

# India Targets Climate Intercept Activists With the Help of Big Tech

Tech giants like Google and Facebook appear to be aiding and abetting a vicious government campaign against Indian climate activists.

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Climate activist Disha Ravi is granted bail during a hearing at Patiala House Court in New Delhi on Feb. 23, 2021. Photo: Sanjeev Verma/Hindustan Times via Getty Images

**The bank of** cameras that camped outside Delhi's sprawling Tihar jail was the sort of media frenzy you would expect to await a prime minister caught in an embezzlement scandal, or perhaps a Bollywood star caught in the wrong bed. Instead, the cameras were waiting for Disha Ravi, a nature-loving 22-year-old vegan climate activist who against all odds has found herself ensnared in an Orwellian legal saga that includes accusations of sedition, incitement, and involvement in an international conspiracy whose elements include (but are not limited to): Indian farmers in revolt, the global pop star Rihanna, supposed plots against yoga and chai, Sikh separatism, and Greta Thunberg.

If you think that sounds far-fetched, well, so did the judge who released Ravi after nine days in jail under police interrogation. Judge Dharmender Rana was supposed to rule on whether Ravi, one of the founders of the Indian chapter of Fridays For Future, the youth climate group started by Thunberg, should continue to be denied bail. He ruled that there was no reason for bail to be denied, which cleared the way for Ravi's return to her home in Bengaluru (also known as Bangalore) that night.

But the judge also felt the need to go much further, to issue a scathing [18-page ruling](#) on the underlying case that has gripped Indian media for weeks, issuing his own personal verdict on the various explanations provided by the Delhi police for why Ravi had been apprehended in the first place. The police's evidence against the young climate activist is, he wrote, "scanty and sketchy," and there is not "even an iota" of proof to support the claims of sedition, incitement, or conspiracy that have been leveled against her and at least two other young activists.



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Though the international conspiracy case appears to be falling apart, Ravi's arrest has spotlighted a different kind of collusion, this one between the increasingly oppressive and anti-democratic Hindu nationalist government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Silicon Valley companies whose tools and platforms have become the primary means for government forces to incite hatred against vulnerable minorities and critics – and for police to ensnare peaceful activists like Ravi in a high-tech digital web.

The case against Ravi and her “co-conspirators” hinges entirely on routine uses of well-known digital tools: WhatsApp groups, a collectively edited Google Doc, a private Zoom meeting, and several high-profile tweets, all of which have been weaponized into key pieces of alleged evidence in a state-sponsored and media-amplified activist hunt. At the same time, these very tools have been used in a coordinated pro-government messaging campaign to turn public sentiment against the young activists and the movement of farmers they came together to support, often in clear violation of the guardrails social media companies claim to have erected to prevent violent incitement on their platforms.

In a nation where online hatred has tipped with chilling frequency into real-world [pogroms](#) targeting women and minorities, human rights advocates are warning that India is on the knife edge of terrible violence, [perhaps even](#) the kind of genocidal bloodshed that social media [aided and abetted](#) against the Rohingya in Myanmar.

Through it all, the giants of Silicon Valley have stayed conspicuously silent, their

**“The silence of these**

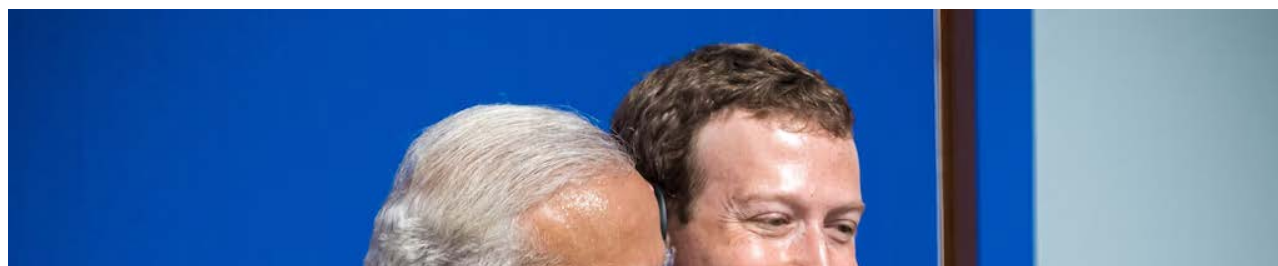
famed devotion to free expression, as well as their newfound commitment to battling hate speech and conspiracy theories, is, in India, nowhere to be found.

