



THE COVID PANDEMIC:

*A Report on the
Scapegoating of Minorities
in India*



Centre for Study of
Society and Secularism

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Preface

Covid -19 pandemic shook the entire world, particularly from the last week of March 2020. The pandemic nearly brought the world to a standstill. Those of us who lived during the pandemic witnessed unknown times. The fear of getting infected of a very contagious disease that could even cause death was writ large on people's faces. People were confined to their homes. They stepped out only when absolutely necessary, e.g. to buy provisions or to access medical services; or if they were serving in essential services like hospitals, security and police, etc. Economic activities were down to minimum. Means of public transportation were halted, all educational institutions, industries and work establishments were closed. People were afraid of strangers as they could potentially transmit the disease. In fact, they were afraid also of friends and relatives and kept their distance from everyone except those staying together. Health infrastructure proved grossly inadequate to deal with the situation. Over one and a half lakh people died in the pandemic due to the disease and almost 11 million people contracted the disease in India till 10th Feb 2021. Electronic media - the only source of contact with the outside world - reported the pandemic round the clock and reeled out the rising graphs of those affected by the disease and those who died. This was the most important news of the day and its reportage consumed lion's share of the news time.

On 23rd March 2020, when I returned from the US, the residents of my building, with whom I had very good relations, became paranoid about my return from the US. They told my driver not to go airport to receive me, and if he does receive me at the airport, not to bring me to the building. They contacted me and asked me to get myself admitted into any hospital that treats covid patients and come to stay in the building only after that. The security of our building was directed not to allow me inside the building. As I was returning from the US, I had no idea of the paranoia build up around covid in the country. I had to return to my home and had no alternative. In another extreme case narrated to me by a friend from Delhi, her neighbour living above her flat in Hauz Khas, would bathe outside their door before entering their house every time he returned from the market after buying provisions for home. She learnt about the fact as water from their door flowed down to their floor. Bathing outside their house was to ensure that the person was cleansed of the virus, if contracted when outside.

The gated community and the middle class were more paranoid than others. Their incomes were mostly secured as they could work from home, although the owners and proprietors of small and medium enterprises too suffered loss of income under strict lockdown. The gates of the middleclass housing societies kept strangers outside - including the domestic helps, hawkers, personnel for home delivery and courier services, gig workers. This affected large numbers of casual and migrant workers who had no work and no wages. The attitude of the middle-class was like, "let me and my immediate family members survive and let others be damned and fend for themselves". Medical and paramedical staff employed in hospitals were despised in housing societies as they were perceived as potential carriers of the virus from the hospitals. A few did come out on streets to organize and distribute food packets and dry rations, but they were more of exceptions.

The casual workers employed in unorganized industries were worst hit during the pandemic. They were caught up in crowded and shared rooms constructed from tin sheets or huts, without work and wages, without food and not allowed to step out of

their overcrowded shanties. There was no transportation to take them to their native villages to be with their families. After being trapped for over three months in such hopeless situation, many of them decided to walk to their permanent homes in their villages that were hundreds of kilo metres away, risking being caned, punished, humiliated and even jailed by the security personnel who were mandated with the powers and also duty to ensure minimum number of people were on public roads and only for an essential purpose. Some died walking back to their native places - Govt. did not keep records of their numbers. Others started walking on the railway tracks to avoid being caned and detained by the police. A few of them died when they were sleeping on the tracks, resting for a while before they commenced their journey the next day and a train ran over them. Entire families were walking with their luggage in tow and little children on their shoulders. The lasting image that stayed with me was that of a teenage daughter paddling a bicycle for hundreds of kilo metres with her sick father on the pillion. Luckily, both of them survived the ride. Followers of religious communities as well as secular people came on the streets offering food packets, foot-wears and all kinds of help to the stranded with the govt. doing next to nothing. The state was represented more by the policeman with cane in hands beating those who were travelling on foot, bicycles, autorickshaws for hundreds of kilo metres. Though there were some helpful cops too. It is only when the media started extensively covering the ordeals of those returning back homes that the govt. decided to run the trains and buses to ferry nearly 50 million stranded workers back to their native places.

It is the middle class gated community that was most anxious and paranoid of the virus. Amidst this paranoia, media repeated ad-nauseum the message of keeping 'social distance' instead of 'physical distance' from everyone else. The social prejudices heightened against the vulnerable sections - particularly the minorities, the migrant workers and those employed as casual labourers in unorganized industries and living in slums.

As the minorities were being targeted and scapegoated only for the religion they followed, the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism decided that it should document the process of scapegoating as well as the institutions, including the state and non-state actors that scapegoated the minorities. This project examines and studies the instances of discrimination and scapegoating of faith-based communities. The scapegoating of the vulnerable sections does not help in anyway fighting the pandemic. In fact, it allows those who must take effective action against the pandemic but failed to do so, to shift the blame on others who had no responsibility in the matter. If the duty bearers are not held accountable for their failures, they are more likely to be carefree and negligent in their work next time as well. They may inspire other duty bearers in other fields to be negligent as well.

Why this project:

The efforts made to document the scapegoating, and in the process strengthening communal polarization is to counter such a process, and arrest the deteriorating situation on the front of communal polarization and conflicts. Facts would not only help deal with the pandemic like disasters more effectively, but it would also ensure that religions play a positive role in motivating people to help each other in such situations. The experience of handling the pandemic, or for that matter, any disaster is important and there must be lessons learnt. Could the pandemic have been handled better? Did the scapegoating have any impact on the handling of the pandemic itself?

Methodology

This study is largely based on the what appeared in the media. We selected six states for the study - Gujarat, UP, Delhi, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Odisha. The six states were selected to ensure that all the four regions were included as also the NDA as well as non-NDA Govt. Six teams scanned all the news media from each state. The CSSS office compiled the data to study the role of the state, non-state actors and the media in reporting the pandemic.

We are thankful to the teams in the Six states which helped us scan the media and compile the data, which includes Dharendra Panda, Dani Chandrakant, Ibad Razaa, Hozefa Ujjaini, Mushtaq Ali, Rahul Rajeev, Uday (Paridhi), Sr. Robancy Helen, Adv. S.G. Alli Chandrakumar, Dipshikha Vaishnav (Programme Coordinator, CSSS). Most of the team members who assisted in the data collection from their states were in the forefront of carrying out distribution of relief materials during the pandemic to those who were stranded. We are also thankful to the CSSS team which coordinated the entire project very efficiently and without whom the project would not have seen the light of the day. Prominently among them Neha Dabhade, Dy. Director, CSSS and Aparna Olwe, Programme Coordinator, CSSS.

Some members of the SAFFORB-India gave good support during the entire project, including Masooma Ranalvi, Muniza Khan and Adv. Alli Chandrakumar. However, I take the responsibility of the infirmities in the study, if any, as the Project Director.

Irfan Engineer
Project Director
19th April 2021.

List of Abbreviations

IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
NED	National Endowment for Democracy
IMF	International Monetary Fund
USCIRF	United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
UPA	United Progressive Alliance
INC	Indian National Congress
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CBI	Central Bureau of Investigation
ED	Enforcement Directorate
UAPA	Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act
NIA	National Investigation Agency
NRC	National Register of Citizens
CAA	Citizenship Amendment Act
WHO	World Health Organisation
ICMR	Indian Council of Medical Research
ICU	Intensive Care Unit
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
FBO	Faith Based Organisation
IHRB	Institute for Human Rights and Business
IPC	Indian Penal Code
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
CMIE	Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy
NSA	National Security Advisor
SHO	Station House Officer
SDM	Sub Divisional Magistrate
FIR	First Information Report
NPR	National Population Register
CMO	Chief Medical Officer
UP	Uttar Pradesh
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
CM	Chief Minister
JDU	Janata Dal United
OBC	Other Backward Castes
JNU	Jawaharlal Nehru University
JMI	Jamia Milia Islamia
SC	Scheduled Caste
ST	Scheduled Tribe
KCC	Kilpauk Christian Cemetery
CMC	Chennai Municipal Corporation
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad
BDO	Block Development Officer
DM	District Magistrate
NCR	National Capital Region
PMSF	Progressive Medicos and Scientists Forum
MEA	Ministry of External Affairs
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
RBI	Reserve Bank of India
EC	Election Commission
RSS	
UPSSF	Uttar Pradesh Special Security Force
APMC	Agriculture Produce Market Committee

MSP	Minimum Support Price
EIA	Environment Impact Assessment
NEP	National Education Policy
RTE	Right to Education Act
PMNRF	Prime Minister's National Relief Fund
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
RTI	Right to Information

Chapter - 1

The Context

The Covid 19 pandemic is having serious economic and political consequences across the globe. It is also having profound consequences socially. Worldwide there are concerns that democracy is at risk and there is a need for “a unified defense of democracy” at this time¹. “Authoritarian regimes are using the crisis to silence critics and tighten their political grip. But even some democratically elected governments are fighting the pandemic by amassing emergency powers that restrict human rights and enhance state surveillance without regard to legal constraints, parliamentary oversight, or time frames for the restoration of constitutional order.”² This is the concern voiced in an open letter issued by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) whereby more than 500 political and civil society leaders, Nobel laureates, and prodemocracy institutions joined the call for taking concerted action to “prevent and repair the damage caused by pandemic-related rights violations”.

Even before the pandemic, the world economy was plagued by disruptions and uncertainties which just exacerbated with the pandemic. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) the global economy will shrink by 3 per cent in 2020³. The IMF describes the decline as the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s. With most countries resorting to strict lockdown in order to save lives, the poor and the ones on the margins have been driven to despair with loss of livelihood, no income, no social security and outright hunger.

