

Dehumanising Discourses: Hate Rhetoric in Digital-Political Ecosystems

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Abstract

The incidence of hate speech in the contemporary digitally mediated environment demands a thorough investigation regarding the mechanisms that initiate and perpetuate such hate ecosystems. This rhetoric, which is also a language of othering, is not an individual act of inappropriate speech but is assisted by mechanisms of discursive dehumanisation, systemic amplification and institutional legitimisation. Drawing upon the frameworks of speech act theory and critical discourse analysis, the paper argues that these three interconnected mechanisms provide the felicity conditions for hate rhetoric to thrive, causing marginalisation and, in many cases, leading to violence. An analysis of the Meitei- Kuki violence in Manipur reveals a typical case of the culmination of hate rhetoric targeted at each other through fringe-group labelling, coordinated digital attacks and institutional legitimation, all converging in ethnic violence. The paper highlights the need for a multi-pronged strategy, including counter speech, digital literacy, robust policymaking, implementation, and institutional accountability, to counter such undemocratic language practices.

Keywords: Hate Rhetoric, Discursive Dehumanisation, Systemic Amplification, Institutional Legitimation, Counter Speech.

Stanley Kubrick's iconic opening scene of his film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, titled "The Dawn of Man", is a perfect representation of the "Us Vs Them" mentality of human beings, sketched through the eruption of violence between two groups of hominins fighting over a waterhole in the prehistoric era. The scene, which is 20 minutes long, shows how, further on, one group discovers the use of bones and carcasses as weapons to drive away the opposite tribe. The discovery of hate language by humans as a means of systemic violence and social othering is yet another example of humanity's "will to power" (Nietzsche 45) and dominance over the other. Robert Sapolsky, in his groundbreaking study of the neurobiology of hate, talks about the 'Us vs Them' dichotomy in human beings. He dwells long on the hormones, the neurons, and the cognitive capacity for framing, which is responsible for love and hatred towards our fellow beings. He argues:

...Us/Them-ing can arise from cognitive capacities to generalize, imagine the future, infer hidden motivations and use language to align with other Us-es...other primates not only kill individuals because they are Thems but have negative associations about them as well. Nonetheless, no other primate kills over ideology, theology or aesthetics. (400)

Discourses of hate are rampant in all parts of the world. In earlier times, when one could point to a single person behind this, like Adolf Hitler or Benito Mussolini, in the contemporary post-truth era, mediated by social platforms and aided by artificial intelligence, these discourses are everywhere and within no time. To add to it, even people who hold the highest offices in the country are lured by the potency of hate rhetoric. There is a growing tendency worldwide to normalise hate rhetoric. Is there a biological explanation for the propensity towards hate rhetoric? How do such discourses functionally dehumanise target groups? Why does hate speech inspire so many quick responses? What are the roles of institutional and discursive

structures in perpetuating such rhetoric? This paper examines such questions and attempts a theoretical study of the systemic mechanisms that function as anchors for hate speech.

What is Hate Speech?

Hate rhetoric is generally defined as derogatory and discriminatory speech or expression which causes physical and psychological harm to social groups or persons belonging to certain races, ethnicities, castes, religions, genders, or persons with physical or mental disabilities(United Nations 10), and is often part of a social group that has historically suffered marginalisation and oppression. These speeches could include abusive words, epithets or verbal or non-verbal expressions which aim at violence against that group. It works by dehumanising the individual or group and stereotyping them in negative terms (Curtis). Primarily, language, which is a communication tool, thus takes the form of a tool of violence by depriving the target group of basic dignity through an act of discursive dehumanisation. The United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech categorises hate speech into three levels: the top, intermediate, and bottom levels. The document records:

1. AT THE TOP LEVEL, “direct and public incitement to genocide” and “advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence” are prohibited under international law.
2. AT THE INTERMEDIATE LEVEL, certain forms of hate speech may be prohibited, but only if restrictions are provided by law, pursue a legitimate aim (e.g. respect of the rights of others, or the protection of public order) and are necessary and proportionate.
3. AT THE BOTTOM LEVEL, legal restrictions should not be imposed on the dissemination of lawful expressions that are, for example, offensive, shocking or disturbing. (United Nations 5)

Researchers also highlight the distinction between hate speech and hate rhetoric. Hate rhetoric, which is part of the constructive and persuasive nature of language and is a strategic tool, does not come under the purview of legality. Hate speech, which is an individual speech act and causes harm, can be restricted by legal mechanisms. However, the ambivalence regarding what is considered harmful hate speech is also reflected in the failure of legal mechanisms to pre-empt it. Notably, most hate speech falls under the category of lawful expression.

