

10 June 2020

The Hindutva Aspect of COVID-19 Outbreak in India

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Key Points:

- India's COVID-19 response outlook is largely characterised by securitisation of the prevailing health crisis, turning it into an Indian Muslims-led conspiracy against the Indian Hindus.
- The novel coronavirus has vehemently brought to the fore, how Hindutva forces target Indian minorities, particularly Muslims.
- While hate speech against non-Hindus has become a usual practice in India, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has given it a renewed vigour.
- A review of trend campaigns by Hindu nationalists and supporters of various Hindutva groups reveals that four themes – propagating Islamophobia, targeting Tablighi Jamaat as the hub of COVID-19, Sinophobic rhetoric and highlighting alleged Hinduphobia in Arab countries - were pursued by these individuals or groups.

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has steered many nation-states into revamping their traditional security narratives to incorporate a wider spectrum of non-traditional security threats and the modalities of their response mechanisms. In India however, the role of state is different. The Indian government, led by the Hindutva-inspired Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has rather opted to dwell on religious fault lines, thereby exacerbating Hindu nationalist sentiments.¹ India's COVID-19

response outlook is largely characterised by securitisation of the prevailing health crisis, turning it into an Indian Muslims-led conspiracy against the Indian Hindus. Hindu nationalists have generated an anti-Muslim rhetoric through hate speech against Indian Muslims. This rhetoric is spreading via mainstream and social media. The outcome of this is rising Islamophobia and hate-crimes against Muslims, who are already economically and socially marginalised.² Religious discrimination is not limited to Muslims alone. In the face of the pandemic, Dalits (lower-caste Hindus) and Adivasi (indigenous tribes) communities are also suffering the stigmatisation attached to the

¹ Niala Mohammad, "Coronavirus Spread in India Sparks Intolerance Toward Minority Muslims," *Voice of America*, last modified April 17, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/coronavirus-spread-india-sparks-intolerance-toward-minority-muslims>.

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² Arunabh Saikia, "The other virus: Hate crimes against India's Muslims are spreading with Covid-19," *Scroll.in*, last modified 8 April 2020, <https://scroll.in/article/958543/the-other-virus-hate-crimes-against-indias-muslims-are-spreading-with-covid-19>.

disease.³

This perspective paper seeks to analyse the role of Hindutva-related aspects, effectively coming into play as BJP administration devises its response mechanisms to COVID-19, leaving the country's most-vulnerable communities entrenched deeper into communal discriminations.

HATE SPEECH

The Hindu nationalist organisations adhere to normalisation politics of fear and hatred against non-Hindus. While hate speech against non-Hindus has become a usual practice in India, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has given it a renewed vigour.⁴ Hateful remarks by Hindu nationalists have ranged from calling the disease as 'God's revenge from Chinese for destroying the nature' to alleging the virus as a 'bio-jihad' led by the Indian Muslims.⁵

Owing to the rising demand of Personal Protective Equipment and other healthcare facilities, the Indian government has tacitly refrained from issuing hateful remarks against China.⁶ Nevertheless, Sinophobic rhetoric has by and large seeped into India's political and social lexicon. Swami Chakrapani, National President of All India Hindu Mahasabha declared the virus as an "avatar for the protection of poor creatures". Referring to the Chinese, Chakrapani stated that the virus was avenging those who ate poor creatures.⁷ On a television interview, India's former ambassador to United States and Israel, Arun K. Singh claimed the Chinese government of capitalising

³ Paul Divakar, "The Novel Coronavirus And Its Impact On The Most Marginalised Communities," *Amnesty International*, last modified 14 April 2020, <https://amnesty.org.in/opinion-the-novel-coronavirus-and-its-impact-on-the-most-marginalised-communities/>.

⁴ Meenakshi Ganguly, "India's Steps to Contain Covid-19 Have Failed to Curb Anti-Muslim Rhetoric," *Human Rights Watch*, last modified August 18 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/18/indias-steps-contain-covid-19-have-failed-curb-anti-muslim-rhetoric>.

⁵ "Chinese Government Condemns BJP Bengal President's Comment on Coronavirus," *The Hindu*, last modified March 12, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/chinese-government-condemns-bjp-bengal-presidents-comment-on-coronavirus/article31044588.ece>. and Billy Perrigo, "It Was Already Dangerous to Be Muslim in India. Then Came the Coronavirus," *Time*, last modified April 3, 2020, <https://time.com/5815264/coronavirus-india-islamophobia-coronajihad/>.

