Impact of Political Discourse on Intercultural Relationships in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

India's celebrated cultural plurality — spanning religious traditions, linguistic communities, and ethnic identities — has long served as the bedrock of its democratic character. Yet the intensification of political communication through mainstream and digital media channels has introduced new pressures on this social fabric. The present study investigates how contemporary political discourse shapes intercultural relationships across India's diverse population. Study Adopted a descriptive-analytical design, the research draws on primary data collected via a structured Likert-scale questionnaire administered to 200 respondents from varied cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds across multiple Indian states. Secondary data were obtained from peer-reviewed journals, government reports, and credible news sources. The dataset was subjected to percentage analysis, mean-score comparison, Pearson correlation, Chi-square, ANOVA, and multiple regression using SPSS. Study Results reveal a statistically significant positive correlation ($r = 0.682$, $p < 0.01$) between political discourse and intercultural relationships. Political discourse emerged as the strongest independent predictor of intercultural dynamics ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$), followed by social media exposure ($\beta = 0.33$) and political engagement ($\beta = 0.21$). Chi-square analysis confirmed a significant association between political communication and cultural tolerance ($\chi^2 = 18.52$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.001$), while ANOVA revealed meaningful regional variation in these perceptions ($F = 4.36$, $p = 0.006$). Inclusive discourse was found to reinforce social cohesion and intercultural trust, whereas divisive narratives correlated with social fragmentation. The findings carry direct relevance for media practitioners, policymakers, and educators tasked with sustaining democratic pluralism. This study extends the existing literature by empirically linking the content and tone of political communication — rather than its mere presence — to measurable shifts in intercultural attitudes among ordinary citizens, a dimension largely absent from prior Indian scholarship.

Keywords: Political Discourse; Intercultural Relationships; Cultural Diversity; Social Cohesion; Social Media; Cultural Tolerance; National Integration; Intercultural Trust; India

1. INTRODUCTION

India stands among the world's most pluralistic societies, home to hundreds of languages, six major world religions, and an intricate lattice of ethnicities, castes, and regional traditions. Far from being a source of fragility, this diversity has historically underpinned a culture of coexistence sustained by constitutional guarantees of secularism, equality, and fraternity. Intercultural relationships — daily exchanges of trust, empathy, and cooperation across communal lines — have served as the social glue binding this heterogeneous nation.

Political discourse, broadly understood as the corpus of speeches, legislative debates, media commentaries, and citizen conversations through which political meaning is produced and contested, has always been central to democratic life. What distinguishes the contemporary moment is the velocity and reach of political communication. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube now deliver political narratives — curated, algorithmically amplified, and often stripped of context — directly into the hands of several hundred million Indian citizens (Rao & Singh, 2024). This transformation has fundamentally altered the conditions under which intercultural perception is formed.

A growing body of research links political communication to attitudinal outcomes: studies variously document the polarising effects of social media algorithms, the role of narrative framing in constructing ethnic identities, and the relationship between political trust and civic participation (Borah & Singh, 2022; Habing, 2023; Banerjee, 2025). Yet the specific pathway through which political discourse — in its inclusive or divisive registers — reshapes the quality of everyday intercultural interaction remains incompletely theorised and sparsely tested with primary data. This constitutes the central gap this paper addresses.

The study pursues four interrelated objectives: (1) to measure the influence of political discourse on intercultural relationships; (2) to assess social media's mediating role in transmitting political narratives; (3) to analyse effects on cultural tolerance and social cohesion; and (4) to identify the relationship between political discourse and attitudes toward national integration. Answering these questions matters not only for scholarly understanding but for practitioners and policymakers charged with managing an increasingly polarised information environment.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Social Media, Political Polarisation, and Echo Chambers

Borah and Singh (2022) employed social network analysis on a large corpus of Indian Twitter data and found clear evidence of ideological echo chambers, where users preferentially interact with others holding congruent political beliefs. This selective exposure progressively reduces citizens' capacity for cross-cutting dialogue. The mechanism is significant because echo chambers do not merely reflect pre-

existing divisions; they actively deepen them by starving users of the disconfirming experiences that promote perspective-taking across cultural lines.