The Source groups and Target groups of Hate rhetoric.

Be it race, caste, class, sex or religion, it is invariably observed that the source groups from where hate rhetoric springs are people in power and often in dominant positions in the social world. The target groups, on the other hand, are minorities who are oppressed and live in the margins; nevertheless, on account of constitutional rights, they are slowly moving towards equality and their right to dignified living. Hate laws are stringent in places that emphasise democratic values and equality.

Stephanie Ullman notes in her book on counter speech that, in the digital age, the surge in the rate of hate speech is quite alarming, with the consequence of imposing psychological trauma on the victims. The most vulnerable communities include LGBTQA+, Jews, African Americans and the Asian American Community. At the national level, the *India Hate Lab*, a project of the Centre for the Study of Organised Hate, has reported a surge in instances of Hate speech in India. According to another report by *The Wire*, there were 1318 instances of hate speech events reported in India in 2025, and 98% of them were anti-Muslim. This shows “a 13% increase over 2024 and a 97% increase over 2023” (deccanherald.com).

The Role of Rhetoric in fuelling and sustaining hate:

JL Austin, in his theory on speech acts, states three different types: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary act. While the locutionary act is that of stating

something literally through words, the illocutionary and the perlocutionary move into the realm of action and the consequence of that action. The illocutionary includes the intention behind the speech act- of persuading, warning, inciting, requesting, etc., whereas the perlocutionary refers to the consequential effects of the illocutionary on the audience. Are they silenced, victimised, hurt, or persuaded to do something?

In her much-discussed work, Judith Butler argues that hate rhetoric is not a singular affair; it has a history that the speaker retells as he belongs to a “linguistic community” (52), part of a powerful interpellation that sustains inequalities. This suggests the power that operates in the societal setup. Words inadvertently become vehicles of violence and subjugation over marginalised identities.

Mechanisms of Hate Rhetoric

Thus, this paper argues that hate rhetoric is not a case of individual, impulsive speech acts but operates both guilelessly and subtly through discursive dehumanisation, systemic amplification, and institutional legitimisation—each mechanism reinforcing societal othering and large-scale violence over marginalised communities, perpetuating hatred and destroying peaceful coexistence.

Discursive Dehumanization

Certain linguistic tactics and tools, which include metaphors, synecdoche, pronominal polarisation, and negative stereotyping, dehumanise people through language. Metaphors are often linked to the audience's cultural and historical memories and thereby tap the unconscious to create connections. Metaphors, according to Lakoff and Johnson, are not mere figures of speech for artistic use; they are part and parcel of everyday language. It utilises the affective power of language to elicit favourable emotional reactions that support the speaker's ideology. Thus, hate rhetoric makes extensive use of animal metaphors like “parasite”, “vermin”, “dogs”, “rats”, etc., by which the enemy group is subordinated and dehumanised and made to appear

as socially undesirable. Such animalistic slurs were rampantly used in Nazi rhetoric. Another conceptual metaphor comes from the area of disease and contamination. “Infestation”, “cleansing”, “elimination”, etc., thus become the words that legitimise the extreme measures taken by the dominant group. Metaphors such as enemy, criminal, traitors construct the notion of the “Other” and demonise them, projecting them as an existential threat. The anti-immigrant hate rhetoric uses both the former and latter considerably. The topoi of threat and fear run subtly through these discourses, with the less-than-human framing enabling violence on the other. It becomes a moral right for the source group to dehumanise the ‘other’.