⁶ Yasmeen Serhan "Indians Aren't Buying China's Narrative," *The Atlantic*, last modified April 20, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/04/india-china-pandemic-coronavirus-distrust/610273/>.

⁷ "Bizarre! Hindu Mahasabha says Coronavirus an "angry avatar";" *The Economic Times*, last modified 16 February 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/bizarre-hindu-mahasabha-says-coronavirus-an-angry-avatar/articleshow/74162817.cms?from=mdr>.

over the coronavirus to achieve geopolitical gains.⁸ In terms of public opinion, as soon as the virus outbreak transpired into a global health emergency, India's general public took to social media platforms, expressing its rage against the Chinese government for mishandling the disease. Hateful remarks against Chinese government and citizens have spurred hate-crimes against North Eastern Indians, who resemble Chinese in their facial features.⁹ A survey conducted by Bangalore-based Takshashila Institution suggests that around two-thirds of Indian citizens blame China for the spread of virus.¹⁰

The Covid-19 pandemic is an outcome of:
1,299 responses

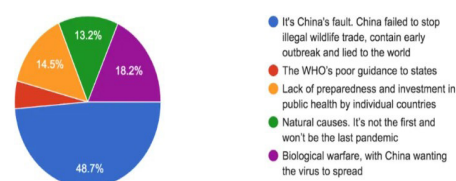


Figure 1 – Public survey blaming China for the spread of COVID-19

Another aspect of the practical manifestation of Hindutva ideology is the religiously-motivated discrimination of the Indian Muslims. Following the outbreak, this discrimination has transcended into outright demonisation. This vilification of Muslims is mainly justified under the garb of a three-day religious congregation led by the Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic missionary organisation, in New Delhi in March. As the congregation convened shortly before an official ban on social gatherings by the Indian government, a large cluster of COVID-19 positive cases was discovered.¹¹

This has triggered a fury of hate speech and false news against Muslims. They are being baptised

⁸ Surya Gangadharan, "China's Agression seeks to Cover up its Original Sin," *Start News Global*, last modified March 20, 2020, <https://stratnewsglobal.com/chinas-aggression-seeks-to-cover-up-its-original-sin/>.

⁹ Murali Krishnan, "Coronavirus: 'Chinese-looking' Indians targeted in racist attacks," *Deutsche Welle*, last modified March 30, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-chinese-looking-indians-targeted-in-racist-attacks/a-52956212>.

¹⁰ Manoj Kewalramani, "Survey Findings: Perceptions of PRC amid Covid-19 pandemic," *Takshashila Institution*, last modified April 2020, <https://takshashila.org.in/survey-findings-perceptions-of-prc-amid-covid-19-pandemic/>.

¹¹ Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shaikh Azizur Rahman, "Coronavirus conspiracy theories targeting Muslims spread in India," *The Guardian*, last modified April 13 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-targeting-muslims-spread-in-india>.

as ‘human bombs,’ ‘coronavirus terrorists’ and ‘super-spreaders’ that are deliberately perpetrating ‘bio-jihad’ and ‘Talibani crimes’ against Hindu nationals of India.¹² Kapil Mishra, a local BJP leader, falsely claimed that the members of Tablighi Jamaat spit on the medical staff, seeking to spread the virus.¹³ The congregation has been termed as ‘Islamic insurrection’ by BJP’s top brass.¹⁴ The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) has termed the Tablighi Jamaat as a factory of the novel coronavirus.¹⁵ More so, the organisation has been categorically mentioned several times by the Joint Secretary of India’s health ministry for speeding up the spread of novel coronavirus.¹⁶

Voiced via social media, anti-Muslim rhetoric prevailing among Indian expatriates in the Gulf countries, has invited condemnation from the Arab countries.¹⁷ While anti-Muslim rhetoric has been nipped in the bud, hyper-national expatriates have been reported of using derogatory and demeaning language against Arab countries, more specifically, the United Arab Emirates.¹⁸

SOCIAL MEDIA

A review of trend campaigns by Hindu nationalists and supporters of various Hindutva groups reveal that following themes were pursued by these individuals or groups:

- Propagating Islamophobia
- Targeting Tablighi Jamaat as the hub of COVID-19
- Sinophobic rhetoric
- Highlighting alleged Hinduphobia in Arab countries

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Nishita Jha and Pranav Dixit, “A Cluster of Coronavirus Cases Can Be Traced Back To A Single Mosque And Now 200 Million Muslims Are Being Vilified,” *Buzzfeed News*, last modified April 3, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/nishitajha/coronavirus-india-muslims-tablighi-jamaat>

¹⁵ “Tablighi Jamaat is factory of corona: VHP,” *National Herald*, last modified April 3, 2020, <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/national/tablighi-jamaat-is-factory-of-corona-vhp>.