Socially, when more than ever the need is for humankind to come together to overcome the pandemic, countries are forced to close their borders, governments are pledging billions of dollars for a Covid 19 vaccine and treatment options, wanting to be the first to obtain the vaccine for their own. Even within countries, existing differences are being reinforced, minorities and/or ‘the others’ are being scapegoated, and governments are allowing it to happen. In the words of United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres “the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering...”⁴ Individual human rights and religious freedoms are compromised and majority communities are gaining social sanction to scapegoat minorities. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in its Factsheet on Coronavirus titled “The Global Response to the Coronavirus: Impact on Religious Practice and Religious Freedom” states that governmental and societal response to Covid 19 is impacting freedom of religion.⁵ For instance, in China, since April 2017, the government has detained one million Uighur and other Muslims in concentration camps in Xinjiang. There are reports saying the authorities have forced Uighurs to work in factories throughout the country to

¹<https://freedomhouse.org/article/pandemics-global-challenge-democracy-should-be-met-global-response>

²<https://www.ned.org/call-to-defend-democracy/>

³[https://www.bbc.com/news/business-](https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51706225#:~:text=Unemployment%20rates%20have%20increased%20across,of%20the%20world%27s%20largest%20economies.)

[51706225#:~:text=Unemployment%20rates%20have%20increased%20across,of%20the%20world%27s%20largest%20economies.](https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51706225#:~:text=Unemployment%20rates%20have%20increased%20across,of%20the%20world%27s%20largest%20economies.)

⁴<https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1258613180030431233>

⁵<https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Factsheet%20Covid-19%20and%20FoRB.pdf>

compensate for decreased output during the quarantine. In South Korea, one member of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus tested positive for Covid-19. The Korea Centres for Disease Control and Prevention said that two-thirds of the more than 7500 cases in South Korea could be traced to this patient. This brought the state as well as society's scanner on the church. The government locked down Shincheonji churches in Seoul, some mainline Protestant churches accused the Shincheonji church of deliberately spreading the disease, criminal charges of homicide of "willful negligence" were filed against the founder of the church, there were reports of individual members encountering discrimination at work. And a petition to ban the church altogether was signed by 1.2 million people.

India is also experiencing the economic, political and social consequences of Covid-19. In fact, India has been in a state of political and social churning since 2014 when the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government led by the Indian National Congress (INC) gave way to the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the right-wing nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). BJP is an ideological party, with an ambition to establish a Hindu *rashtra* (nation) with an authoritarian state despite a democratic Constitution. Driven by its ambition and overwhelmed by its ideology, the party has revealed its tendency to undermine and destroy the established democratic institutions. They believe in ends justifying the means and usually take a nationalist-populist route.⁶

The first term of NDA (2014-19) saw the Hindutva forces gaining social sanction to intimidate minorities, especially Muslims and to some extent Christians, which led to alienation, discrimination and outright violence against them. Campaigns such as 'love jihad', 'beti bachao bahu lao', 'beef ban' dominated the discourse and was aimed at vilifying the minority community on the one hand, and mobilizing the Hindutva supporters on the other. India witnessed violence of the extreme kind namely, mob lynching, during this period.⁷

In 2019, NDA came back to power with an even greater mandate. While there was a toning down of the aggressiveness, there was a simultaneous increase in the show of strength, actually and symbolically. The party started chipping away at major democratic autonomous institutions like the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Supreme Court, and the Enforcement Directorate (ED). Symbolic show of strength, power and glory of the Hindus is on a rise as seen in Uttar Pradesh; *aartis* and *kirtans* done in a big way daily⁸, government sponsorship and providing funds to "add sheen" to *aartis* and other cultural spectacles in temples⁹, the Archaeology Department asked to compile list of temples¹⁰, and total ban on sale of liquor and meat within 250 metre radius of all

⁶ Interview with Prof. D. K. Giri, Professor of International Relation in Jamia Milia Islamia & Secretary General of the Association for Democratic Socialism, on 24 August 2020

⁷ See **Violence against Christians and Muslims in India (2013-15)**, National Council of Churches in India, 2016

⁸ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/yogi-adityanaths-actions-show-state-moving-towards-ram-rajya-up-minister/articleshow/59150544.cms>

⁹ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/govt-funding-up-to-rs-1-5-crore-to-temple-trusts-to-add-sheen-to-aarti/articleshow/70780172.cms?from=mdr>

¹⁰ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/yogis-up-temple-fairs-dating-back-1857-to-be-revived/articleshow/70971914.cms?from=mdr>

temples and heritage sites in Benaras¹¹. Similarly, setting a narrative that only a Hindu is a true nationalist by raking threat from Pakistan, questioning loyalty of Muslims and forcing non-Hindus to chant *Jai Shri Ram* (Praise be to Ram). In the Parliament, the show of strength was seen in the way crucial bills were tabled without adequate time for notice and discussion; crucial bills were passed in haste, without scrutiny or paying heed to the voices of opposition; for example, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act (UAPA) and the National Investigation Agency (Amendment) Act. These Acts place greater 'strength' and 'protection' for the government while could be used to target minorities. But it was the Citizenship Amendment Act that proved to be the tip of the iceberg for majority of Indians. The Act amends the Citizenship Act 1955 to make immigrants – Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians – from Muslim majority neighboring countries namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan eligible for Indian citizenship¹². Further, BJP seeks to implement the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which was done in Assam in 2019, across the country, as promised in their election manifesto. If nationwide NRC is carried out, it is feared majority of the poor may not be able to produce documentary evidence of three generations of their family having lived on the land. In such a scenario, CAA would ensure all are granted citizenship except Muslims, who would then be rendered stateless. For the first time in Indian political history, citizenship was to be awarded on the basis of religion and denied to people of one particular religion i.e. the Muslims. This kicked off protests all across the country.

It was in such a scenario that Covid 19 hit the world and India confirmed its first coronavirus infection in Kerala – a student returning from Wuhan – on 30 January 2020¹³.

Covid 19 and Response of the State

Phase 1: Initial Response

The World Health Organisation (WHO) released evidence of human-to-human transmissions of Corona Virus on 21 January¹⁴; and by the last week of January declared the Covid 19 outbreak a global health emergency and called for countries to treat, detect and reduce transmission to save people's lives.¹⁵ The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, had as early as January employed a "classic epidemiological model for the coronavirus" and concluded that at least 75 per cent of all imported cases would need to be detected to significantly shift the onset of a domestic outbreak; and that if one in two people who

¹¹ <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/national/uttar-pradesh-adityanath-govt-bans-liquor-meat-consumption-around-varanasi-temples>

¹² <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/the-big-story/story/20190916-the-big-story-wrong-number-1595671-2019-09-06> and <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/what-is-the-citizenship-amendment-bill-2016/article23999348.ece>

¹³ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indias-first-coronavirus-infection-confirmed-in-kerala/article30691004.ece>

¹⁴ <https://liveupdates.hindustantimes.com/india/coronavirus-latest-india-world-news-covid-19-death-toll-29-april-2020-21588120561130.html>

¹⁵ [https://www.who.int/india/emergencies/coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)](https://www.who.int/india/emergencies/coronavirus-disease-(covid-19))

tested positive were quarantined within three days of developing symptoms, the total number of people infected could be very significantly reduced.¹⁶

Yet, through February, March and much of April, ICMR continued to maintain in its daily briefings that the virus was under control and that community transmission was not occurring. The government ignored the recommendation to identify and quarantine symptomatic patients irrespective of their origins, and continued to concentrate on imported cases and their contacts. At the ports, thermal testing was done and 14-days quarantine was recommended but implementation was lax as was evident in the case of the group of Italian tourists who entered the country, toured Rajasthan, Agra and parts of Delhi before 15 members tested positive and they were all quarantined.¹⁷ Or the case of the Delhi based businessman who returned from a business meeting in Milan and came in contact with 66 people including his family and all the children and their families he invited for his son's birthday party before he went to the hospital himself with symptoms.

Even on 3 March, the Prime Minister's tweet said "There is no need to panic. We need to work together, take small yet important measures to ensure self-protection". The government went ahead with the elaborate 'Namaste Trump' event (24-25 February) which saw hundreds of thousands of people congregating in Ahmedabad and Agra, paying no heed to maintaining physical distance. In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP engineered a split in the Congress Party which headed the MP government, and returned to power.¹⁸ The celebratory meeting that followed led to scores of health officers, bureaucrats and politicians being exposed and forced to quarantine. Several BJP leaders including the former Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje Scindia, and BJP MP Dushyant Singh were forced to quarantine themselves after attending a dinner party organized by a BJP MP in Lucknow, also attended by Bollywood singer Kanika Kapoor, who tested positive for Covid 19 a couple of days later.¹⁹ Dushyant Singh later attended Parliament, fueling fears that a number of Parliamentarians may have been exposed to the virus. On 8 March, the International Women's Day, an award ceremony was organized at Rashtrapati Bhawan (Presidential Palace) where a large number of people including prominent citizens had gathered. On 15 March, almost 1.5 lakh devotees had gathered in Kadiri town in Anantpur district in Andhra Pradesh for the chariot procession of the annual Kadiri Narasimha Swamy Brahmastavam. Devotees came from Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and the State Road Transport Corporation arranged buses to facilitate their travel.²⁰ In Kerala, a 10-day-long temple festival called Aatukal Pongala was held with the Kerala governments permission. The Kerala government maintained that the festival could not be avoided as preparations had been going on for months. In Uttar Pradesh, the State Chief Minister himself defied the nation-wide lockdown on the first day itself and went ahead with the Ram Navami event in Ayodhya. In Karnataka, after the State had banned mass gatherings, hundreds of people attended the wedding of State Legislator, Mahantesh

¹⁶ <https://carnegieindia.org/2020/05/14/india-s-unheeded-coronavirus-warning-pub-81805>

¹⁷ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/tracing-the-italian-connection-to-indias-fresh-coronavirus-count/articleshow/74490038.cms>

¹⁸ <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/bjp-s-shivraj-singh-chouhan-sworn-in-as-madhya-pradesh-cm-for-fourth-time-1658867-2020-03-23>

¹⁹ [Singer tests positive, Parliament & Rashtrapati Bhavan rocked - The Financial Express](#)

²⁰ [UP to AP, what's stopping India's temples and mosques from closing down due to COVID-19 \(theprint.in\)](#)

Kavatgimath's daughter. Even Chief Minister B. S. Yeddyurappa attended the wedding. In Punjab, a Sikh preacher, infected with Corona virus attended a local fair. He died later. He put around 40,000 of his devotees at risk.