The use of Synecdoche reduces the whole to its parts, turning their kin as having positive traits and their enemies as having negative ones. Gendered hate rhetoric always revolves around this binary rhetoric, as in the use of parts of the female genitalia to suggest women. Nationalist discourses also make use of this device, as in the use of the term “Hindus” in the RSS Chief Mohan Bhagawat’s speech “, everyone living in India is Hindu,”(Trivedi) to denote India and thereby reducing the pluralistic national identity into a single religious identity. Pronominal polarisation is another linguistic strategy used to polarise people into ‘we’, ‘our’, ‘us’ and ‘they’, ‘them’, and ‘those people’, constructing rigid social boundaries (Knoblock). The binaries also appear as positive vs negative, as in the illocutionary acts used in Donald Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric. In one of his rallies, he called Somalia and other nations "Places that are a disaster. Filthy, dirty, disgusting, ridden with crime"(News Wires).

Systemic Amplification

The amplification of hate is a systemic problem accentuated by the ever-increasing information overload of the digital era. In addition, Algorithmic radicalisation occurs through the curation of personalised feeds and social media echo chambers, which are wholly driven by likes, dislikes, and shares from the audience, leading people to polarised communities even without their conscious intention, effectively locking them in those hate chambers. Viral

memes, deep fakes and disinformation on the World Wide Web accentuate this phenomenon to an alarming degree, suspending critical reflection. Some people also either keep mum or side with this rhetoric out of fear of being ousted from the social network. Algorithmic radicalisation occurs step by step through initial engagement with news feeds. In contrast, in the next step, the algorithm provides the user with emotionally charged, sensational, and radical content, which unconsciously draws the user into a “filter bubble” (Parisier) where they are daily exposed to narrow perspectives that filter out diverse opinions. Over time, this leads to the normalisation of extremist views and brings in a sense of false belongingness in the user. This strategy is extensively used by radical groups like ISIS(Lavie-Driver and Linden 2025). NA Ganaie(2026) remarks:

Case studies of ISIS’s algorithmic recruitment strategies, Al-Qaeda’s generative AI-powered propaganda, Taliban’s encrypted-platform messaging, and far-right extremist memetic warfare demonstrate systematic weaponisation of AI technologies. Evidence from geopolitically significant regions, particularly Kashmir, Afghanistan, Syria, and Western democracies, illustrates how extremist organisations leverage AI to create personalised recruitment campaigns, establish echo chambers, and manufacture synthetic narrative content while maintaining operational security.

Institutional Legitimization

The Saffron Wave is an analysis of how the Indian constitutional ideal of secular democracy was reframed by the Hindu Nationalist discourse as the appeasement of minorities. It examines in detail how Hindutva rhetoric successfully converged post-independent Indian political thought with the pre-independent ideals of ‘HindSwaraj’, thereby giving it a majoritarian, populist edge. Institutionalisation of such rhetoric occurs when governments, the mainstream media, academia, and religious bodies confer authority, normalcy, and credibility on such narratives. Garnering social acceptance, they seep into the fabric of mainstream

ideology through strident, pervasive rhetoric, gradually become legitimate language, and enter the category of state-sponsored symbolic violence (Bourdieu).

Various inner mechanisms are at work in this process of legitimisation. A term or concept once part of a fringe group's vocabulary, unthinkable in terms of political correctness, is gradually introduced into mainstream newspapers, political party manifestos, or Parliamentary debates. These repeated discussions of these ideas multiply or endorse their legitimacy. Extremist positions, when repeated in public settings, make it possible to take a position that gives both views equal standing. Thus, from a fringe position, it comes to a fairly central position as another reasonable option. Taking note of the debate, the majoritarian State and other policy-making institutions begin to consider incorporating these ideas into their policies, thereby aiding bureaucratic and administrative incorporation.

A recent instance of such an attempt at legitimisation by the BJP-led Indian government is uncovered by the author Anuradha Sajjanhar in an online article on a global politics blog. She claims that over the past 15 years, the party has launched a propaganda campaign against established intellectuals and academics and has created new think tanks, India Foundation and Vivekananda International Foundation, to build a new, credible expert system to legitimise its ideology.