¹⁶ Aniruddha Ghosal, Sheikh Saaliq and Emily Schmall, “Indian Muslims face stigma, blame for surge in infections,” *Star Tribune*, last modified April 25, 2020, <https://www.startribune.com/islamophobia-after-large-cluster-affects-india-s-virus-fight/569946322/>.

¹⁷ Sumit Ganguly and Nicolas Blarel, “Why Gulf States Are Backtracking on India,” *Foreign Policy*, last modified May 5, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/05/gulf-states-backtracking-india/>.

¹⁸ “UAE royal slams Islamophobic man who said ‘Hindus built Dubai from scratch’; latter deletes Twitter account,” *Free Press Journal*, last modified April 16, 2020, <https://www.freepressjournal.in/india/uae-royal-slams-islamophobic-man-who-said-hindus-built-dubai-from-scratch-latter-deletes-twitter-account>.

Date	Trend	Trending Time (minimum 12 hours)
March 21	#ChinaLiedAndPeopleDied	17:15
March 23	#ChineseVirusCorona	14:35
March 26	#ChineseVirus19	23:35
March 27	#ChineseBioterrorism	14:25
April 1	#nizamuddinidiots	12:25
April 16	#jahiljamati	16:55

Table 1 - List of prominent Twitter trends related to COVID-19 used by Hindu nationalists (March 1 – May 31, 2020)

Propagating Islamophobia

Following the emergence of Tablighi Jamaat’s gathering in New Delhi as an epicentre of the deadly virus during March, Hindu nationalists have left no stone unturned in linking the pandemic to Muslims. India Twitter was flooded with a number of Islamophobic trends like hashtag #कोरोना_जिहाद (Corona Jihad), #नजामुद्दीन_के_कोरोना_जॉम्बीज (Nizamuddin are corona zombies), #MarkazCOVIDSspread, #JamaatKaCoronaDisaster to name a few.¹⁹ Hashtags like #Biojihad and #TablighiJamatVirus were also trending with the claim that Muslims are intentionally spreading the virus.²⁰

Since March 28, hashtag #CoronaJihad appeared nearly 300,000 times and potentially reached to 165 million people on Twitter.²¹ On Twitter, 700,000 handles were involved in conversations with the said hashtag that has reached 170 million handles since March 29.²² #CoronaJihad alone had more than 250,000 interactions on Facebook since March 29. The #CoronaJihad hashtag is the manifestation of the idea that Muslims are weaponising the virus against Hindus. In other words, Muslims were painted as bioterrorists.

¹⁹ Siddharthya Roy, “Hate Goes Viral in India,” *The Diplomat*, last modified May 4, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/hate-goes-viral-in-india/>.

²⁰ Namrata Kolachalam, “Indian Muslims Are Being Scapegoated for the Coronavirus,” *Slate*, last modified April 9, 2020, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/04/tablighi-jamaat-india-muslims-coronavirus.html>.

²¹ Billy Perrigo, “It Was Already Dangerous to Be Muslim in India. Then Came the Coronavirus,”

²² David Gilbert, “India’s Hindu Nationalists Are Inciting Hate By Claiming Muslims Are Spreading Coronavirus,” *Vice*, last modified April 11, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/akwmyj/indias-hindu-nationalists-are-inciting-hate-by-claiming-muslims-are-spreading-coronavirus.

The vilification of Indian Muslims on social media was aided and amplified from the top levels of the Indian central government all the way down to BJP's IT Cell including state arms, other official agencies, elected BJP representatives and radical right-wing supporters.²³ According to a research conducted by Equity Labs, it has been found that majority of the users creating and sharing such content are young men between the ages of 18 and 34.²⁴ Several members of BJP and VHP with verified Twitter handles were found involved in sharing online posts with this hashtag and other relatable hashtags. Apart from officials of BJP and VHP, several verified Twitter handles of Hindu nationalists were observed to be using the said hashtag.²⁵

According to analysis conducted by Equity Labs, groups involved in propagating the Islamophobic hashtags on Facebook were found to be supporters of Modi, BJP or RSS.²⁶ These includes

- Indian Defence Force (2.8 million followers)
- BJP For India Page (580,000 followers)
- West Bengal BJP Supporters (350,000 followers)