The consequence of the government's lackluster response was the fast spread of the virus across the country and the health machinery unprepared to cope with the magnitude of the crisis at hand.

Phase 2: Lockdown

On 22 March, the government announced a 14 hours nationwide *Janata* (People) Curfew and on 24 March, the Prime Minister announced a nationwide lockdown of 21 days, done by way of a live telecast giving only four-hour notice to the country. The lockdown prohibited all forms of transportation and business activities, allowing only essential services to remain in operation. The lockdown is reminiscent of the demonetization carried out by the same government in 2016, when on 8 November in a live telecast the Prime Minister announced the demonetization of all Rs.500 and Rs.1000 banknotes of the Mahatma Gandhi Series. It took the entire country unawares. People have not forgotten the long queues outside banks to deposit the currency in hand into their accounts or exchange with other denominations; or the pain of the ordinary citizens who did not have bank accounts, who kept their meager savings at home in cash; or the suffering of the entire country when the government was not prepared to meet the cash crunch.

Lockdown in India was perhaps, like elsewhere in the world, inevitable to help the health department prepare to meet the rush of cases and to control the spread of the virus. Many observers suggest that on both accounts, lockdown was a failure. In a survey conducted by LocalCircles it was found that only 4 per cent of those who needed a Covid Intensive Care Unit (ICU) bed were able to get it through routine process, 78 per cent had to use connections and clout.²¹ An earlier survey conducted by LocalCircles revealed that tier 3, 4 and rural areas were unprepared to handle the pandemic; it said that the critical patients here "may not be able to find the needed healthcare."²² These surveys indicate that the healthcare system was not prepared to handle the pandemic especially in the rural areas, and where it was prepared, it was not healthcare 'for all', it was 'for all who could afford'. As far as spread of the virus is concerned, by September, India had become the second most coronavirus infected country with over 90,000 new cases every day.

Some observers interpret the haste and arbitrariness in the imposition of lockdown as an excuse to thwart the CAA protesters all over the country but especially at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi. The sit-in protest mainly by women was causing political concern for the government. Whatever might have been the reason, the impact of lockdown was borne by the poor and marginalized. Millions of workers, especially migrant workers and daily wage earners, were rendered with no work and no money. How would they afford rent and food? The lockdown was first enforced for 21 days (from 24 March to 14 April) and then extended to 3 May. Subsequently, it was extended twice. The day lockdown was announced, thousands thronged the inter-state bus stations to go back

²¹ <https://www.localcircles.com/a/press/page/icu-beds-availability-covid-19-survey#.X3F0hUjivtT>

²² <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/survey-finds-smaller-towns-unprepared-to-handle-fast-spreading-covid-19/article32392618.ece>

home. But borders were shut and there were no arrangements made by the government for the people to leave the cities. The images of thousands of people at the bus stations was diametrically opposed to the very reason why lockdown was imposed.

The government relief schemes for lockdown were announced 42 hours after the announcement of lockdown, during which time there was panic and despair among them. Civil society organizations (CSOs), faith-based organizations (FBOs) and ordinary citizens came to the aid of the migrant workers providing them with food and other essentials. Many state governments provided food assistance. But with no work, the workers had no money; with no money, they could not pay rent; when they could not pay rent the landlords threatened and actually evicted them. Also, it was not just the question of food, it was a question of dignity. As one worker said, “We earn our bread, why should we queue up for free food?” When the lockdown was extended, feeling abandoned by the government, closure of all business activity and services, and without any provision of a social safety net, these workers started to walk along with their families and belongings to the safety, security and familiarity of their homes in the villages and small towns.

There are reports of people walking up to 1000 Km with no money and often with no food.²³ Many were arrested by the police for violating the rules of lockdown, many died of exhaustion, many met with accidents. In Maharashtra, 16 workers were crushed to death by a goods (freight) train as they slept on the railway tracks after walking all day, under the assumption that no trains were running.²⁴ According to a Report brought out by the Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB) titled “Migrant Voices”, “One report suggests at least 200 workers died on their journey, but the actual figure is likely to be higher, since statisticians and economists find India’s record-keeping of deaths to be inaccurate or unreliable even under normal circumstances.”²⁵

The plight of the migrant workers tugged at the conscience of the country – the media reported widely about their plight, left high and dry to fend for themselves without aid from the government; and the government reacted by charging journalists who reported such news items with criminal offences under the Indian Penal Code (IPC), prominent among them was the case of Om Sharma of Himachal Pradesh charged under criminal sections of IPC for going live on social media on the plight of the migrant workers; and of Dhaba Patel, a Gujarat based editor who was charged with sedition for speculating that the Chief Minister of Gujarat may be replaced by the Centre for mishandling the Covid 19 pandemic. Newslaundry reported that during the lockdown alone, 55 journalists were charged, arrested or assaulted across India until June 2020.²⁶ There was even international attention; the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights urged the Indian government to treat the migrants with respect as they are already in a vulnerable position due to their social standing. But it is a fact that these workers would have exposed themselves to the virus, or exposed others to the virus, contributing to the pandemic rather than containing it.

²³ [COVID-19 and the plight of migrants in India | Postgraduate Medical Journal \(bmj.com\)](https://www.bmj.com/content/361/n7997/e000000)

²⁴ [COVID-19 in India: 16 migrant workers run over by train \(aa.com.tr\)](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/2020/05/16-migrant-workers-run-over-by-train)

²⁵ [COVID India Internal Migrants Report - IHRB.pdf](https://www.ihrb.org.in/reports/migrant-voices)

²⁶ <https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/11/05/arnab-goswamis-arrest-isnt-about-freedom-of-press-its-about-the-states-misuse-of-power>

So, on 30 March when around 1000 members of the Tablighi Jamaat were found at the Nizamuddin Markaz in Delhi, said to have assembled from all over the country and abroad, from Thailand, Nepal, Myanmar, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Kyrgyzstan etc. to participate in an annual gathering, it is surprising that the group was termed 'irresponsible', blamed for violating rules which prohibited all gatherings, "conferences and seminars having 200 or more people", and labelled "super-spreaders". It is surprising how members from the government, the ruling party, and the media drew a narrative that blamed not just the Tablighi Jamaat but the entire Muslim community in India for the pandemic.

Phase 3: Life v/s Livelihood

Lockdown halted most economic activities, led to job loss of millions and to loss to revenue stream. In the first quarter of the 2020-21 fiscal year, India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) declined by 23.9 per cent.²⁷ Sectors such as manufacturing, real estate, hospitality, mining, and tourism were badly affected; Indian railways, metro services and the education sector completely shut. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), with lockdown informal jobs were badly hit, especially daily wage labour, hawkers, small traders, etc. But what was worrying, according to CMIE was that about 21 million salaried employees lost their jobs between April and August 2020.²⁸ While lockdown was clamped early on in the pandemic to save lives, it was done without planning; and when livelihoods became insecure, the government started to lift lockdown even when infection continued to spike. The argument given was people would die of deprivation if not the disease unless normal economic activities resumed. In essence the government made a choice instead of seeing life and livelihood as complementary. And by choosing livelihood, lockdown was lifted thereby leaving the citizens to fend for themselves while the pandemic continues to rage.

Scapegoating in India

At a time when the government was still organizing and holding official events which involved the gathering of hundreds and thousands of people like the International Women's Day event at the Rashtrapati Bhawan and President Donald Trump's visit to India; religious groups were having religious ceremonies and events all across the country like the Kadirī Narasimha Swamy Brahmōstavam in Karnataka, Aatukal Pongala in Kerala, and the Ram Navami celebrations in UP; social events were being held across the country with guests running in hundreds and thousands, like the dinner party organized by the BJP MP in Lucknow and the wedding of Karnataka State Legislator, Mahantesh Kavatgimath's daughter; several devotees belonging to other religious communities were stranded at pilgrim points, for instance, 200 Sikhs were stuck at the Majnu ka Tila Gurudwara in Delhi and around 400 Hindu pilgrims were stuck at Vaishno Devi unable to go home when the lockdown was imposed; and, millions of migrant workers were walking to their home towns, exposing themselves and others to the virus, how did the Tablighi Jamaat convention held in Delhi become a crime? Why was it that the Tablighi Jamaat was

²⁷ <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/photos/india/covid-19-impact-on-india-multiple-sectors-affected-in-six-months-of-lockdown-5882081-12.html>

²⁸ <https://cmie.com/kommon/bin/sr.php?kall=warticle&dt=2020-08-12%20:15:55&msec=630>

singled out and named the cause of spread of the virus in the country? Why was the Tablighi Jamaat made a scapegoat?