In April, Modi made a speech at an election rally in Banswara, Rajasthan, where he claimed the opposition Congress party wanted to distribute people's wealth to "infiltrators" who are claiming more benefits than they deserve. He was widely seen as referring to India's Muslim minority. This stereotype of Muslims "stealing" from the welfare state was then reinforced by appointed experts from Modi's Economic Advisory Council. The council published a questionable research paper in May arguing that Muslim birthrates are rising much faster than any other demographic.

Counter Mechanisms

The mechanisms for countering hate rhetoric lie in legislative frameworks, judicial mechanisms, technological and academic initiatives, and stringent reforms. At the international level, there are multilateral initiatives such as Social Media 4 Peace (UNESCO) and UN Country Team Initiatives (UNSDG), as well as national legislation in some countries that establishes strong hate speech regulation. In India, though, the law against hate speech is not a single comprehensive law but spread over multiple sections. For instance, the IPC has sections 153A, 153B, 295A, 505, etc., as measures to keep a check; however, they fall short of the expected outcomes in their implementation. Further, there is a catch in the balancing between sections which vouch for freedom of expression, Article 19(1) (a) and sections dealing with hate rhetoric.

Digital regulation, as in the EU Digital Services Act, and AI-powered detection, as in the HatePrism Project (Saha), are attempts to curb hate speech through proactive policies, such as Counter-Speech generation, rather than blocking and suspending offensive messages on social media. NLP practitioners in this field generate data sets in this regard. Counterspeech is another way to counter hate speech with arguments, narratives, and expression, directly challenging hate content without censorship, as that would interfere with the right to freedom of expression.

The role of felicity conditions and the significant role of silence of bystanders (McGowan 2018) can provide fertile grounds for hate speech to thrive. Felicity conditions are certain conditions that make a speech act successful. This includes the authority of the speaker, the presuppositions of the audience, consisting of assumptions, associations, beliefs, and uptake. Rae Langton also discusses the use of blocking as counter speech, in which the audience blocks the presupposition, rendering the hate speech ineffective or misfiring (Langton 2018). The silence of bystanders can affirm and license the speech act and the speaker's

authority to say so (Donzelli 2021). However, the act of counter speech can also be shaky ground because, when silence aids in licensing, counter speech could strengthen and popularise hate rhetoric.

Case Study: The Meitei- Kuki Conflict in Manipur (2023-present) and Hate Rhetoric

The Meitei-Kuki conflict illustrates how the three mechanisms detailed above function in society. The conflict is a clear case of speech acts that show a symbiotic, cyclical, domino effect between speech and violence, where one feeds the other in a recurring pattern. The conflict involves performative speech acts, institutional legitimisation by state and national leaders, dehumanising discourse, algorithmic amplification through digital campaigns, and counter-speech mechanisms. The conflict erupted in May 2023 between the communities, resulting in 260 deaths and the displacement of some 50,000 people (“Cops”). The timeline of the conflict shows the linear progression and flare-ups of certain long-held debates between the two communities.

Formed in 2012, the International Meiteis Forum, over the years, has systematically labelled Kukis as “immigrants,” “foreigners,” and “tenants with no rights” (Chongloi, Suantak). Over a period of ten years, through repeated endorsements, the fringe group narrative enters the mainstream, enabling institutional legitimisation (Suantak). There ensues a Statewide “war on drugs” that turns into a propaganda against Kukis, branding them as “drug addicts, poppy cultivators and illegal immigrants from Myanmar” (Sinha, PUCL). The state authority criminalises an entire community through an elocutionary act of ranking, thus positioning Kukis outside legitimate polity. Further, the Manipur High Court's recommendation in March 2023 to include the Meitei community in the scheduled tribes list triggered the long-held insecurity of the Kukis, which flared into an irredeemable, violent act (Sinha, PUCL). An unintentional act by the court thus paves the way for institutional legitimisation, since the ecosystem of hate was already in place.

