholar spoke about their journey of experiencing state violence, faced with protests for appropriate labour conditions.

*"We were fighting for appropriate conditions of labour in our teaching jobs. We were also standing in solidarity with those who were suspended or removed from their jobs for standing up for certain causes. I have braved state violence. The state does not know the difference between policing and policy. For instance, deep technology like facial recognition technology is being deployed to identify those that I would call potential victims of state violence"*

The scholar added that the violence is cyclical and the demands repetitive in these movements for bettering human society.

### ***Passing the Mic: Towards Plural Voices and Articulations***

In some other cases, as seen across social movements, one sees that the center stage of the causes is appropriated by the more powerful, many a time. As one respondent suggested:

*“People have learned the social justice language. They’re always saying that they’re trying to unlearn...that they were in a different place at that time in their life and that they’ve learned a lot and grown. They’ve become more aware and conscious...This is the kind of language you would see across the board, from sexist harassers, from predators who are being pulled up, to feminists who are being called out. People are learning the social justice language because it is out there now.”*

I spoke to an activist who identifies as a cis-gendered pansexual feminine male, an environmentalist, and an intersectional feminist. The respondent spoke about the trauma that those who identify as gender non-binary and speak in their voice, for themselves face:

*“Historically, we have seen many manifestations of violence against gender non-binary people. They are murdered and killed, there is sexual violence, there is policing and policymaking that is very exclusionary, besides physical violence. It all boils down to this --- anyone who does not fit into the ideas set forth by patriarchy is met with exactly this, in varying degrees and proportions. For instance, no law goes beyond six months’ imprisonment for raping a transgender person. Once, I was called to a television channel, where I spoke against the Kerala government’s environmental policies. I filed 11 cases in court. The court authorities misgendered me, shaming my so-called feminine gestures. Gender non-binary friends are made fun of using caricatures of popular film characters...are called “onbadhu” (nine) and “pennachi” (shemale). Of course, there is unacceptability, and stereotypes still reign supreme in Kerala, the state with the highest literacy in India.”*

The respondent also spoke about online hate against people for presenting their authentic self:

*“We had a campaign called Gender Bender, and I wanted to support them. We ran an online campaign, where we applied nail polish and put it up on Instagram. The hate comments and threats were of deplorable depths. I wanted to tell them that all feminine people are not genderqueer. I wanted to delete my photo or uninstall Instagram; however, I have supportive partners who encouraged me to stay on and not cede space. Clubhouse is another space where the levels of patriarchal policing and toxicity are very high. Those who spoke on various issues in their voices have had to uninstall the app since they could not cope with the hate that comes from them just being present in these spaces. Even the only male MLA who put up a post during the pride month received a lot of hate and had to take it down. Things were terrible during the lockdown with no support system in place.”*

Many respondents also spoke about intersectionality, where multiple identities intersect to render many that many times more marginalised, with one summing it up:

*“As an anti-caste activist, I have observed that male patriarchy works across castes. When the men from the Dalit community perpetrate violence, those from the dominant castes harass the survivors and not those who perpetrate violence.”*

This section sought to present the lived experiences of those at the receiving end of Hate for their communicative acts that do not stand in line with larger colonial-normative tendencies along various axes like gender, caste, class, and region. Showcased as a graduation of experiences ranging from forestalling speech and presence to communication in polarised contexts, and then speaking for oneself in one's voice, the section captures slice-of-life realities of Hated Speech as they play out in present-day India.

The analytical category of Hated Speech has been useful in bringing to the fore such experiences and voices since it focuses on the lived experiences of being at the receiving end of Hate, which is often missing from the stories that explore both, the affective dimensions of communication, as well as the ethos and articulation of emotions in a

democracy. At this juncture and to recognise the need to mitigate hate, what follows is a focus on some ways of igniting hope in the life of the Indian democracy.

## 6. ENUNCIATING HOPE: MITIGATING THE STEEP COSTS OF FREEDOM IN INDIA

This research endeavour is the first qualitative study on 'Hated Speech', bringing together a slice of the lived experiences of those who are at the receiving end of systemic and systematised hate. Towards this end, a reflection to highlight tactical efforts in redressing historical injustices and contemporary violence is in order. These ideas for Enunciating Hope emerged from an in-vivo engagement with the interviewees, and they offer broad reflections for hope as a point of departure.

### *6.1. Silence and Presence*

One of the biggest fallouts of being at the receiving end of hate for speaking out is that one is rendered silent and muted. How do individuals and groups cope with coercive power that does not respect or allow their speech? Institutions often thrive on reducing individuals to speechless spectators. However, it is through ***bodily presence*** and ***continuous negotiations*** through this presence that dents are made in spaces that are otherwise obdurate. Murali Shanmugavelan, Faculty Fellow (Race and Technology), Data and Society Research Institute suggested:

*“Silence is also about presence. It does not signify absence. It is strategic and is certainly powerful. There is intolerance to presence, but one must occupy space and continue to be there. It makes people uncomfortable, but it also exposes intolerance.”*

It becomes important to then ensure that the silence is heard and presence felt, through acts of solidarity-building.