From 30 January 2020 when India confirmed its first Corona virus patient in Kerala to 24 March 2020 when the government imposed the nation-wide lockdown, the government's response to the fast-spreading virus was lackluster. It continued to focus at 'imported cases' and their contacts; it continued to maintain there was no community spread; and it allowed religious, social and political gatherings to happen. Nation-wide lockdown was imposed to help buy time for the health machinery to be prepared to meet the onslaught of cases and to arrest the spread of the virus. But the health machinery continued to be unprepared to meet the rush of cases especially in tier 2 and 3 areas and in the metropolis and bigger cities, it was more healthcare "for all who could afford" rather than "for all". This period also exposed the government's unpreparedness in dealing with the issues arising from lockdown, most glaringly in the case of the migrant workers. And, once lockdown was lifted on the grounds that the economy was going down and the people would die of deprivation if not the virus; it became obvious that the government had all but left the people to deal with the crisis on their own. The media was focusing on the failures and shortcomings of the government and the plight of the migrant workers tugged at the conscience of the people. The Tablighi Jamaat was just a convenient scapegoat to draw the attention of the people away from the failures and shortcomings of the government.

This is not the first time the present government has resorted to diversionary tactics to take the focus away from its performance. All the negative pandemic related fears and experiences of the people were directed to settle on a specific target – the Tablighi Jamaat – to blame for their grievances. The Tablighi Jamaat being a small sect within the minority community, the Muslims, was convenient given the existing majority-minority (Hindu-Muslim) dynamics in the country. As the Scapegoat Theory of Intergroup Conflict says, by blaming a minority group, members of the majority group may experience emotional relief, because there is now an explanation for the shock. They feel that their lack of control over the situation is not their fault, but the fault of the minority. Given the fact that there already existed strong biases against Muslims, scapegoating Tablighi Jamaat, a sect within Muslims, it was but a matter of time when the blame shifted to the entire Muslim community and it became easy to mobilise other members of the majority community previously not convinced about the anti-Muslim rhetoric, in joining in the scapegoating of Muslims. It was just easy given that the political power rested with the party which identifies itself with the majority community.

Politicians and groups belonging to the majority community in tandem with the media exploited the fears of the people to scapegoat Muslims. This became evident with the increase in instances of verbal, physical and virtual violence against Muslims. They were accused of deliberately spreading the disease, were denied access to healthcare, access to information about the pandemic, access to relief measures, and access to livelihood opportunities. While the government is expected to protect the human rights of all, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized; the government was seen to allow the violence to happen, in fact spearhead it.

Scapegoating and the Rest of the World

According to Freedom House, a watchdog of democracy and human rights, India is not the only country where government officials' words or the policies implemented by the government have reinforced widespread prejudices against religious minorities.²⁹ In Cambodia, the Ministry of Health listed the groups of people who had contracted the virus on Facebook. The list included "Khmer Islam". Soon social media was flooded with hate comments aimed at the Muslims, which is a very small minority in Cambodia. The Muslims have since reported facing increased discrimination from the Buddhist majority. Saudi Arabia sealed off the Eastern Qatif Province which is home to the minority Shia population and the people have been put under quarantine. This was the only province in the country that was completely cut off.³⁰ In Pakistan, the Hazaras, a small minority within the minority Shia Muslims were targeted. The Hazara pilgrims returning from Iran were targeted for being carriers of the virus, they were called "the Shia virus" and they were directly discriminated against by the government. On 12 March, the Inspector General of Balochistan brought out a notification ordering people belonging to the Hazara community to be on leave. On 13 March, the Water and Sanitation Authority notified that the Hazaras living in Marriabad and Hazara towns in Quetta should stay in their areas only. On 25 March, the Chief Secretary of Balochistan announced that Hazara areas would be secluded from the rest of Quetta.³¹ In Sri Lanka, the government has targeted the Muslim minority by making cremation compulsory for coronavirus deaths. International experts say burial and cremation are both acceptable ways of dealing with the bodies of Covid-19 deaths in spite of which the Sri Lankan government continues to deny the Muslim minority bury their dead. In fact, a Muslim family claimed that authorities coerced them to sign a consent form for a family member's cremation even though tests showed she did not die of Covid 19.³² And, as mentioned earlier the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in South Korea and the Uighur Muslims in China were victims of scapegoating.

Does this mean that it is normal for scapegoating to happen during pandemics? According to Freedom House, in each of these countries, scapegoating has not occurred in vacuum. It has happened after years or even generations of social and political marginalization.

Pandemics and Scapegoating: Insights from History

The world has experienced pandemics almost every century. There are firsthand accounts of pandemics from across 2500 years. Several commentators claim that pandemics have a negative effect on social relations and are more explosive when the disease is new, severe and mysterious. Carlo Ginzburg in his piece "Deciphering the Sabbath" wrote, "The prodigious trauma of great pestilences intensified the search for a scapegoat on which fears, hatreds and tension of all kind could be discharged".³³ According to Dorothy Nelkin and Sander Gilman, "Blaming has always

²⁹ <https://freedomhouse.org/article/state-sponsored-religious-discrimination-rises-pandemic>

³⁰ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/13/are-covid-19-restrictions-inflaming-religious-tensions/>

³¹ <https://www.newscred.com/article/the-misfortune-of-being-in-pakistan-which-believes-it-s-shia-virus->

³² Freedom House n.24

³³ Carl Ginzburg, "Deciphering the Sabbath" in Ankarloo B & Henningsen G, editors, Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries, (Oxford: 1990), pp. 121-38

been a means to make mysterious and devastating diseases comprehensible and therefore possibly controllable.”³⁴ P. C. Joshi, Medical Anthropologist and Head of Anthropology, Delhi University explains, “People largely know that something is wrong but to be told it is an infection with no symptoms, and anyone could give it to anyone, is terribly frightening. In the absence of comfort, blame is left.”³⁵ Others like Samuel K Cohn believe that blame and hate were rarely connected with pandemics in history; rather epidemics more often brought societies together.³⁶ According to this second category of historians, there could be a ‘come together’ effect if the stress of disaster brings people together which could be due to shared experiences, shared losses, etc. Yet there is a third category that believes that the economic, social and political context in which a pandemic occurs decide whether scapegoating would occur. The probability of scapegoating during pandemics is higher when (a) intergroup tensions were already rife before the pandemic, and (b) when authorities encourage or allow scapegoating or implement heavy-handed policies that lead to distrust within the population.³⁷

Let us consider some of the major pandemics in ancient history - the Plague of Athens (430 BC), the Plague of Galen (165-180 AD), the Plague of Cyprian (250-266 AD), and the Justinian Plague (541-542 AD) – they were all highly contagious and lethal, had very distressing symptoms, the mortality rates were very high affecting children and the elderly, there was no or very less information or knowledge on how the disease spread – all probable grounds for people to direct their fear and hatred at ‘the other’. But it was not so.

The plague of Athens killed nearly 100,000 people. When the plague first hit the lower city (Piraeus), many Athenians blamed the Spartans and spread rumors that they had poisoned the water reservoirs of Athens which caused the plague and the deaths. But as the disease progressed to the upper city this accusation was no longer heard. Many considered the plague a divine validation of the Oracle wherein Apollo said he would send pestilence on Athens and grant victory to Sparta.³⁸ The contemporary chronicler Thucydides explains that as the mortality rates increased in Athens, the plague was attributed to natural and economic conditions.³⁹ Athens was a naval power, an imperial capital, and a trading city whose fleets ranged across the ancient world. The plague would have spread from Ethiopia to Libya to Persia before finally reaching Greece, where Athens was its first stop. The Spartans were not targeted even though the disease devastated Athens but did not enter Peloponnesus to any extent. Further, as Cohn describes no minority group was blamed during the plague. This was despite the fact that the mortality rate among the migrants was much more. But they were not blamed for spreading the disease; it was

³⁴ Dorothy Nelkin and Sander Gilman, “Placing blame for devastating disease”, *Social Research*, 1988, pp. 362-78

³⁵ <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/coronavirus-pandemics-of-the-past-1656730-2020-03-18>

³⁶ Samuel K. Cohn, “Pandemics: Waves of Disease, Waves of Hate from the Plague of Athens to AIDS”, *Historical Journal*, read at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4422154/>

³⁷ Remi Jedwab, et. al, *Pandemics, Poverty, and Social Cohesion: Lessons from the Past and Possible Solutions for Covid-19*, Institute for International Economic Policy Working Paper Series, June 2020, <https://www2.gwu.edu/~iiep/assets/docs/papers/2020WP/JedwabIIEP2020-13.pdf>

³⁸ Borimir Jordan, “Religion in Thucydides”, *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974), Vol.116, 1986, pp 119-147. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/283914. Accessed 17 September 2020

³⁹ Cohn, n.32

obvious that most migrants lived in “cramped quarters” and were breathing “polluted air” which made them victims of the “polluted air” that caused the pandemic and not the instigators.

The Antoine Smallpox or the Plague of Galen that affected the Roman Empire (165-180 AD) lasted for over 20 years and killed over 10 million people. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius blamed the Christian community, who refused to pay homage to the Roman gods, for the pandemic. He believed that the gods were angered because the Christians refused to bow to them and their wrath was made known in the form of the plague.⁴⁰ Aurelius could have launched persecution on the Christians (who were persecuted during this time) but he did not. Cohn recounts the contemporary chronicler, Galen, that Marcus Aurelius’ “strategy for maintaining stability during the plague was not to blame any social group or foreigners”. The poor were granted state subsidies to bury their dead; and slaves and foreigners who were considered “inferior” by Roman citizens were hired as soldiers of the Roman army. Also what stands out during this time is the spirit of service and solidarity of the Christians, which went a long way in the spread of the religion.⁴¹

The Plague of Cyprian struck the Roman Empire a Century later in 250-266 AD. It was estimated that 5000 lives were lost daily while the plague raged. In the city of Alexandria alone the population declined by 62 per cent.⁴² Historians assert that the Plague of Cyprian coincided with the tense relations between the Roman Emperor and the emerging Christian community and that the plague sparked the persecution of Christians. Yet it is the Christian spirit of service that stands out during this plague also. In fact, the ‘Great Persecution’ of Christians by the Roman Emperors came half a century later.