Chaturvedi et al. (2024) extended this insight by modelling the dynamics of intergroup interaction on social platforms, demonstrating that the nature of that interaction — whether it is civil or hostile — determines whether cross-group contact reduces or intensifies religious polarisation. Hostile political exchanges on digital platforms were shown to generate backlash effects, hardening in-group solidarity while increasing out-group hostility. These findings are directly applicable to the Indian context, where communal tensions are frequently ignited or amplified through viral social media content.

2.2 Governance, Ethnic Diversity, and Inclusive Discourse

Hausing (2023) examined how India's federal institutions manage the country's exceptional ethnic complexity. The study found that the framing choices of political elites — whether they narrate diversity as a problem to be governed or a resource to be celebrated — have measurable downstream effects on inter-ethnic relations at the grassroots level. Inclusive narratives embedded in federal governance facilitated social stability, whereas exclusionary framing heightened ethnic anxieties and reduced intercultural cooperation.

Seth et al. (2022) analysed how certain political actors on social media leverage symbolic associations — particularly military imagery — to signal in-group strength, with the implicit corollary of out-group threat. Such discursive strategies, the authors argue, normalise a zero-sum conception of national belonging that is structurally inhospitable to intercultural trust.

2.3 Political Communication, National Identity, and Cultural Narratives

Banerjee (2025) traced the evolution of competing national identity narratives in post-2014 Indian politics, arguing that the contest over what it means to be Indian increasingly draws cultural, religious, and civilisational fault-lines into partisan debate. When collective identity is politicised in this way, cultural belonging becomes a variable rather than a constant: communities whose cultural markers align with the dominant political narrative enjoy a sense of secure belonging, while others experience marginalisation or suspicion. Such dynamics predictably chill intercultural interaction.

Salam (2025) took a longer view by examining how educational texts construct national memory, finding that the systematic exclusion of North-East Indian cultural narratives from mainstream curricula weakens the sense of shared national membership among affected communities. While textbooks do not constitute political discourse in the narrow sense, they reflect and reinforce the ideological priorities of ruling political coalitions and thus operate as one vector through which political choices shape cultural identity.

Singh (2025) analysed the anxiety produced by competing visions of the 'Idea of India', observing that citizens who encounter contradictory political narratives about national identity experience reduced

confidence in social institutions and heightened uncertainty about cultural norms. This uncertainty is likely to translate into greater caution and reduced spontaneity in intercultural interaction.

2.4 Metaphor, Language, and Discursive Power

Prabhakaran et al. (2021) offered a computational investigation of the role of metaphor in political discourse, demonstrating that figurative language systematically frames social groups as threats, contaminants, or parasites — framings that prime negative affect toward out-groups. Their topic-agnostic methodology revealed that these metaphorical patterns are pervasive across political speech and media commentary, suggesting that the rhetorical texture of political communication carries consequences beyond its explicit propositional content.

Solovev and Pröllochs (2022) documented striking disparities in hate speech on social media across party affiliation, gender, and ethnicity, finding that political figures associated with populist or nationalist movements generated disproportionate volumes of hostile user-generated content. This finding underscores the indirect effects of elite political discourse: politicians who engage in othering rhetoric licence and amplify similar behaviour among followers.

2.5 Theoretical Foundations

The analysis in this paper draws on three intersecting theoretical traditions. Habermas's (2022) theory of the public sphere provides a normative benchmark: genuinely democratic discourse must be inclusive, reason-giving, and oriented toward mutual understanding rather than strategic manipulation. Against this standard, much contemporary political communication — particularly on social media — appears deficient, substituting emotional mobilisation for deliberative exchange.

Putnam's (2020) conceptual distinction between bonding social capital (ties within groups) and bridging social capital (ties across groups) provides a structural frame for understanding the stakes. Divisive political discourse tends to strengthen bonding capital while eroding bridging capital, producing communities that are internally cohesive but mutually insular — precisely the fragmentation pattern documented in this study.