Figure 2 – Analytics of Islamophobic Covid-19 content on Twitter (Source: Coda Story)

²³ Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarasingam, “#CoronaJihad: COVID-19, Misinformation, and Anti-Muslim Violence in India,” Strong Cities Network, last modified May 26, 2020, <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/exclusive-islamophobic-disinformation-and-hate-speech-has-swamped-social-media-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

²⁴ Burhan Wazir, “Exclusive: Islamophobic disinformation and hate speech has swamped social media during the coronavirus pandemic,” Coda Story, last modified May 21, 2020, Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarasingam, “#CoronaJihad: COVID-19, Misinformation, and Anti-Muslim Violence in India,

²⁵ Ramesh Solanki, Twitter Post, April 11, 2020, 9:15 AM, https://twitter.com/Rajput_Ramesh/status/1248826965261312000 and Suresh Chavhanke, Twitter Post, April 10, 2020, 5:07 PM, <https://twitter.com/SureshChavhanke/status/1248583434181591041>.

²⁶ David Gilbert, “India’s Hindu Nationalists Are Inciting Hate By Claiming Muslims Are Spreading Coronavirus,”

There are signs that weaponisation of social media against Muslims in recent weeks was coordinated. A source within Facebook has confirmed that the social media giant is investigating the possibility that attacks were part of a coordinated effort.²⁷

It was also observed that some of the Hindu nationalists which were previously involved in amplifying attacks on Muslims during last year’s Citizenship Amendment Act controversy through social media were this time using Tablighi Jamaat gathering to make a purported claim that Muslims were purposely spreading COVID-19.

As compared to Hindu nationalists messaging about the so-called various types of Jihad like ‘Population Jihad’ (Muslims reproducing at a faster rate as compared to Hindus to transform India into a Muslim state) and ‘Love Jihad’ (Muslim men tricking Hindu women to convert to Muslims by engaging them in romantic relationships), experts have pointed out that the propagation of ‘Corona Jihad’ and ‘Bio Jihad’ are the most outrageous ones and have greater potential to force Hindu extremists towards physical violence because people are getting infected and dying because of the virus.²⁸



Figure 3 - Caricature posted on Twitter showing before and after version of Muslim terrorist, replacing suicide vest with COVID-19 virus (Source: Twitter)

In addition to trends, memes were weaponised to target Muslims. Some memes linked Muslims to malaria carrying mosquitoes, while others showed a Muslim wearing a suicide vest

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Billy Perrigo, “It Was Already Dangerous to Be Muslim in India. Then Came the Coronavirus,” Time

and a vest containing COVID-19.²⁹ One meme portrayed China as producer of the virus while Muslims as its distributors.³⁰

The misinformation targeting Muslims was based on the assertion that Muslims are using novel coronavirus as a tool of political violence by intentionally coughing on people and attempting to reduce Hindu population.³¹ Supporters of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his political party were found sharing misinformation on Facebook and Twitter using #CoronaJihad, #CrushTablighiSpitters, #MuslimMeaningTerrorist, and #BioJihad. At least 102 viral Islamophobic fake news have appeared up till May 16.³² In terms of fact-checking fake news items related to COVID-19 from January to late April, fact checking website BoomLive journalists wrote that 34 out of 178 stories (19 per cent) were related to communal rumours. Most of these rumours were false allegations directed towards Muslims for spreading the virus.³³



Figure 4 - Caricature depicting Muslims pushing various forms of Jihad, and Hindus ignoring them under the facade of secularism (Source: Strong Cities Network)

²⁹ Nicholas Pritchard, "The Anti-Muslim COVID-19 Disinformation Campaign Sweeping India," AlBawaba, last modified April 7, 2020, <https://www.albawaba.com/opinion/anti-muslim-covid-19-disinformation-campaign-sweeping-india-1349269>.

³⁰ "Coronavirus: Islamophobia concerns after India mosque outbreak," BBC, last modified April 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52147260>.

³¹ Nicholas Pritchard, "The Anti-Muslim COVID-19 Disinformation Campaign Sweeping India,"

³² "Fake Alert: Long List of Islamophobic fake news which is going viral during Coronavirus Pandemic," Media Scanner, last modified May 9, 2020, <https://mediascanner.in/fake-alert-long-list-of-islamophobic-fake-news-which-is-going-viral-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

³³ Archis Chowdhury, "Fake News In The Time Of Coronavirus: A BOOM Study," BOOM, last modified May 8, 2020, <https://www.boomlive.in/fact-file/fake-news-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-a-boom-study-8008/page-2?infinite-scroll=1>.