In its place is a growing and chilling complicity with Modi's information war, a collaboration that is poised to be locked in under a draconian [new](#) digital media law that will make it illegal for tech companies to refuse to cooperate with government requests to take down offending material or to breach the privacy of tech users. Complicity in human rights abuses, it seems, is the price of retaining access to the largest market of digital media users outside China.

After some early [resistance](#) from the company, Twitter accounts critical of the Modi government have [disappeared](#) in the hundreds without explanation; government officials engaging in bald incitement and overt hate speech on Twitter and Facebook have been [permitted](#) to continue in clear violation of the companies' policies; and Delhi police [boast](#) that they are getting plenty of helpful cooperation from Google as they dig through the private communications of peaceful climate activists like Ravi.

"The silence of these companies speaks volumes," a digital rights activist told me, requesting anonymity out of fear of retribution. "They have to take a stand, and they have to do it now."

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, left, and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, right, hug at the conclusion of a town hall meeting at Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park, Calif., on Sept. 27, 2015. Photo: David Paul Morris/Bloomberg via Getty Images

**Referred to in** the Indian press variously as the “toolkit case,” the “[Greta toolkit](#),” and the “[toolkit conspiracy](#),” the police’s ongoing investigation of Ravi, along with fellow activists Nikita Jacob and Shantanu Muluk, centers on the contents of a social media guide that Thunberg [tweeted](#) to her nearly 5 million followers in early February. When Ravi was arrested, the Delhi police [declared](#) that she “is an Editor of the Toolkit Google Doc & key conspirator in document’s formulation & dissemination. She started WhatsApp Group & collaborated to make the Toolkit doc. She worked closely with them to draft the Doc.”

The [kit](#) was nothing more than a Google Doc put together by an ad hoc collection of activists in India and the diaspora designed to generate support for the movement of farmers that has been staging [enormous](#) and [relentless](#) protests for months.

The farmers oppose a set of new agricultural laws that Modi’s government rushed through under the cover of the coronavirus pandemic. At the heart of the protests is the belief that by doing away with long-

time price protections for crops and opening up the agricultural sector to more private investment, small farmers will face a “[death warrant](#),” and India’s fertile lands will fall into the hands of a few large corporate players.

Many nonfarmers have looked for ways to help, both in India and in the global South Asian [diaspora](#), as well as more broadly. The youth-led climate movement felt a particular responsibility to step up. As Ravi [said](#) in court, she supports the farmers “because they are our future, and we all need to eat.” And she has also pointed to a climate connection. Drought, heat waves, and flooding have all grown more intense in recent years, and India’s farmers are on the front lines of these climate impacts, often losing their crops and livelihoods, experiences Ravi knows about firsthand from [witnessing](#) her farmer grandparents struggle with weather extremes.

Much like countless such documents of the digital organizing age, the toolkit at the center of this controversy contains a buffet of familiar suggestions for how people can express their solidarity with India’s farmers, mainly on social media. “Tweet your support to the Indian Farmers. Use hashtag #FarmersProtest #StandWithFarmers”; take a picture or a video of yourself saying you support the farmers; sign a petition; write to your representative; participate in a “tweetstorm” or “digital strike”; attend one of the protests in person, whether inside India or at an Indian embassy in your country; learn more by attending a Zoom information session. An early [version](#) of the document (soon deleted) talked about challenging India’s peace-and-love, or “yoga & chai,” public image.

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Pretty much every major activist campaign generates clicktivist how-to guides exactly like this one. Most

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mid-sized nongovernmental organizations have someone whose job it is to draft such documents and send them to potential supporters and “influencers.” If they are illegal, then contemporary activism itself is illegal. By arresting and imprisoning Ravi for an al-

leged role as an editor of the toolkit, she is in essence being criminalized for making India look bad in front of the world. Under that definition, all international human rights work would need to be shut down, since that work rarely presents governments in a flattering light.

This point was [made](#) forcefully by the judge who ruled on Ravi’s bail: “Citizens are conscience keepers of government in any democratic Nation. They cannot be put behind the bars simply because they choose to disagree with the state policies,” he wrote. As for sharing the toolkit with Thunberg, “the freedom of speech and expression includes the right to seek a global audience.”