Sen's (2021) argument about the 'illusion of singular identity' is also pertinent. Sen observed that violence and social exclusion are facilitated when political discourse reduces people to a single identity marker — religion, caste, language — ignoring the multiple, overlapping affiliations that constitute actual human experience. Inclusive political discourse, conversely, acknowledges this complexity and thereby creates cognitive space for empathy and cooperation across communal lines.

3. RESEARCH GAP

The literature surveyed above makes clear that political discourse shapes identity, polarisation, and cultural narratives. However, several significant lacunae remain. First, existing studies rarely link elite-level discourse to individual-level intercultural behaviour; the causal pathway from political communication to the quality of everyday social interaction is inferred rather than measured. Second,

India-specific quantitative studies tend to focus on political outcomes — voting, party preference, protest participation — rather than on intercultural attitudes and behaviours. Third, while social media's role in polarisation is well-documented, its specific function as a conduit between political narratives and intercultural perception has not been systematically tested with primary survey data.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1: To examine the influence of political discourse on intercultural relationships among individuals in contemporary India.

2: To assess the role of social media and digital platforms in transmitting political discourse and shaping intercultural perceptions.

3: To analyse the impact of political narratives on cultural tolerance, social cohesion, and mutual understanding.

4: To identify the relationship between political discourse and attitudes toward cultural diversity and national integration.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive-analytical research design. Descriptive analysis characterises patterns in the data; analytical procedures test whether observed associations are statistically significant and estimate their magnitude. This combination is widely used in social science research and is appropriate for the study's explanatory ambitions.

5.2 Data Sources

Primary data were gathered through a structured questionnaire administered to 200 respondents from diverse cultural, religious, linguistic, and regional backgrounds across multiple Indian states. Secondary data were obtained from peer-reviewed journals, edited volumes, government reports, and credible online sources published between 2018 and 2025.

5.3 Sampling Strategy

A combined convenience and snowball sampling approach was employed to reach respondents from communities that are often underrepresented in survey research. The snowball component was particularly valuable for recruiting participants from minority linguistic and religious communities. While these non-probability methods limit strict statistical generalisation, the diversity of the achieved sample — spanning five religious communities and multiple age cohorts — supports analytical generalisation of the findings.

5.4 Measurement Instrument

The questionnaire comprised two sections. The first captured demographic information (age, community affiliation, state of residence, occupational category). The second presented 22 attitudinal statements rated on a five-point Likert scale anchored at Strongly Disagree (1) and Strongly Agree (5),

covering four thematic domains: political discourse exposure and tone, social media use, intercultural interaction quality, and perceptions of social cohesion.

5.5 Hypotheses

H0: There is no significant relationship between political discourse and intercultural relationships in contemporary India.

H01: There is a significant relationship between political discourse and intercultural relationships in contemporary India.

H02: Political discourse does not significantly influence cultural tolerance among individuals from different communities.

H2: Political discourse significantly influences cultural tolerance among individuals from different communities.

H03: There is no significant relationship between social media-based political discourse and intercultural perceptions.

H3: There is a significant relationship between social media-based political discourse and intercultural perceptions.

H04: Political discourse does not significantly affect social cohesion and national integration.

H4: Political discourse significantly affects social cohesion and national integration.

5.6 Statistical Tools

Data analysis was conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics (v.26). The following procedures were applied: (i) frequency and percentage distributions for demographic profiling; (ii) mean and standard deviation for attitudinal statement analysis; (iii) Pearson bivariate correlation to test the primary hypothesis; (iv) Chi-square test of independence to examine the discourse–tolerance association; (v) one-way ANOVA to detect inter-state variation; and (vi) stepwise multiple regression to identify predictors of intercultural relationship quality.

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

6.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the age distribution of the sample. Nearly half (45%) of respondents were drawn from the 18–25 cohort, reflecting the demographic reality that young adults constitute the largest active social media user group in India. The 26–35 cohort contributed a further 32.5%, ensuring substantial representation of working-age adults.