The matic narratives ostensibly presented by some Muslims such as Muslims are immune to COVID-19, the virus is a divine punishment and that Muslims are deliberately spreading the deadly virus were woven in broader Hindu nationalist rhetoric about Muslims.³⁴

The modus operandi of Islamophobes in India follows a well-established pattern of using fake news, morphed images, outright fabrications, and lies.³⁵ During the COVID-19 pandemic, a new element is added to the pattern in the form of giving anti-Muslim flavour to genuine reported news. Apart from the Islamophobic hashtags, videos with false claims also went viral on social media. An example of this is the circulation of videos falsely accusing Tablighi Jamaat members of spitting on various people including police.

Targeting Tablighi Jamaat as the hub of COVID-19

Apart from general targeting of Muslim community, Tablighi Jamaat gathering members were specifically targeted and rhetoric against them was constructed, deeming them contaminated/contaminating, uncivilised, deceptive and anti-national jihadists or terrorists.³⁶ Social media posts and hashtags.



Figure 5 - A caricature of a Tablighi Jamaat member as a suicide bomber using COVID-19 as explosives (Source: Twitter)

started labelling Tablighi Jamaat members as Markaz pigs and Nizamuddin idiots. The virus was referred to as Tablighi Jamaat virus.

³⁴ Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarsingam, "#CoronaJihad: COVID-19, Misinformation, and Anti-Muslim Violence in India,"

³⁵ Siddhartha Roy, "Hate Goes Viral in India,"

³⁶ Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarsingam, "#CoronaJihad: COVID-19, Misinformation, and Anti-Muslim Violence in India,"

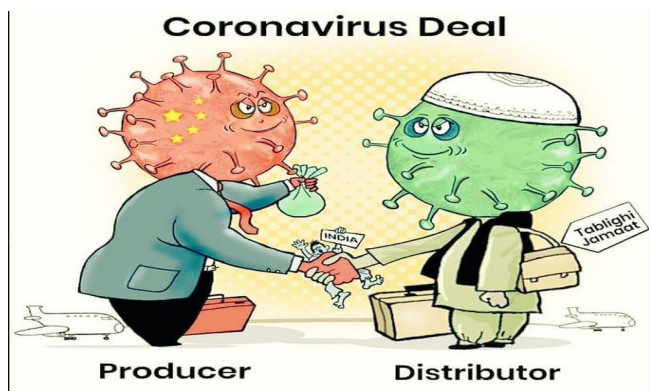


Figure 6 – Caricature accusing China as a producer of the virus and Tablighi Jamaat members as its distributors (Source: Twitter)

In March, images started appearing on social media which circulated conspiracy theories about China and Tablighi Jamaat. From April onwards, images comparing Tablighi Jamaat members or Indian Muslims to terrorists or venomous snakes gained wide traction on social media. Specific trends like #nizamuddinidiots, #jahiljamati, MarkazCOVIDspread, #JamaatKaCoronaDisaster and #TablighiJamatVirus were trending on India Twitter. Twitter with the sole aim of blaming Tablighi Jamaat's gathering for spreading COVID-19 in India.

Sinophobic rhetoric

In addition to sharp increase in Islamophobia rhetoric on social media platforms, a notable surge of Sinophobic rhetoric was also observed.³⁷ In early March, #ChineseVirus and #WuhanVirus started trending which indicates a growing clamour for holding China responsible for the virus.³⁸ On March 27, #ChineseBioterrorism was trending on India Twitter for 14 hours. The trend was an attempt to project the coronavirus pandemic as bioterrorism by China. From mid-March onwards, the trend shifted from blaming China to Tablighi Jamaat's gathering for spreading COVID-19.

Date	Trends	Trending Time (minimum 12 hours)
March 21	#ChinaLiedAndPeopleDied	17:15
March 23	#ChineseVirusCorona	14:35
March 26	#ChineseVirus19	23:35
March 27	#ChineseBioterrorism	14:25

Table 2 - List of prominent Sinophobic Twitter trends used by Hindu nationalists (March 1 – May 31, 2020)

³⁷ Siddhartha Roy, "Hate Goes Viral in India,"

³⁸ Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarasingam, "#CoronaJihad: COVID-19, Misinformation, and Anti-Muslim Violence in India,"