## 6.2. Spaces of Solidarity and Care, Online and Offline

***A respondent who worked with migrant labour during the COVID-19 pandemic spoke about how opening up channels of communication would have helped enormously and gone a long way in showing that we care.***

*“In a crisis, they needed ppl to talk and listen to them. Communication proves to be an enormous deal, especially in catering to their needs on the ground, listening to their difficult circumstances, and tailoring the responses of authorities towards addressing them.”*

This resonated with other respondents calling for online and offline solidarity based on ***trauma-informed ethics of care*** and the ***practice of listening***.

*“A lot of times, even amongst allies, there are many points of contention and dissonances. It is important to listen to each other and find points of cooperation and solidarity-building that are based on empathy and focus on the larger vision and bigger picture.”*

In principle, respondents agreed that solidarity forged based on ***experience*** and ***empathy*** towards building a common future stands the litmus test, most times.

## 6.3. Building Trust, Passing On the Mic

Towards this end, ***building trust amongst allies*** becomes important. Many activists have raised concerns many a time about who gets to lead and wield the baton, and who gets to speak on behalf of whom.

*“I don't know if they can be a concerted action, because right now we [are] in an India which is a divided society, a gendered society, heterosexual binary society. We are not in that place where we have solidarities across systems of oppression. While I might want to build solidarities with, or take action with other women or non-binary folks or queer folks or whatnot, and come together and do something. It's so much more*

*complex, right? This is because, first, we have to question ourselves on a lot of things before we get to that place where we have Trust and Care for each other. It's not that there is no solidarity. There are, of course, folks who are doing a lot of work. Of course, a lot of groups, a lot of initiatives, a lot of things that are happening, but it gets complex because when you think of concerted action or building solidarities, it becomes about who is going to be the representative. Without tackling that, there's no proper way right now, where we all come together and we can do this right."*

Another respondent, who was involved in collective action struggles for the LGBTQI+ community, suggested the way ahead:

*"We need reflexive collective action. Sometimes when faced with extenuating circumstances, we have no choice but to break our silence and "shout out". As a collective, we must learn to **speak with** everyone and not for them. We must know when to pass on the mic."*

#### **6.4. Standing Up To Repressive Power**

The farmers' movement against the newly introduced farm laws in India is an excellent case<sup>25</sup> to understand solidarity building, sustained engagement with fellow protestors, and braving difficult circumstances in favour of a larger vision for the future<sup>26</sup>. The costs to be borne in the present times have been steep, with many farmers losing their lives, something that could have easily been averted. The relentless and unflinching stances on their demands are what inspiring stories are made of. As a respondent suggested:

*"Stand up to repressive measures. It is very difficult to stand up to unbridled power. When we see sane voices being jailed, like in the Bhima Koregaon case, it is extremely disheartening. However, we also know that around these voices future movements will come together."*

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<sup>25</sup> <https://thewire.in/rights/the-anatomy-of-a-successful-protest-or-how-the-farmers-won-their-fight>

<sup>26</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/farmers-protest-india-delhi-punjab-bjp-7540336/>

A **multi-pronged approach**, with transnational solidarity-building with civil society across borders, owning communication processes and practices without relying on one external agency, and remaining steadfast is all easier said than done, but offers the only way out.

### **6.5. Learning to Hold Hands**

As a corollary to the above discussion is the oft-quoted idea of holding hands. However, this is not without problems, since lack of awareness of the lack of equitable conditions and respect continues to plague already skewed power relations even within spaces of solidarity. As a respondent quipped,

*“It is becoming the responsibility of the marginalised to teach the mainstream. However, it is the latter who has to read and study and learn. It is not anyone’s responsibility to teach...it is the responsibility of those in the mainstream to learn and not degrade. Patriarchy doesn’t learn. It should not be the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressor. Research on gender non-binary people is done everywhere, and yet it becomes the responsibility of those who identify as gender non-binary to teach.”*

This highlights the crux of the issue --- if speech and communicative acts are to be unequivocally equitable and emancipatory as they should, the responsibility rests on those who are in solidarity to listen, learn, understand, and be reflexive in their approach towards building larger connections. Only then will the hands that hold reflect equitable sharing of the burden --- that of reform, to augment open spaces for plural articulations of speech and communicative acts, built on trauma-informed ethics of care and trust.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This research project sought to conceptualise and present the analytical category of 'Hated Speech', explaining the continuum of speaking up and being at the receiving end of hate as it manifests through various degrees of violence. Towards this end, 15 qualitative semi-structured conversational interviews were conducted, presented across three rubrics in this report. The report ended by Enunciating Hope, as possible reflexive pathways for the road ahead, in building solidarities and aiming for reflexive collective action. The need for such an analytical category, which marks a shift from the perpetrators of hate to those who are at its receiving end, is a political move in shining light on how living in constant fear and threat, and speaking up irrespective. This opens up a newer analytical model for studying efforts in shifting power differentials, at a time when its consolidation poses grave threats to democratic speech and communication.

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