Table 1: Age Distribution of Respondents (N = 200)

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18–25 Years	90	45.0
26–35 Years	65	32.5
36–45 Years	30	15.0
Above 45 Years	15	7.5
Total	**200**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Survey Data (2024)

Table 2 details the religious community composition. The distribution broadly mirrors India's census demography, with Hindu respondents constituting 55%, followed by Muslim (20%), Christian (12.5%), Sikh (5%), and Other (7.5%) communities.

Table 2: Community Profile of Respondents (N = 200)

Community	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Hindu	110	55.0
Muslim	40	20.0
Christian	25	12.5
Sikh	10	5.0
Others	15	7.5
Total	**200**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Survey Data (2024)

6.2 Mean-Score Analysis of Political Discourse Statements

Table 3 reports mean scores and interpretations for the four core attitudinal statements. All means fall above the neutral midpoint of 3.0, indicating consistent agreement across the sample. The statement about political narratives and inter-community trust attracted the highest mean (4.20), underscoring the reputational dimension of political communication — its power to cast communities as trustworthy allies or potential adversaries in the public imagination.

Table 3: Mean Scores — Political Discourse Attitudinal Statements

Statement	Mean Score	Interpretation
Political discourse influences cultural perceptions	4.12	Agree
Social media affects intercultural understanding	4.05	Agree
Political discussions impact social cohesion	3.98	Agree
Political narratives influence trust among communities	4.20	Strongly Agree

Note: Scale — 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree. Source: Primary Survey Data (2024)

6.3 Correlation Analysis (Testing H01)

Table 4 presents the Pearson correlation between the composite political discourse index and the intercultural relationship quality index. The correlation coefficient of $r = 0.682$ ($p < 0.01$) indicates a strong, statistically significant positive association, thereby rejecting H_{01}. This result is consistent with Habermasian theory: the character of political communication influences the character of social life. As political discourse grows more exclusionary, intercultural relationship quality tends to deteriorate; as it grows more inclusive, relationship quality improves.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation — Political Discourse and Intercultural Relationships

Variable Pair	Correlation (r)	Significance (p)
Political Discourse ↔ Intercultural Relationships	0.682	< 0.01

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).*

6.4 Chi-Square Test (Testing H02)

The Chi-square test was applied to examine whether the distribution of respondents' cultural tolerance scores differs significantly across levels of political discourse exposure. As shown in Table 5, the

calculated chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 18.52$, df = 4) corresponds to a p-value of 0.001, well below the 0.05 significance threshold. H_{02} is accordingly rejected. The finding confirms that exposure to political discourse — and particularly to its divisive or inclusive content — has a discernible bearing on citizens' levels of tolerance toward other cultural communities.

Table 5: Chi-Square Test — Political Discourse and Cultural Tolerance

Parameter	Value	Decision
Chi-Square (χ^2)	18.52	—
Degrees of Freedom	4	—
p-value	0.001	Reject H_{02}

Source: Primary Survey Data (2024), SPSS Output.

6.5 ANOVA (Testing H3 — Regional Variation)

One-way ANOVA was used to determine whether respondents from different states perceive the impact of political discourse differently. The between-group F value of 4.36 (p = 0.006) confirms significant regional variation, prompting rejection of the null hypothesis of homogeneous perceptions. This finding aligns with Hausing's (2023) observation that federal political dynamics produce locally specific intercultural environments. States with histories of distinct regional political movements or significant minority populations showed particular sensitivity to the tone of national political discourse.

Table 6: ANOVA — Regional Variation in Perceptions of Political Discourse Impact

Source of Variation	F Value	p Value
Between Groups (States)	4.36	0.006
Within Groups	—	—

Source: Primary Survey Data (2024), SPSS Output.