This seems obvious. Yet somehow this most benign of documents has been latched onto by multiple government officials as something far more nefarious. General VK Singh, Modi’s minister of state for road transport and highways, [wrote](#) in a Facebook post that the toolkit “revealed the real designs of a conspiracy at an international level against India. Need to investigate the parties which are pulling the strings of this evil machinery. Instructions were laid out clearly as to the ‘how’, ‘when’ and ‘what’. Conspiracies at this scale often get exposed.”

The Delhi police quickly took its cue and set out to find evidence of this international conspiracy to “[defame the country](#)” and undermine the government, using a draconian colonial-era sedition law. But it didn’t stop there. The toolkit also stands accused of being part of a secret [plot](#) to break India apart and form a Sikh state called Khalistan (more sedition), because a Vancouver-based Indo-Canadian who helped put it together has expressed some sympathy for the idea of an independent Sikh homeland (not a crime and nowhere mentioned in the toolkit). And remarkably, for one Google Doc that the police claim was mainly written in Canada, this same toolkit stands accused of inciting and possibly plotting violence at a large farmers’ “tractor rally” in Delhi [on](#) January 26.



Thousands of Indian farmers on tractors entered New Delhi as the country marked its Republic Day on Jan. 26, 2021, escalating protests against new agricultural laws passed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government. Photo: Anindito Mukherjee/Bloomberg via Getty Images



**For weeks**, these claims have gone viral online, much of it under coordinated hashtag campaigns **spearheaded** by India's Ministry of External Affairs and faithfully echoed by top Bollywood and cricket stars. Anil Vij, a government minister in the state of Haryana, tweeted in Hindi that "Whoever has seeds of anti-nationalism in their mind has to be destroyed from the roots, be it #Disha\_Ravi or anyone else." Challenged as an obvious example of hate speech by a powerful figure, Twitter claimed that the post did not violate its policies and left it **up**.

Indian print and broadcast media has relentlessly echoed the preposterous charges of sedition, with well over 100 stories about Ravi and the toolkit appearing in the Times of India alone. Television news shows have run **crime-stopper-style** exposés of the international toolkit "conspiracy." Not surprisingly, the rage has spilled out into the streets, with photos of Thunberg and Rihanna (who also **tweeted** in support of the farmers) **burned** at nationalist rallies.

Modi himself has even weighed in, speaking of enemies who have "stooped so low that they are not sparing even Indian tea" – widely **taken** as a reference to the deleted "yoga & chai" line.

And then, earlier this week, the whole frothy mess seem to fall flat. Rana, in his **order** releasing Ravi, wrote that "perusal of the said 'Toolkit' reveals that any call for any kind of violence is conspicuously absent." The claim that the kit was a secessionist plot was also entirely unproven, he wrote, an elaborate guilt-by-association inference.

As for the charge that disseminating critical information about India's treatment of farmers and human rights defenders to prominent activists like Thunberg constitutes "sedition," the judge was particularly harsh. "The offence of sedition cannot be invoked to minister to the wounded vanity of the governments."

The case is ongoing, but the ruling represents a major blow to the government and a vindication for the farmer's movement and the solidarity campaigns supporting them. However, it is hardly a victory. Even if the toolkit case loses steam as a result of the judge's slap-down, it is just one of hundreds of campaigns that the Indian government is waging to hunt down activists, organizers, and journalists. Labor organizer Nodeep Kaur, one year older than Ravi, was also jailed for her support of the farmers. Just released on bail, Kaur claimed in court that she had been [badly beaten](#) while in police custody. Meanwhile, hundreds of farmers remain [behind](#) bars and some of those arrested have [disappeared](#).

The real threat that the toolkit represented to Modi and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, was always, at root, about the power of the farmers' movement. Modi's political project represents a powerful merger of unleashed Hindu chauvinism with highly concentrated corporate power. The farmers challenge that dual project, both in their insistence that food should stay outside market logics and in the movement's proven ability to build power across the religious, ethnic, and geographic divisions that are the lifeblood of Modi's rise to power.

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Ravinder Kaur, a professor at the University of Copenhagen and the author of "[Brand New Nation: Capitalist Dreams and Nationalist Designs in Twenty-First-Century India](#)," writes that the farmers are

“perhaps the largest mass mobilisation in post-colonial India’s history, one that spans rural and urban populations, and conjoins the revolt against deregulated capitalism to the struggle for civil liberties.” For Modi’s powerful merger of transnational capital with a hypernationalistic state, “the anti-farm law mobilisation poses the most sustained and direct challenge to this alliance yet.”