Highlighting alleged Hinduphobia in Arab countries

The mistreatment of Muslims in India amid COVID-19 drew outcry from Arab countries. Prominent voices from Arab countries tweeted against rising tendency of Hindutva in India and the mistreatment of Muslims amidst COVID-19. Consequently, Hindu nationalists started trending #Hinduphobia_in_Arab on April 22 to highlight alleged Hinduphobia in Arab countries. The trend continued to trend for about 11 hours.³⁹

ISLAMOPHOBIC VIOLENT ATTACKS

Following the outbreak of coronavirus, stigmatisation of Indian Muslims has led to increased religiously-motivated violence and vigilantism in India.⁴⁰ With soaring fake news against them, the Muslims of India are fighting the disease, with medical facilities denied, amid social and economic boycotts, and a rising verbal, physical and psychological harassment.⁴¹ Islamophobic crimes are reaching new highs with violent mob attacks on Muslim families and places of worship. Such attacks have specifically hiked in New Delhi, Karnataka, Telangana and Madhya Pradesh.⁴² The Global Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index Report of 2018, found Muslims among the poorest groups within India with one out of every three persons living in multi-dimensional poverty.⁴³ Muslims are therefore, systemically subjected to a higher infection rate, higher spread-rate comes in tandem.⁴⁴

³⁹ "Trendinalia India," last modified April 22, 2020, <https://www.trendinalia.com/twitter-trending-topics/india/india-200422.html>.

⁴⁰ CJ Werleman, "India is Outsourcing its Dirty Work to Right-Wing Vigilantes," *Byline Times*, last modified February 6, 2020, <https://bylinetimes.com/2020/02/06/india-is-outsourcing-its-dirty-work-to-right-wing-vigilantes/>.

⁴¹ CJ Werleman, "The Most Dangerous Place for a Muslim During the COVID-19 Pandemic is India," *Inside Arabia*, last modified April 13, 2020, <https://insidearabia.com/the-most-dangerous-place-for-a-muslim-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-is-india/> and Munir Ahmed, "Vilification of Indian Muslims," *Daily Times*, last modified April 27, 2020, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/602793/vilification-of-muslims-in-india/>.

⁴² Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shaikh Azizur Rahman, "Coronavirus conspiracy theories targeting Muslims spread in India,"

⁴³ Oxford Poverty and Human Development Index. 2018. MPI in India: A Case Study. OPHI.

⁴⁴ Joan Williams, Diego Gonzalez-Medina, Quan Le, "Infectious Diseases and Social Stigma," *Applied Technologies and Innovations* 4, no.1 (2011): 58-70.

THE ROLE OF RELIGIONISED ‘PSUEDO-SCIENCE’

Promotion of scientifically ill-rooted ideas and conjectures based upon Hindu-nationalist ideological inclinations have surged in India, particularly after BJP’s rise to power. This entails appealing the Indian citizens with an idea of the ancient India, thriving upon the principles of science, technology and philosophy. The political leadership of BJP has engineered an ideologically-motivated interplay of science, pseudo-science and myths, leading to the generation of a ‘religionised science’ and ‘scientised religion’.⁴⁵ The BJP government in 2014, had also established the Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy (AYUSH) as well.⁴⁶

The coronavirus outbreak has also come with its due share of BJP-led pseudo-science medical ascriptions, misinformation and disinformation. As the infectious disease spread at a breakneck speed in China, the Ministry of AYUSH on January 29 issued an advisory titled “Homoeopathy for Prevention of Corona Virus Infections: Unani Medicines Useful in Symptomatic Management of Corona Virus Infection” which recommended that “homoeopathy medicine Arsenicum Album 30 could be taken as prophylactic medicine against coronavirus infections” along with several other traditional remedies.⁴⁷ Widely practiced across India, homeopathic medication was found to be completely ineffective by a 2015 Australian research.⁴⁸

Apart from homeopathic medication, BJP’s fight against coronavirus incorporated the method of clapping, ringing bells on streets collectively, singing “Go Corona Go” and consuming cow dung and cow urine for

warding off the disease.⁴⁹ The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), a Hindu religious organisation used distilled cow urine as a sanitiser.⁵⁰ While the consumption of cow urine and cow dung have become a part of mainstream political lexicon, evidence-based research has so far remained unable to find scientific evidence of its utility for human health.⁵¹

ASSESSING THE BJP OUTLOOK

With fears of an ‘Apartheid Era’ kick-starting in India, the politicisation of the coronavirus outbreak against religious minorities is the most visible aspect of BJP-led response to the outbreak.⁵² Individuals linked to the Tablighi Jamaat gathering are being heavily tested, a move being deemed as scapegoating Muslims.⁵³ On the other hand, Hindu nationalists, at several instances have easily evaded the need of physical distancing. For instance, in early-April, thousands of Hindu devotees assembled in temples across West Bengal to celebrate Ram Navami.⁵⁴ Table 3 presents number of congregational events including those attended by political leadership of BJP, uninviting any condemnation from state authorities.