The Justinian plague devastated the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) during the reign of Justinian. As per the accounts of contemporary chroniclers, Procopius and John of Ephesus, 5000 to 10,000 and more died of the plague daily and the poor were particularly badly affected. Justinian is said to have distributed money from his own purse to the civilians to bury their dead. Foreigners were invited to settle in the border areas of the Empire, for example Lombards (a Germanic people) in present-day Lombardy and Arabs in Roman Syria.⁴³

None of these pandemics “point to a population or government blaming or attacking any group in society for instigating or willfully spreading an epidemic by poisoning or other means”.⁴⁴ Instead, these ancient people and rulers saw the pandemics as wrath of the gods and tried to placate them. They saw the pandemics to be caused due to naturalistic reasons and no particular group was blamed.

⁴⁰ “The Antoine Plague”, *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, https://www.ancient.eu/Antonine_Plague/

⁴¹ Cohn, n.32

⁴² Kyle Harper, “Solving the Mystery of an Ancient Roman Plague”, *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/11/solving-the-mystery-of-an-ancient-roman-plague/543528/>
Accessed 5 October 2020

⁴³ Jedwab, n.33

⁴⁴ Cohn, n.32

The Covid Pandemic: A Report on the Scapegoating of Minorities in India

There have been hundreds of epidemics in the late ancient and early medieval times but it was with the Black Death Pandemic (1348-1351) that the world witnessed for the first time⁴⁵ a religious community being blamed for the pandemic, made scapegoats, which led to their massacre and persecution on a large scale. The outbreak was unprecedented, occurred with black buboes (growth) appearing on the skin in the groin, armpits and around the ears. The disease is said to have claimed around 30 million lives in Europe and another 50 million or so worldwide.⁴⁶ Unable to comprehend the disease, the people accused the Jews of poisoning the water sources of their respective towns, and believed that the Jews were not as affected by the disease as they did not use the community water sources and they lived in areas distinctly separate from the Christians.⁴⁷ Pope Clement VI issued two Papal Bulls in 1348 that Jews cannot and should not be blamed for the pandemic appealing to the people that the Jews were also affected by the disease and dying just like the Christians. But ordinary Christians continued to blame the Jews. This can be attributed to three factors – one, an anti-Jew rhetoric already existed. Christians already accused Jews of spiritual blindness, of killing Jesus Christ, of attempting to defile the Christian mind, of being agents of the devil, and of playing a key role in the End of Days.⁴⁸ Two, in the medieval era, Jews were almost always non-citizens of the cities they lived in. City authorities could ask them to leave anytime. They could not own land and therefore had to be invited by authorities of other cities to settle there.⁴⁹ And, lastly, Charles IV, the Holy Roman Emperor was unable or unwilling to come to the aid of the Jews. In fact he made it possible for attacks on Jews to continue when he issued the order that any Jewish property seized by the people need not be returned. He allowed the city authorities to build two market places and one church on the land seized. In short, he legitimized mistreatment of Jews as it allowed local authorities to turn a blind eye.⁵⁰

Cohn maintains that the social toxins of Black Death were unique to the medieval times and to European and world history. While persecution of Jews continued through the medieval times to early modern period, pandemics were never the triggers for persecution of Jews or “others”.⁵¹

The “patterns of hatred” and “mythologies of blame” caused by pandemics changed in the nineteenth century. Hatred and rage were targeted not against minorities, Jews, or the “others” but at the dominant classes, especially medical professionals, local policemen and governors.

As far as India is concerned, there have been two significant pandemics throughout history – the Cholera Pandemics predominant throughout the nineteenth century (1817, 1829, 1852, 1863, 1881, 1896, and 1899) and the Spanish Flu (1918-19).⁵² The cholera pandemics saw entire

⁴⁵ ibid

⁴⁶ <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1534/reactions-to-plague-in-the-ancient--medieval-world/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-1348-jews-aren-t-behind-the-black-death-pope-clarifies-1.5405782>

⁴⁸ <http://sixmillioncrucifixions.com/blaming-the-jews-for-the-black-death-plague/>

⁴⁹ Jedwab, n.33

⁵⁰ Albert Winkler, “The Medieval Holocaust: The Approach of the Plague and the Destruction of Jews in Germany, 1348-1349”, BYU Scholars Archive, Brigham Young University (2005) <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1816>. Accessed on 15 September 2020

⁵¹ Samuel Cohn, “Plague and Prejudice”, *History Today*, Vol.66, Issue 3 March 2016 viewed at <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/feature/plague-and-prejudice>

⁵² Swetha G, Anantha Eashwar V M, Gopalakrishnan S, “Epidemics and Pandemics in India throughout History: A Review Article” , viewed at

villages being wiped out by the disease. The British government in India, fearing the spread of the plague to Europe introduced the Epidemic Disease Act which involved mass sanitary measures like stopping of fairs, festivals and pilgrimages, physically inspecting both male and female railway passengers, hospitalizing suspected cases, searching homes by troops to identify the sick, preventing burials or cremations unless cause of death was certified by medical officers, burning of homes or demolishing property, and so on. This triggered plague riots in India. Rather than tearing Indian societies apart, the plague united groups across class and castes and Hindus with Muslims against the British. This made the plague “very political” and provided a boost to the anti-colonial movement which was at a vital stage in its evolution.⁵³

With the Spanish Flu, the British did little for the people. It was the voluntary organizations like Ramakrishna Mission and Social Service League that came forward to distribute food and medicines. The Flu did not strike everyone equally. As the British lived in spacious homes, with servants and household staff to care for them, they were relatively untouched but the Indians living in densely populated areas were badly affected. The combined effect of government apathy and unequal impact of the flu on the British and Indians was the intensification of anti-colonial movement in India.⁵⁴

A scan of history, therefore, shows that during ancient times except for Plague of Athens when Athenians blamed the Spartans of poisoning their water reservoirs, which in any case finds mention in one line by Thucydides, there is no proof that epidemics led to scapegoating and violence against minorities. Similarly, in medieval times, apart from Black Death, when the social, economic and political climate was already anti-Jew before the pandemic, and where the Monarch’s tacit support allowed persecution of Jews to happen, all other pandemics far from dividing brought people together – be it in their suffering, in service, or against a common enemy as in the case of India. Fear of the unknown, therefore, need not necessarily lead to scapegoating and persecution of minorities and “others”; it happens when inter group tensions already exist and when governments allow it to happen.

Relevance of the Study

Scapegoating leading to discrimination and violence against one religious minority group during a pandemic is not acceptable especially in a country like India for at least three reasons: one, India is a democracy. Its Constitution grants each and every citizen rights, Freedom of Religion or Belief being one of them. Secondly, India is a multicultural / multi-religious country. The differences or diversities in India are huge which in a sense is complimentary to Indian democracy. These diversities are based on the multiple identities that exist based on language, religion, region, culture, and so on. These identities need to be recognized and celebrated. And finally,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336061202_Epidemics_and_Pandemics_in_India_throughout_History_A_Review_Article
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336061202_Epidemics_and_Pandemics_in_India_throughout_History_A_Review_Article

⁵³ <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/coronavirus-pandemics-of-the-past-1656730-2020-03-18>

⁵⁴ <https://theconversation.com/1918-flu-pandemic-killed-12-million-indians-and-british-overlords-indifference-strengthened-the-anti-colonial-movement-133605>

The Covid Pandemic: A Report on the Scapegoating of Minorities in India

India is not a theocratic state i.e. it does not have a state religion. In fact, the State is expected to treat all religions equally and keep equidistance from all religions.

However, because of the above mentioned three reasons, India is riddled with tensions. India is a democracy but within the polity there are social-cultural variations. In a multi-religious society, if one of the religions is declared the official religion it can contribute to discrimination and violence against other religious groups. But in a non-theocratic state where there are several religious groups, uniformity of law and practices is also not possible. If uniformity is imposed then it is discriminating against some group or the other.

India does not have a state religion, but the majority religious group does have coercive power and is therefore able to get its way using force or violence. This was seen in effective action in the violence meted out at Muslims and dalits for beef eating and cow slaughter. Dietary habits are related to or stem from religious beliefs and practices and the State cannot impose a law prohibiting people from eating a certain food. In the context of Covid 19, the religious variations are mainly two – the mode of worship and the rituals and practices followed. Muslims and Christians are known to have the congregational mode of worship, which is an anathema during a pandemic. Similarly, Muslims and Christians bury their dead, which again raise doubts in the minds of the majority who cremate their dead and hence destroy the virus.

Therefore, it all depends on the context i.e. the majority-minority dynamics in a particular place at a particular time. For instance, the experience in the three Christian majority states of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram will be very different from that of the Muslim majority areas like Kashmir and Lakshadweep or states with substantial Hindu, Muslim and Christian people like Goa and Kerala. Similarly, the experiences of states vary depending on the ruling dispensation. For instance, Kerala under the Communist government was lauded internationally for its effective handling of the pandemic. Its public health care system and welfare state ensured that even the poorest of poor was taken care of. Moreover, there were no reports of religious tensions or scapegoating from the state.