Protests by farmers in and around Delhi have been [met](#) with water cannons, tear gas, and mass arrests. But they keep coming, too big to defeat with force alone. That is why the Modi government has been so determined to find ways to undermine the movement and suppress its message, repeatedly [blocking](#) the internet ahead of protests and successfully pressuring Twitter to cancel over a thousand pro-farmer accounts. It is also why Modi has sought to muddy the waters with tales of devious toolkits and international conspiracies.

An open letter [signed](#) by dozens of Indian environmental activists after Ravi’s arrest made this point: “[T]he current actions of the Central Government are diversionary tactics to distract people from real issues like the ever-rising cost of fuel and essential items, the widespread unemployment and distress caused due to the lockdown without a plan, and the alarming state of the environment.”

**The Modi government is attempting to drag the public debate away from terrain where it is obviously weak and move it to the ground**

It is this quest for a political diversion, in other words, that helps explain how a simple solidarity campaign has been recast as a secret plot to break India apart and incite violence from abroad. The Modi government is attempting to drag the public

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debate away from terrain where it is glaringly weak – meeting people’s basic needs during an economic crisis and pandemic – and move it to the ground on which every ethnonationalist project thrives: us versus them, insiders versus outsiders, patriots versus seditious traitors.

In this familiar maneuver, Ravi and the broader youth climate movement were simply collateral damage.

Yet the damage done is considerable, and not only because the interrogations are [ongoing](#) and Ravi’s return to jail remains distinctly possible. As the joint letter from Indian environmental advocates [states](#), her arrest and imprisonment have already served a purpose: “The Government’s heavy-handedness are clearly focused on terrorising and traumatising these brave young people for speaking truth to power, and amounts to teaching them a lesson.”

The still wider damage is in the chill the entire toolkit controversy has placed over political dissent in India – with the silent complicity of the tech companies that once touted their powers to open up closed societies and spread democracy around the world. As one headline [put](#) it, “Disha Ravi arrest puts privacy of all Google India users in doubt.”

Indeed, public debate has been so deeply compromised that many activists in India are going underground, deleting their own social media accounts to protect themselves. Even digital rights advocates are wary of being quoted on the record. Asking not to be named, a legal researcher [described](#) a dangerous convergence between a government adept at information war and social media companies built on maxi-

mizing engagement to mine their users' data: "All of this stems from a stronger weaponization of social media platforms by the status quo, something that was not present earlier. This is further aggravated by the tendency of these companies to prioritise more viral, extremist content, which allows them to monetise user attention, ultimately benefitting their profit motives."

**Since her arrest**, the entrails of Ravi's private digital life have been laid out for all to see, picked over by a voracious and salacious national media. Televised panels and newspapers obsessed over her private text [messages](#) to Thunberg as well as other communications among activists who were doing nothing but editing an online pamphlet. Police, meanwhile, have repeatedly [insisted](#) that Ravi's decision to delete a WhatsApp group was proof that she had committed a crime, rather than a rational response to government attempts to turn peaceful digital organizing into a weapon directed at young activists.

Ravi's lawyers have [asked](#) the court to order the police to stop leaking her private communications to the press – information they seemingly have as result of seized phones and computers. Wanting still more private information for their investigation, the Delhi police have also made demands of several major tech companies. They have asked Zoom to [disclose](#) the list of attendees of a private activist meeting which they say relates to the toolkit; police have made several [requests](#) to Google for information about how the toolkit was posted and shared. And according to [news reports](#), police have asked Instagram (owned by Facebook) and Twitter for toolkit-related information as well. It is unclear which companies have complied and to what extent. The police have touted Google's cooperation [publicly](#), but Google and Facebook did not respond to The Intercept's request for comment. Zoom and Twitter referred to their corporate policies,

which state that they will comply with relevant national laws.

## **The entrails of Ravi’s private digital life have been laid out for all to see, picked over by a voracious and salacious national media.**

Which may be why the Modi government has chosen this moment to introduce a [new set of regulations](#) that would give it levels of control over digital media so draconian they come close to China’s [great fire-wall](#). On February 24, the day after Ravi’s release from jail, Reuters [reported](#) on the Modi government’s planned “Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code.” The new rules will [require](#) media companies to take down content that affects “the sovereignty and integrity of India” within 36 hours of a government order – a definition so broad that it could easily include slights against yoga and chai. The new code also states that digital media companies must cooperate with government and police requests for information about their users within 72 hours. That includes requests to trace down the originating source of “[mischievous information](#)” on platforms and perhaps even encrypted messaging apps.