6.6 Multiple Regression Analysis (Testing H4)

Stepwise multiple regression was employed to assess the relative contribution of three independent variables — political discourse exposure, social media exposure, and political engagement — to the composite intercultural relationship quality score. Table 7 presents the standardised beta coefficients for the final model. Political discourse emerges as the dominant predictor ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$), followed by social media exposure ($\beta = 0.33$, $p = 0.002$) and political engagement ($\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.015$). The model as a whole was statistically significant, and H_{04} is rejected. The regression equation is:

$$\hat{Y} \text{ (Intercultural Relationship Quality)} = f(X_1\text{: Political Discourse}, X_2\text{: Social Media Exposure}, X_3\text{: Political Engagement})$$

Table 7: Multiple Regression — Predictors of Intercultural Relationship Quality

Predictor Variable	Beta (β)	Significance (p)
Political Discourse (X_1)	0.54	0.000
Social Media Exposure (X_2)	0.33	0.002
Political Engagement (X_3)	0.21	0.015

Dependent Variable: Intercultural Relationship Quality. Source: Primary Survey Data (2024), SPSS Output.

6.7 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 8: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Test Applied	Result
H1: Political discourse ↔ Intercultural relationships	Pearson Correlation	Accepted
H2: Political discourse → Cultural tolerance	Chi-Square	Accepted
H3: Regional variation in perceptions	One-Way ANOVA	Accepted
H4: Political discourse predicts intercultural quality	Multiple Regression	Accepted

Source: Primary Survey Data (2024).

7. FINDINGS

1. Primacy of young adults: Forty-five percent of respondents fell in the 18–25 age cohort, confirming that young, digitally connected citizens constitute both the primary audience for political discourse and the demographic most exposed to its intercultural consequences.

2. Broad agreement on discourse effects: Mean scores for all four attitudinal statements exceeded 3.9, indicating widespread agreement that political discourse shapes cultural perceptions, intercultural understanding, social cohesion, and inter-community trust. The highest mean (4.20) attached to trust effects, suggesting that political communication's capacity to confer or withdraw reputational legitimacy on communities is particularly salient to respondents.

3. Strong predictive relationship: The correlation of $r = 0.682$ ($p < 0.01$) represents a large effect size by conventional benchmarks (Cohen, 1988), indicating that variation in political discourse quality accounts for a meaningful share of variance in intercultural relationship quality.

4. Confirmed discourse–tolerance association: The Chi-square result ($\chi^2 = 18.52$, $p = 0.001$) establishes a statistically significant association between political communication and cultural tolerance, validating concerns raised in the qualitative literature about the real-world consequences of exclusionary rhetoric.

5. Regional sensitivity: ANOVA results ($F = 4.36$, $p = 0.006$) reveal that the same national political narratives are processed differently across states, likely reflecting variation in local histories of communal relations, regional political cultures, and minority demographic concentrations. Any national communication strategy must account for this contextual variation.

6. Social media as an amplifier: Social media exposure ranked second in the regression model ($\beta = 0.33$), confirming that digital platforms do not merely carry political messages but intensify their impact on intercultural perception. This finding is consistent with Chaturvedi et al. (2024) and Borah and Singh (2022).

7. Bidirectionality of effects: While statistical tests establish directional relationships, qualitative interpretation of the survey data indicates that the relationship between discourse and intercultural quality is bidirectional. Improved intercultural relationships may also generate demand for more constructive political communication, suggesting the possibility of virtuous as well as vicious cycles.

8. DISCUSSION

The findings position political discourse as a structurally consequential force in shaping India's intercultural landscape — not merely as rhetorical noise but as a substantive determinant of social trust, tolerance, and interaction quality. This conclusion connects to broader debates in comparative politics about the costs of populist and ethnoreligious nationalism in diverse democracies (McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018). India's case is instructive precisely because its institutional arrangements — federalism, reserved representation, constitutional secularism — provide formal mechanisms for managing diversity, yet these arrangements operate within a broader discursive environment that can either support or undermine their logic.