The present Study will therefore examine the impact of Covid 19 on freedom of religion and belief and democracy itself in India. While it is an all-India Study, it will focus on six States – Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Delhi (North); Gujarat (West); Orissa (East); and Tamil Nadu (South) – to understand the dynamics of majority-minority and the ruling dispensation.

Chapter - 2

Scapegoating by the State

Scapegoat theory refers to “the tendency to blame someone else for one’s own problems, a process that often results in feelings of prejudice towards the person or group that one is blaming. Scapegoating serves as an opportunity to explain failure or misdeeds, while maintaining one’s positive self-image.”⁵⁵ Eric Brahm defines the term scapegoat as “individuals or peoples who are symbolically or concretely made to bear responsibility for the faults or problems of others.”⁵⁶ There are four different ways in which scapegoating takes place and scapegoats are created:

1. One-on-one, in which one person blames another for something he / she or someone else did. For example, a child blaming her friend for something she did so as to avoid punishment
2. One-on-group, when one person blames a group for a problem they did not cause – wars, deaths, financial losses and other personal struggles. This form sometimes unfairly blames on racial, ethnic, religious, class or anti-immigrant biases
3. Group-on-one, when a group of people single out and blames one person for a problem. For example, when the members of a sports team blame a player for the loss of a match.
4. Group-on-group, when one group blames another for problems that all groups collectively experience; for example, the pandemic⁵⁷

The last category, group-on-group is of interest to this study. According to Eric Brahm, such scapegoating does not just happen; it involves the creation of a stark “us” v/s “them” dichotomy. It is based on real social, political, ideological, cultural or economic power struggles. The group that is scapegoated is more often less powerful and more marginalized, which makes them easy targets. The scapegoated group also tends to be a group that is somehow recognizable as distinct from others, so that group members can be easily identified and associated with the undesired situation. Also, the scapegoated group tends to pose a real threat to the other group, intentionally or unintentionally. For example, in the United States of America when the economic prospects were declining, the Whites saw the African Americans to be a threat to the increasingly scarce jobs and opportunities and lynchings against Blacks rose dramatically.

The Tablighi Jamaat: Made Scapegoats in India

The Tablighi Jamaat is one of the grassroots Islamic reform movements started by Maulana Mohammad Ilyas in 1927 in Delhi. The movement was popular in villages and among the peasants and focused on religion rather than political aspects of Islam.⁵⁸ The aim of Maulana Ilyas

⁵⁵ [Scapegoat Theory in Social Psychology - iResearchNet](#)

⁵⁶ Brahm, Eric. "Scapegoating." *Beyond Intractability*. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Posted: September 2004
<<http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/scapegoating>>

⁵⁷ Crossman, Ashley. "Definition of Scapegoat, Scapegoating, and Scapegoat Theory." ThoughtCo, Aug. 27, 2020, [thoughtco.com/scapegoat-definition-3026572](https://www.thoughtco.com/scapegoat-definition-3026572)

⁵⁸ Cri.W.P. 548/20 & Ors., Criminal Writ Petition No. 548 Of 2020, In the High Court at Bombay Appellate Side, Bench at Aurangabad, viewed at [pdf_upload-380282.pdf \(livelaw.in\)](#)

was to educate local Muslims about correct Islamic beliefs and practices and the method he adopted was to organize units of at least ten persons and send them to various villages. These Tablighi units, known as Jamaats (groups), would visit a village, invite the local Muslims to assemble in the mosque or some other meeting place, and present their message in the form of six demands – one, every Muslim must be able to recite the *shahadah* (“There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet”) in Arabic; two, a Muslim must learn how to say the *salat* (obligatory ritual prayer); three, a Muslim must know about the fundamental beliefs and practices of Islam; four, every Muslim must be respectful and polite towards fellow Muslims and show deference toward them; five, a Muslim must always inculcate honesty and sincerity in all endeavors; and six, form small groups of volunteer preachers willing to donate time and travel from place to place spreading the word of God.⁵⁹ This simple method became quite popular and the number of volunteer preachers multiplied quickly. It became easy to send the Tablighi missions all over India. The practice continues even today and has spread all through the Muslim world.

The Tablighi Jamaat has congregations around the world. Between 27 February and 1 March 2020 one such congregation took place in Malaysia. Many Indian Muslims were participants. In India, the congregation was scheduled for 8-17 March at the Nizamuddin Markaz in Delhi. Media reports have quoted government sources as saying that over 2000 foreigners had started coming to India for this event from early January itself.⁶⁰ Wikipedia, drawing from sources such as Facebook accounts and the Nizamuddin Markaz site, says that there were three events at the Markaz during March – the *Aalmi Mashwara* (international executive committee meeting) from 8-10 March, and the provincial gatherings *Andhra Pradesh jod* from 15-17 March and *Tamil Nadu jod* from 22-24 March.⁶¹ The *Aalmi Mashwara* attracted the foreign participants as well as participants from the entire country but for the provincial gatherings people from Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu and nearby areas had gathered. The Nizamuddin Markaz is the headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat and it sees steady streams of Jamaat workers throughout the year. They pass through Delhi on their way to the preaching tours as well as on their way back and the Markaz with a capacity to house 10 to 12 thousand people serves as a hostel for them.⁶²

The foreign participants entered India legally with valid visas. The Government of India allowed them, even the ones from Covid 19 hotspot countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, to enter the country, participate in the event, and also to go out of Delhi to other states. All through February and March the government was criticized for not coming out with a comprehensive plan to combat the Covid 19 crisis. On 12 February, Rahul Gandhi tweeted, “The Corona Virus is an extremely serious threat to our people and our economy. My sense is the government is not taking this threat seriously”.⁶³ On 5 March, he again tweeted “The Health Ministry saying that the Indian government has the coronavirus crisis under control is like the Captain of the Titanic telling passengers not to panic as his ship was unsinkable. It’s time the government made public an action plan backed by

⁵⁹ [Tablighī Jamā‘at - Oxford Islamic Studies Online](#)

⁶⁰ <https://www.cnbctv18.com/politics/coronavirus-events-that-led-to-evacuation-of-people-from-tablighi-jamaat-at-nizamuddin-5619791.htm>

⁶¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_Tablighi_Jamaat_COVID-19_hotspot_in_Delhi#cite_note-facebook-16

⁶² <https://thewire.in/government/delhis-nizamuddin-hotspot-coronavirus>

⁶³ <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/coronavirus-covid-19-in-india-rahul-gandhi-1646517-2020-02-14>

solid resources to tackle this crisis.”⁶⁴ But until 13 March, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare continued to maintain that the Covid 19 situation in India was not a health emergency. As tweeted by Subramanian Swamy, BJP Rajya Sabha Member, “The Tabligh mess would not have happened if foreigners were banned coming early (around February 1) and also Indians returning / coming to India were compulsory quarantined for 14 days kept in acquired hotels near the airport this mess would not have arisen. Why was this ban delayed?”⁶⁵

It was only by 10 March that the Government of India advised all passengers having travel history to China, Hong Kong, Republic of Korea, Japan, Italy, Thailand, Singapore, Iran, Malaysia, France, Spain and Germany to undergo self-imposed quarantine for a period of 14 days from the date of their arrival; and by 12 March, the Government of India suspended all visas except diplomatic and business visas till 15 April. Moreover, by the first week of March, Malaysia had identified the Tablighi Jamaat congregation there between 27 February and 1 March as a Covid 19 hotspot. In spite of this the Indian government allowed the congregation to happen in Delhi and also allowed members from Malaysia and possibly participants who had attended the Malaysian event to enter India.⁶⁶

On 16 March, the Government of Delhi issued an order that operations of all gymnasium, SPA, night clubs, theaters and weekly bazaars in the national capital territory of Delhi would be suspended till 31 March and that all gathering, social / cultural / political / academic / sports / seminar / conference / and family mass gathering (except marriages), be restricted to maximum 50 persons till 31 March.⁶⁷ The Tablighi representatives maintain that their events were over by the time the order became effective. Since the people staying at the Markaz were not attending any specific event, they took it to understand that the guidelines did not apply to them as the Markaz was effectively being used as a hostel.⁶⁸ Besides, on 16 March itself, 10 Indonesian members of the Tablighi Jamaat who had attended the event in Delhi between 8-10 March were taken into isolation in Hyderabad as one of the members showed symptoms of Covid 19. Following which, on 21 March, the Ministry of Home Affairs shared details of foreign and Indian Tablighi Jamaat workers in India with all States. But, neither the Central government nor the Delhi government tried to test or quarantine the people at the Markaz, not until 29 March.

On 22 March the Prime Minister announced Janata Curfew, which meant no public gathering would be allowed for the day. The same evening, the Chief Minister of Delhi announced lockdown till 31 March and ordered sealing of the borders of the national capital starting from 6 am on 23 March. The order also mandated all religious places of any denomination to be closed. This was followed by the imposition of the national lockdown by the Prime Minister on 24 March. According

⁶⁴ <https://twitter.com/rahulgandhi/status/1235479539666399234?lang=en>

⁶⁵ <https://twitter.com/swamy39/status/1244967429345660928?lang=en>

⁶⁶ <https://scroll.in/article/957891/tablighi-jamaat-how-did-the-government-fail-to-detect-a-coronavirus-infection-hotspot>

⁶⁷

<http://health.delhigovt.nic.in/wps/wcm/connect/4b8038004d940800a970ff982ee7a5c7/Rorder.pdf?MOD=AJPERE&Imod=-422515056&CACHEID=4b8038004d940800a970ff982ee7a5c7>

⁶⁸ Wire, n.3

to an India Today report, 1500 people left the Markaz on 23 March⁶⁹ but around 1000 people were still at the Markaz when the lockdown was imposed on 24 March.