⁴⁵ Srinath Perur, “Science and the rise of nationalism in India,” *The Nature*, last modified July 24, 2019, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02243-x>

⁴⁶ Ruchi Kumar, “Face It: The Indian Government Is Peddling Pseudoscience,” *The Wire – Science*, last modified April 27, 2020, <https://science.thewire.in/health/indian-government-pseudoscience-covid-19/>.

⁴⁷ “Advisory for Corona virus: Homoeopathy for Prevention of Corona virus Infections - Unani Medicines useful in symptomatic management of Corona Virus infection,” *Press Information Bureau, New Delhi*, last modified January 29, 2020, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1600895>.

⁴⁸ Erin Blakemore, “1,800 Studies Later, Scientists Conclude Homeopathy Doesn’t Work,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, last modified March 11, 2015, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/1800-studies-later-scientists-conclude-homeopathy-doesnt-work-180954534/>.

⁴⁹ Falah Gulzar, “Indians fighting coronavirus: Ministers singing ‘go corona go’ to devotees burning effigies of ‘coronasur,’” *Gulf News*, last modified March 11, 2020, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/india/indians-fighting-coronavirus-ministers-singing-go-corona-go-to-devotees-burning-effigies-of-coronasur-1.1583920332008> and Danish Siddiqui, “Hindu group offers cow urine in a bid to ward off coronavirus,” *Reuters*, last modified March 14, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-india-cow-urine-pa/hindu-group-offers-cow-urine-in-a-bid-to-ward-off-coronavirus-idUSKBN2110D5>.

⁵⁰ Anwasha Mitra, “Coronavirus in Mumbai: For a short time we used distilled cow urine as a sanitiser, it has anti-bacterial power, says ISKCON,” *Free Press Journal*, last modified March 16, 2020, <https://www.freepressjournal.in/mumbai/coronavirus-update-in-mumbai-iskcon-temple-temporarily-uses-cow-urine-as-disinfectant>.

⁵¹ Arun Mitra “Cow Urine Must Leave Our Health Discourse and Its Proponents, Our Politics,” *The Wire*, last modified May 2, 2019, <https://thewire.in/health/cow-urine-must-leave-our-health-discourse-and-its-proponents-our-politics>.

⁵² CJ Werleman, “An Apartheid Era Begins in India, As Does a Moral Dilemma for its Allies,” *Byline Times*, last modified April 23, 2020, <https://bylinetimes.com/2020/04/23/an-apartheid-era-begins-in-india-as-does-a-moral-dilemma-for-its-allies/>.

⁵³ Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shaikh Azizur Rahman, “Coronavirus conspiracy theories targeting Muslims spread in India,”

⁵⁴ “Devotees visit temples on Ram Navami in West Bengal defying coronavirus lockdown,” *Deccan Herald*, last modified April 2, 2020, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/east-and-northeast/devotees-visit-temples-on-ram-navami-in-west-bengal-defying-coronavirus-lockdown-820496.html>.

Date	Description	Estimated Strength
February 29	Kapil Mishra holds a rally against so-called 'Jihadi violence' in Jaipur, Rajasthan. ⁵⁵	~1,200
March 12	BJP supporters welcome BJP leader Jyotiraditya Scindia in Bhopal. ⁵⁶	Hundreds
March 14	All India Hindu Mahasabha threw a 'gaumutra party' in Delhi. ⁵⁷	~200
March 18-19	Thousands visited various Hindu temples of Ahmedabad, Gujarat. ⁵⁸	~60,500
March 20	A man in Madhya Pradesh performed Hindu rituals for his deceased mother. ⁵⁹	~1,500
March 24	Oath-Taking ceremony of Shivraj Singh Chouhan in Madhya Pradesh. ⁶⁰	100+

Table 3 – Non-exhaustive list of major Hindu gatherings before enforcement of countrywide lockdown

The government's own preparedness for responding to the outbreak is equally subject to contestation. As late as of March 23, BJP's political leadership was engaged in toppling elected government in Madhya Pradesh, amidst Prime Minister Modi's appeal of observing a voluntary lockdown.⁶¹ The Prime Minister's appeal to Indian citizens to clap hands, beat plates and ring bells as a recognition of services

⁵⁵ Abhinav Rajput, "Goli maaro slogan is back as Kapil Mishra leads 'peace' march," *The Indian Express*, last modified March 1, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/delhi-violence-kapil-mishra-march-6293334/>.