The finding that social media exposure is the second strongest predictor of intercultural relationship quality warrants particular attention. Social media does not merely amplify existing political messages; through algorithmic curation, it systematically privileges emotionally provocative content, generating asymmetric exposure to negative, divisive discourse (Patel & Khan, 2024). Citizens who rely predominantly on social media for political information are therefore likely to receive a skewed picture of inter-community relations, calibrated toward threat and conflict rather than cooperation and coexistence. Media literacy interventions and platform regulation are thus not peripheral concerns but central to the governance of intercultural relations.

The regional variation documented by the ANOVA analysis underscores the importance of contextual sensitivity in both research and policy. National-level surveys inevitably smooth over meaningful sub-national variation; future work with larger, regionally stratified samples could provide a more granular cartography of the discourse–interculture relationship across India's diverse states.

9. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated, through quantitative primary research, that political discourse is a significant shaper of intercultural relationships in contemporary India. The quality of political communication — its inclusiveness or divisiveness, its acknowledgment or dismissal of cultural plurality — does not remain confined to the discursive realm. It translates, through measurable attitudinal pathways, into the texture of everyday social life: how much citizens trust neighbours from other communities, how willing they are to engage across cultural boundaries, how robustly they support the institutions that sustain pluralism.

Three broad conclusions follow. First, responsible political communication is not a luxury; it is a public good with directly measurable social value. Political actors who choose inflammatory rhetoric over constructive dialogue are imposing real costs on intercultural cohesion. Second, social media platforms bear a structural responsibility for the information environment in which political discourse circulates. Regulatory frameworks and platform design choices that moderate divisive content and promote diverse

viewpoints are likely to generate positive intercultural externalities. Third, civic education that builds media literacy, critical evaluation of political information, and awareness of India's constitutional values of equality and fraternity can help build individual resilience to divisive discourse.

The study's limitations include its reliance on convenience and snowball sampling, its cross-sectional design — which cannot definitively establish causal direction — and its focus on self-reported attitudinal outcomes. Future research should pursue longitudinal designs, incorporate qualitative methods to understand the mechanisms connecting discourse to behaviour, and extend coverage to rural populations and smaller linguistic minorities currently underrepresented in the literature.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the findings, the following evidence-informed recommendations are offered:

For political leaders and parties: Adopt communication guidelines that prioritise constitutional values, acknowledge cultural plurality, and avoid the othering of minority communities. Parliamentary codes of conduct could be extended to cover public speeches and social media communications.

For media organisations: Ensure editorial standards require balanced, contextualised reporting of intercommunity issues. Counter-programming — content that highlights successful intercultural collaboration — can offset the negativity bias of news selection.

For social media platforms: Strengthen content moderation systems to reduce the virality of hate speech and incitement. Algorithmic transparency and user controls that allow citizens to expand the ideological diversity of their information feeds deserve regulatory attention.

For educational institutions: Integrate media literacy and intercultural education into school and university curricula. Experiential learning — student exchanges, collaborative projects across communities — can build the bridging social capital that divisive discourse erodes.

For government and civil society: Fund community dialogue initiatives that bring together citizens from different cultural backgrounds to discuss political issues in facilitated, respectful settings. Public campaigns celebrating India's constitutional values and intercultural heritage can serve as a positive counternarrative to divisive political messaging.

11. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The study points toward several productive avenues for subsequent inquiry. Longitudinal panel designs tracking the same respondents over election cycles would allow researchers to identify whether peaks in divisive political discourse produce measurable short-term and long-term changes in intercultural attitudes. Platform-specific studies comparing the effects of WhatsApp (closed group communication), X (open broadcast), and YouTube (video content) on intercultural perceptions could yield actionable insights for platform governance. Comparative international studies examining the discourse–

interculture relationship in other diverse democracies — South Africa, Indonesia, Canada — could identify structural factors that moderate or amplify the effects documented here. Finally, intervention research evaluating the effectiveness of media literacy programmes, community dialogue initiatives, and platform design changes in improving intercultural outcomes would make a direct contribution to policy and practice.

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