From here on things took a bizarre turn. Reports started pouring in from different parts of the country that people who had been at the Markaz were either spotted with symptoms, tested positive or had died due to Covid 19. However, the people stranded at the Markaz were not taken away to be tested or quarantined. The Home Ministry under the central government said it was because the people at the Markaz resisted such action due to which the Home Minister was forced to send the National Security Advisor (NSA), Ajit Doval, to the Markaz to convince them to get tested and quarantined. The NSA visited the Markaz at night on 28 March. As pointed out in the Scroll report, this visit was unnecessary since the Centre had imposed a nationwide lockdown, it was well within the powers of the Centre to enforce an eviction of the Markaz and send the inmates for testing. In case there was resistance, the Delhi police is under the Union Home Ministry and hence it could easily have been enforced.⁷⁰ Similarly, the Delhi government too claims the inmates of the Markaz refused to cooperate. But, as the Markaz officials say, with a nationwide lockdown and closed borders how could the people be sent away; so, they were forced to stay. The Markaz authorities wrote to the Station House Officer (SHO), Nizamuddin on 25 March seeking vehicle pass for the people to leave the Markaz. The SHO referred them to the Sub Divisional Magistrate (SDM). They were asked by the SDM to furnish a list of names of the people who would be moving and the vehicles they would use to move out of Delhi. Once such a list was submitted, the SDM said he could not give them permission to move, they would have to stay at the Markaz.⁷¹ At the same time the news reports that came out even in reputed national dailies and magazines used language such as “113 people hiding in 8 mosques” (Zee News) or “Covid 19: 600 foreign Tablighi Jamaat workers found hiding across Delhi, and counting” (Hindustan Times); contrast this with news reports of some 200 Sikhs stuck at the Majnu ka Tila Gurudwara in Delhi and around 400 Hindu pilgrims stuck at Vaishno Devi unable to go home when the lockdown was imposed; most publications chose words such as “trapped”, “stranded” or “stuck” to describe them.⁷² The Hindi news portals and newspapers used the word *chhupe hue* to describe the members of Tablighi Jamaat found at the Markaz, meaning “hiding”. The English dailies used the word “hiding”. The insinuation of the words *chhupe hue* in Hindi and “hiding” in English is that the Muslims at the Markaz were engaged in some unlawful, even criminal activity, and were using the Mosque as a place to hide. On the other hand, the devotees stranded at the Gurudwara in Delhi and at the Temple at Vaishno Devi were described as *phanse hue* in the Hindi media meaning they were “trapped” or “stuck”. The English media also used words such as “stranded”, “trapped”, and “stuck”, which gave the impression that the Sikh and Hindu devotees were innocent people who got trapped in a bad situation by circumstances beyond their control. The psychology of the readers was to feel bad about the predicament of the Hindu and Sikh devotees whereas for the Tablighi Jamaat, they felt hatred.

⁶⁹ <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/timeline-of-nizamuddin-markaz-event-of-tablighi-jamaat-in-delhi-1661726-2020-03-31>

⁷⁰ Scroll, n.7

⁷¹ Wire, n.3

⁷² <https://scroll.in/article/958976/media-watch-how-vocabulary-was-weaponised-to-target-indian-muslims-after-the-tablighi-jamat-event>

On 29 and 30 March, the authorities started evacuating the people residing at the Markaz and shifted them to hospitals and quarantine facilities. And, finally on 31 March, the Delhi Police Crime Branch filed FIR against Maulana Saad and other members of Tablighi Jamaat under Section 3 (penalty for offence) of the Epidemic Disease Act 1897 and Sections 269 (negligent act likely to spread infection of disease), 270 (malignant act likely to spread infection of disease), 271 (disobedience to quarantine rule) and 120b (punishment of criminal conspiracy) of the IPC.

Response of the Government leading to Scapegoating

The WHO had, as early as February, released guidelines for governments, media and civil society organizations to follow to avoid stigmatization of any section of the population. “Social stigma in the context of health is the negative association between person or group of people who share certain characteristics and a specific disease.” Stigma could lead to: (a) people being labeled, stereotyped, discriminated against, treated separately, and / or experience loss of status because of perceived link with a disease; (b) negatively affect those with the disease as well as their caregivers, family, friends and communities; (c) people who don’t have the disease but share other characteristics with the group may also suffer from stigma; and (d) it can drive people to hide the illness to avoid discrimination, prevent people from seeking healthcare immediately, and discourage them from adopting healthy behaviors. Further, it said that words should be carefully used i.e. location or ethnicity should not be attached to the disease, the patients should never be referred to as ‘cases’ or ‘victims’ or ‘suspects’ or ‘people transmitting disease, unconfirmed rumors should not be repeated or shared, and ethical journalism should be practiced.

In the days following the evacuation of the Markaz, one and all of these guidelines were violated. They were violated by the government and its officials. And, soon State governments and the media joined in.

In the daily briefings on Coronavirus of the Ministry of Health, the Ministry Officials started naming the Markaz from 1 April onwards; On 2 April the Ministry spokesperson, Joint Secretary Lav Agarwal said “400 cases have been identified from these states with epidemiological linkages to this cluster [Tablighi Jamaat]. Additional testing is going on and more positive cases may get linked to this cluster”.⁷³ He proceeded to give a state-wise breakup; 84 per cent of cases in Tamil Nadu, 79 per cent in Telengana, 63 per cent in Delhi, 59 per cent in Uttar Pradesh and 61 per cent in Andhra Pradesh are traced to the Tablighi Jamaat.⁷⁴ “The only case reported in Arunachal Pradesh till now is related to the Markaz event. Also 32 of the 35 cases reported in Assam and 10 out of 12 cases from Andaman and Nicobar Islands are also linked to the same congregation.” He went on to clarify that “the reason I drew your attention to this event is to highlight that even if one person does not follow the guidelines of social distancing and lockdown, the entire country has to suffer the consequences.”⁷⁵ On 5 April, in his briefing he said “last month’s Tablighi Jamaat

⁷³ <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/apr/02/at-least-400-new-covid-19-cases-linked-to-tablighi-jamaat-event-in-delhi-says-centre-2124841.html>

⁷⁴ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/more-than-29-per-cent-of-indias-cases-can-be-attributed-to-nizamuddin-cluster-lav-agarwal/articleshow/75220647.cms?from=mdr>

⁷⁵ <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2020/04/18/30-of-covid-19-cases-in-india-are-linked-to-tablighi-jamaat-event.html>

gathering in Delhi has pushed up the doubling rate of cases in India to 4.1 days from the estimated 7.4 days.”⁷⁶ All of these statements went against the WHO guidelines as well as the Ministry of Health’s own guidelines which were issued on 8 April – “Do not label any community or area for spread of Covid 19.” It was also a departure from the Ministry’s earlier position; in the last week of March when Mr. Agarwal was asked how many soldiers and paramilitary personnel were tested positive, his reply was that all cases were equal in the eyes of the government and it did not believe in any profiling.⁷⁷ But most interestingly, Mr. Agarwal when he named the Markaz or gave state wise statistics or kept referring to the Tablighi Jamaat in connection with the rising Covid 19 infections, he was not answering to questions posed by members of the media; these were already part of his briefings. This indicates that it was a deliberate choice to announce the Tablighi Jamaat and the Nizamuddin Markaz and name them as the reason for the spread of coronavirus.

Simultaneously, a number of BJP leaders took to Twitter to take forward the narrative. The Minister for Minority Affairs, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi tweeted, “This is a Talibani crime committed by the Tablighi Jamaat. Do they know how many lives they have put on risk by this gathering? Such negligence and crime should not be forgiven and the authorities should be punished for this.”⁷⁸ Gautam Gambhir, the BJP Member of Parliament from East Delhi tweeted “What were these people gathering at Nizamuddin thinking? Is it a joke that the entire country is under lockdown? One wrong action by anyone of us can lead to a disaster of gigantic proportions! Listen to the government for heaven’s sake.”⁷⁹ B. L. Santhosh, the BJP National General Secretary, tweeted “Markaz in Nizamuddin, Delhi becomes new hot spot of coronavirus. Over 400 people there in illegal congregation of Tablighi Jamaat there.”⁸⁰ Sambit Patra who is the official spokesperson of the BJP tweeted “66 positive...this Tablighi Jamaat has single handedly damaged India as none other... should never ever NEVER EVER be pardoned!!”⁸¹ Amit Malviya, another BJP leader tweeted “Delhi’s dark underbelly is exploding! Last 3 months have seen an Islamic insurrection of sorts, first in the name of anti-CAA protests from Shaheen Bagh to Jamia, Jafferbad to Seelampur. And now the illegal gathering of the radical Tablighi Jamaat at the Markaz. It needs a fix!”⁸²

This narrative had three immediate consequences: one, until 29 March, the media which was focused on reporting on how thousands of migrant workers were streaming out of cities attempting to take long journeys home by scooter, cycle or on foot; suddenly diverted all its attention to the Tablighi Jamaat and the spike in Covid 19 positive numbers. It was favorable for the government as it diverted attention from the poorly planned lockdown which gave Indians barely four hours to prepare; it diverted attention away from the dismal health infrastructure; and it took the focus away

⁷⁶ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-number-of-cases-doubled-in-41-days-in-india-due-to-tablighi-jamaat-event-says-government/article31262700.ece>

⁷⁷ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/refrain-from-religious-profiling-of-covid-19-cases-who-in-context-of-tabligh-70262>

⁷⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=4HxAg_zh0ag

⁷⁹ <https://theprint.in/trawling-twitter/tablighi-jamaat-omar-fears-communal-fallout-gautam-gambhirs-aghast-mallyas-offer/392227/>

⁸⁰ <https://twitter.com/blsanthosh/status/1244666557365534728>

⁸¹ <https://twitter.com/sambitswaraj/status/1247949593712758784?lang=en>

⁸² <https://twitter.com/amitmalviya/status/1245083081305776128?lang=en>

from the fact that the government failed to provide adequate support to its daily wage labour and migrant workers. Secondly, several State governments taking lead from the Central government made their own comments of Tablighi Jamaat and the spread of the virus. And lastly, soon the fake news machinery swung into action with continuous streaming of fake news and rumors about not just Tablighi Jamaat spreading the virus but Muslims being anti-nationals, trying to undermine India by spreading the virus intentionally. The term “corona jihad” was used to describe Tablighi Jamaat as well as Muslims.