⁵⁶ Ruhi Tewari, "BJP gives Scindia 'Trump-like' welcome in Bhopal, coronavirus does not deter huge crowd," *The Print*, last modified March 12, 2020, <https://theprint.in/politics/bjp-gives-scindia-trump-like-welcome-in-bhopal-coronavirus-does-not-deter-huge-crowd/380126/>.

⁵⁷ Ganesh Radha-Udayakumar, "Publicity-hungry swami drinks cow urine at Delhi party to piss off coronavirus, may go viral," *India Today*, last modified March 14, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/coronavirus-gaumutra-party-swami-chakrapani-maharaj-all-india-hindu-mahasabha-1655557-2020-03-14>

⁵⁸ "Sick-ular in times of corona," *Ahmedabad Mirror*, last modified April 2, 2020, <https://ahmedabadmirror.indiatimes.com/ahmedabad/cover-story/sick-ular-in-times-of-corona/articleshow/74939907.cms>.

⁵⁹ "Coronavirus Outbreak: Over 26,000 in MP's Morena placed under home quarantine after 10 who attended Dubai-returned man's feast test positive," *Firstpost*, last modified April 4, 2020, <https://www.firstpost.com/health/coronavirus-outbreak-11-people-infected-after-dubai-returned-man-who-tested-positive-for-covid-19-throws-mass-feast-for-1500-8228341.html>.

⁶⁰ Akshita Jain, "BJP Ignores PM Modi's Social Distancing Advice At Shivraj Singh Chouhan's Oath-Taking," *Huffington Post*, last modified March 24, 2020, https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/bjp-madhya-pradesh-social-distancing-shivraj-singh-chouhan_in_5e79a7bbc5b62f90bc508234.

⁶¹ Asad Ashraf, "How Modi's BJP lagged on Covid-19 response in Central India," *TRT World*, last modified April 21, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/how-modi-s-bjp-lagged-on-covid-19-response-in-central-india-35617>.

of healthcare providers transpired into many Indians taking to the streets, ruling out physical distancing.⁶² The hastily imposed lockdown by the BJP government came with its own fallouts. As the economic hubs in the country shut down, hundreds of thousands of migrants trekked back to their homes.⁶³ Many lost lives in the process.⁶⁴ Physical distancing was naturally absent.

CONCLUSION

As the infectious disease broke out in India, Prime Minister Modi was expected to bankroll the health-crisis to nourish the political cult surrounding him by emerging as the 'problem-solver'.⁶⁵ Contrarily, the policies adopted by the Prime Minister Modi and BJP's political leadership are rather retrogressive and manifest a lack of commitment to human security. As morbidity and mortality resulting from COVID-19 rapidly increase in India, the administration has engaged itself into fuelling religious extremism and hyper-nationalism. Most immediately, the novel coronavirus has vehemently brought to the fore, how Hindutva forces target Indian minorities, particularly Muslims. A tarnished social-fabric shall be an obvious outcome, having long-term bearing in terms of stigma, stereotyping and potential violent attacks. In the longer run, India's crisis-management shall unravel many ins and outs of India's political governance and response preparedness. As the COVID-19 outbreak widens existing national security spectrum to include human development and health security, the effectiveness of its human security apparatuses shall also count among the determinants of India's national power.

⁶² Rasheeda Bhagat, "A farcical show amidst the Janata curfew," *The Hindu-Business Lines*, last modified March 24, 2020, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/a-farcical-show-amidst-the-janata-curfew/article31149214.ece>.

⁶³ Soutik Biswas, "Coronavirus: India's pandemic lockdown turns into a human tragedy," *BBC News*, last modified March 30, 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52086274>.

⁶⁴ Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Manoj Chaurasia, "India racked by greatest exodus since partition due to coronavirus," *The Guardian*, last modified March 30, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/india-wracked-by-greatest-exodus-since-partition-due-to-coronavirus>.

⁶⁵ Angshuman Choudhury, "Coronavirus outbreak: How Narendra Modi has used crisis management to strengthen his cult following," *Scroll.in*, last modified March 29, 2020, <https://scroll.in/article/957565/coronavirus-outbreak-how-narendra-modi-has-used-crisis-management-to-strengthen-his-cult-following>.