In February 2025, a video circulated widely showing the President of KSO, Paojakhup Guite, issuing a threat against Meiteis: “If they enter our buffer zone, not a single one should be allowed to leave alive” (in Manipuri). This illocutionary act had perlocutionary effects on the other side, causing fear and validating Kuki militancy. Guite’s authority as a student leader also accentuated the felicity conditions (“Manipur Police,” “Cops”). Escalating the tensions further, the Chief Minister Biren Singh makes a speech, calling Kukis “ Myanmarese”, implying that they are not Indians. As stated by the CM, institutional legitimisation plays out very well in this act (Chongloi 2023). There ensued a fervent give and take of hate rhetoric from both sides, with words such as Kuki terrorists and Meitei aggressors (“Cops”). The law enforcement agencies also played their part by remaining silent and by delaying arrest on the FIR. The office of the CM, the police and the judiciary provided felicity conditions for this speech act.

The PUCL tribunal alleged that the media’s role in the whole process was partisan and lacked investigative rigour. Digital media platforms further fomented the spread of inflammatory content. Foreign media also used this conflict to target the BJP and vilify Meitei and amplify Kuki narratives. Researchers also identified pro-Kuki and pro-Meitei handles surging these days (“Peace building”, Tyagi and Chakravarty)

Both communities produced their own versions of the narrative, operating within the echo chambers and indulging in organised and rapid hate narrative deployment. The PUCL tribunal found that there was selective enforcement of the law, alleging that the state machinery had failed to protect its own citizens. (“Cops”, PUCL). In the case of the Manipur conflict, the coordinated Digital heat campaign and the state-sponsored legitimisation worked hand in hand. The law enforcement and legal provisions failed to counter the hate narrative and implementation strategies; hate speech is not violence, but a part of violence. The ongoing

Manipur conflict is an example of discursive dehumanisation, algorithmic radicalisation, and institutionalised legitimisation of hate rhetoric.

Conclusion

Hate rhetoric is not a random act of speech uttered impulsively, but is a premeditated attempt, with a historic continuity, at harming the other, waiting for felicitous conditions to arise. As opposed to the conventional notions of language as a medium of communication, understanding, and identity formation, the digital and AI age has shifted the purpose of language to spread misinformation, falsehoods, and stereotypes, aiding in social othering and thereby inducing far-reaching, irredeemable consequences. Hate rhetoric operates on multiple levels of societal consciousness and affects the participants, bystanders and victims in myriad ways. The very notion of speech acts illustrates that speech is not an innocent carrier of thoughts; it can trigger an avalanche of performative acts that breed violence, hatred, and consequential suffering. Discursive dehumanisation, systemic amplification and institutional legitimisation work in tandem sometimes consciously, at other times unintentionally, as the case may be, to create fertile grounds for hate to spread like an epidemic. The Counter speech of the victims, although seen as one retaliatory measure to the phenomenon of hate speech, could also, in turn, exacerbate the harm. Vulnerable populations often fall into the trap set by the perpetrators, causing an infinite speech act loop which perpetuates oppressive structures perennially. Reconciliatory speech acts may also turn out to be a facade, as they remain submerged in the societal unconscious, waiting to resurface once the felicity conditions are satisfied. The historical continuity of the speech acts forms a barrier to solving the conflict. Counter speech mechanisms, if not administered consciously and cautiously, can end up promoting a never-ending conflict.

The paper, with theoretical support from speech act theory and the critical discourse analysis framework, provides a holistic analysis of the mechanisms of hate rhetoric, not as a

hasty act that sparks untoward adverse events. In contrast, as evidenced by the analysis of the Manipur conflict, it is a hate eco-system which thrives through repeated discourse patterns, media amplification and institutional legitimisation culminating in ethnic violence and displacement. However, the paper has its own limitations. Although it delves into the mechanisms which provide felicity conditions for hate speech, it neither deals with the psychological trauma of the victims nor does it undertake a systematic evaluation of the counter speech mechanisms. The highly complex nature of the Manipur conflict cannot be reduced to a single factor, namely hate rhetoric, as it encompasses other historical and socio-political factors that fall outside the purview of this paper. Nevertheless, these limitations provide ample hints for further research, which is imperative for tackling the crucial issue of hate rhetoric. This paper aims to open new avenues for tracking hate speech, explore counter-speech options, and highlight the need for multi-pronged strategies in policymaking and implementation to address the rising challenge of hate rhetoric in our digitally mediated world.

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