The new code is being introduced in the name of protecting India’s diverse society and blocking vulgar content. “A publisher shall take into consideration India’s multi-racial and multi-religious context and exercise due caution and discretion when featuring the activities, beliefs, practices, or views of any racial or religious group,” the draft rules [state](#).

In practice, however, the BJP has one of the most sophisticated [troll](#)

[armies](#) on the planet, and its own politicians have been the most voracious and aggressive promoters of hate speech directed at vulnerable minorities and critics of all kinds. To cite just one example of many, several BJP politicians actively [participated](#) in a misinformation campaign claiming that Muslims were deliberately spreading Covid-19 as part of a “Corona Jihad.” What a code like this would do is enshrine in law the double digital vulnerability experienced by Ravi and other activists: They would be unprotected from online mobs revved up by a Hindu nationalist state, and they would be unprotected from that same state when it sought to invade their digital privacy for any reason it chose.

Apar Gupta, executive director of the digital rights group Internet Freedom Foundation, expressed particular concern about parts of the new code that may allow government officials to track down the originators of messages on platforms like WhatsApp. This, he [told](#) the Associated Press, “undermines user rights and can lead to self-censorship if users fear that their conversations are no longer private.”

[Harsha Walia](#), executive director of the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association and author of “[Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism](#),” puts the

**The “lethal” new code is “aimed at killing the independence of India’s digital news media. This attempt to arm bureaucrats with the power to tell the media what can and can’t be published has no basis in law.”**

dire situation in India like this: “The latest proposed regulations requiring social media companies to assist Indian law enforcement is yet another outrageous and undemocratic attempt by the fascist Hindutva Modi government to suppress dissent, solidify the surveillance state, and escalate state violence.” She told me that this latest move by the Modi government needs to be understood as part of much broader pattern of sophisticated information warfare waged by the Indian state. “Three weeks ago, the Indian government shut down the internet in parts of Delhi to suppress information about the farmers protest; social media accounts of journalists and activists at the farmers protest and in the Sikh diaspora were suspended; and Big Tech cooperated with Indian police in a number of baseless but chilling sedition cases. In the past four years, the Indian government has ordered over 400 internet shutdowns, and the Indian occupation of Kashmir is marked by a prolonged communications siege.”

The new code, which will impact all digital media, including streaming and news sites, is set to take effect within the next three months. A few digital media producers in India are pushing back. Siddharth Varadarajan, founding editor of [The Wire](#), [tweeted](#) last Thursday that the “lethal” new code is “aimed at killing the independence of India’s digital news media. This attempt to arm bureaucrats with the power to tell the media what can and can’t be published has no basis in law.”

Do not expect portraits of courage from Silicon Valley, however. Many U.S. tech executives regret [early decisions](#), made under public and [worker](#) pressure, to refuse to cooperate with China’s apparatus of mass surveillance and censorship – an ethical choice, but one that cost companies like Google access to a staggeringly large, lucrative market. These companies appear unwilling to make the same kind of calculation again. As the Wall Street Journal [reported](#) last August,



“India has more Facebook and WhatsApp users than any other country, and Facebook has chosen it as the market in which to introduce payments, encryption and initiatives to [tie its products together in new ways](#) that [CEO Mark] Zuckerberg has said will occupy Facebook for the next decade.”

For tech companies like Facebook, Google, Twitter, and Zoom, India under Modi has turned into a harsh moment of truth. In North America and Europe, these companies are going to great lengths to show that they can be trusted to regulate hate speech and harmful conspiracies on their platforms while protecting the freedom to speak, debate, and disagree that is integral to any healthy society. But in India, where helping governments hunt and imprison peaceful activists and amplify hate appears to be the price of access to a huge and growing market, “all of those arguments have gone out the window,” one activist told me. And for a simple reason: “They are profiting from this harm.”

Naomi Klein’s [latest](#) book is “*How to Change Everything: The Young Human’s Guide to Protecting the Planet and Each Other*,” just published by Simon & Schuster.