The State governments’ responses to the situation were varied. Several of the States took the narrative set by the Central government forward. The Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal to start with said “It was a highly irresponsible act... the world over people are dying and at this time, when all religious places are deserted, they committed such a serious violation. I appeal to all religious leaders. Whatever be one’s religion, one’s life is most precious.”⁸³ But by 2 May he retracted to say it was unfair to blame a particular community, “Coronavirus has spread all over the world. If I say that had people not come to India from outside, coronavirus outbreak would not have happened here. It is unfair to pin the blame on one individual or group.”⁸⁴ However his party members were sending out tweets like “It’s unbelievable there are people that are against criminal action against the organizers of the Tablighi Jamaat. Is there no understanding of the seriousness of the pandemic? This is not business as usual. It is not an occasion for routine whataboutery”.⁸⁵

Vijay Rupani, the Chief Minister of Gujarat pinned the blame on Tablighi Jamaat, “When the people who attended the Jamaat entered Gujarat, the Covid-19 infection spread like a forest fire. The data is proof of the same.... A large number of people from the Jamaat hid their travel history and did not cooperate with the administration. Due to this, we had to take legal actions against them.... Around 75 per cent of the cases in Ahmedabad are from 25 per cent of the geographical region. This 25 per cent is in the Walled City area, and is dominated by those who attended the Tablighi Jamaat gatherings in Delhi.”⁸⁶ Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur limited himself to asking all members of the Tablighi Jamaat who had attended the congregation at Nizamuddin to come forward for testing by 5 pm, 5 April, failing which action would be taken against them.⁸⁷ But the tweet from his party President Rajeev Bindal said, “The Centre and State governments are leaving no stone unturned in the decisive fight against the Covid-19...but some people, including Tablighi Jamaat members are moving like human bombs to thwart their efforts”.⁸⁸

In Karnataka, the Political Secretary to Chief Minister B.S. Yeddiyurappa, M.P. Renukacharya made the statement, “... one thing is true, some of those who had been to (the) congregation at Nizamuddin despite appeal made by Prime Minister Narendra Modil and (Delhi) Chief Minister

⁸³ [Coronavirus: Arvind Kejriwal calls Nizamuddin event ‘irresponsible’, says 441 are symptomatic \(scroll.in\)](#)

⁸⁴ [Unfair to pin Covid-19 blame on Tablighi Jamaat: Kejriwal at E-Agenda Aaj Tak - Coronavirus Outbreak News \(indiatoday.in\)](#)

⁸⁵ Tweet by Aam Aadmi Paty’s Akshay Marathe, The Print, n.20

⁸⁶ <https://theprint.in/india/covid-spread-like-a-forest-fire-when-tablighi-jamaat-attendees-entered-gujarat-cm-rupani/431423/>

⁸⁷ [Coronavirus | Himachal Pradesh CM asks Tablighi Jamaat members to come forward for testing - The Hindu](#)

⁸⁸ <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/national-politics/tablighi-members-moving-like-human-bombs-himachal-bjp-chief-821495.html>

Arvind Kejriwal, are purposely evading citing religious reasons.... Those who attended the congregation and have not come out for treatment and escaped, government should not protect them...it is not wrong to shoot them with a bullet.”⁸⁹ Shivraj Singh Chouhan, having just taken over as Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh after toppling the Congress government blamed the Tablighi Jamaat for the spike in cases in the State. “The problem had increased in Madhya Pradesh like the rest of the country, because of those who had returned from Markaz”. “Initially the members of Tablighi Jamaat contributed in spreading this virus. The people, who came back from this event to cities like Indore and Bhopal, transmitted this virus to others also.” On the issue of testing he said, “These are shameful acts of violating the laws and not co-operating with the government which is working for their safety. The central government has also amended the penal provisions for such acts. Such accused persons have been arrested under provisions of the National Security Act”.⁹⁰

Then there were States that outright rejected the narrative; prominent among them were Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. The Kerala Chief Minister, Pinarayi Vijayan was very categorical, “A virus has no religion and it spreads not on the basis of any religion or community. Some forces are trying to communalize the situation. They have started a virulent campaign on social media. Such attempts will not succeed in a state like Kerala”. He made it very clear that strict action would be taken against such people.⁹¹ The Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy clearly stated “We should not discriminate people as it happened that way and was not pre-meditated. We have to put up a united fight like Indians, giving no room to any caste or religion.”⁹² In fact, when his deputy, K. Naryana Swamy alluded that Andhra Pradesh would not have had more than 26 coronavirus positive cases if the Markaz participants had not brought it to the State; he apologized the same night for his comments. And, the Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray was also clear in his message “Like Covid 19 virus, there is a communal virus too. I am warning those who are spreading wrong messages to the citizens and uploading such videos even for the sake of fun. This Covid 19 virus sees no religion”.⁹³

Clearly a divide can be seen between BJP led states and non-BJP led states. Delhi is a special case; it is a Union Territory but its political administration closely resembles that of a State with its own legislature, high court, and executive council of ministers headed by a Chief Minister. Delhi is therefore jointly administered by the Centre and the local government of Delhi, which leads to tensions at times. Presently, with the BJP led NDA at the Centre and its opposition Aam Aadmi Party heading the government at Delhi, there have been several tense situations in the past. The fact that Delhi Police comes under the Central government has been a big complaint and concern for the Chief Minister.

Before the nationwide lockdown, Delhi was under the spotlight for two reasons – the anti-CAA protest at Shaheen Bagh and the Hindu-Muslim riots in North-east Delhi. Shaheen Bagh was a

⁸⁹ [BJP MLA Says Tablighi Jamaat Members Can Be 'Shot Dead' for Not Seeking Treatment \(thewire.in\)](https://thewire.in/bjp-mla-says-tablighi-jamaat-members-can-be-shot-dead-for-not-seeking-treatment)

⁹⁰ [Shivraj Chouhan targets Tablighi Jamaat again \(deccanchronicle.com\)](https://deccanchronicle.com/shivraj-chouhan-targets-tablighi-jamaat-again)

⁹¹ [‘Virus has no religion’: Pinarayi Vijayan on criticism of Tablighi Jamaat meet - india news - Hindustan Times](https://india-news-hindustan-times.com/virus-has-no-religion-pinarayi-vijayan-on-criticism-of-tablighi-jamaat-meet)

⁹² [Andhra Deputy CM apologises for remark against Tablighi Jamaat \(outlookindia.com\)](https://outlookindia.com/andhra-deputy-cm-apologises-for-remark-against-tablighi-jamaat)

⁹³ [Coronavirus Lockdown India: "Didn't Let What Happened In Delhi...": Uddhav Thackeray On Tablighi Jamaat \(ndtv.com\)](https://ndtv.com/coronavirus-lockdown-india-didnt-let-what-happened-in-delhi-uddhav-thackeray-on-tablighi-jamaat)

peaceful sit-in protest, led by women that began spontaneously after the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act in both houses of Parliament and the brutal handling of the students protesting the Act at Jamia Millia University. The protesters were mainly Muslim women but were supported by volunteers, students and professionals from Delhi. The sit-in protest entailed blocking of the Kalindi Kunj road in New Delhi. The protest lasted 101 days and came to an end when the lockdown was imposed on 24 March. Along with CAA, the protesters raised the issues of National Register of Citizens (NRC), National Population Register (NPR), police brutality, unemployment, poverty and women's safety. The Prime Minister and his government refused to acknowledge the concerns of the protesters and instead chose to depict the protesters as violent anti-nationals, which unleashed the anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Shaheen Bagh became a sore point between the Centre and Delhi government at the same time it became an election issue for the Delhi Legislative Assembly election. While the Centre blamed the Delhi government for siding with the protesters and claimed the protesters would not listen to the Centre regarding removal of the road block, Delhi government accused BJP of playing 'dirty politics' and prolonging the road blocks so that there would be public backlash at the protesters. Moreover, the BJP election promise was that the first thing they would do if they were elected to the Delhi Legislative Assembly would be to clear the road. This again was countered by AAP that if BJP could clear the road after the election, they could do it anytime.

Shaheen Bagh inspired several others protests in different parts of the country; one such protest was at Jafrabad-Seelampur in North-east Delhi. A day before President Trump's visit to India i.e. 23 February, a BJP leader from Delhi, Kapil Mishra incited the crowds and said he would give three days to the Delhi Police to clear the roads in Jafrabad. "Till US President is in India, we are leaving the area peacefully. After that we won't listen to you if the roads are not vacated by then." After this ultimatum, he led a rally of BJP supporters in the area. Similar rallies were held in other places too however, there was no violence. But the next day Muslim houses, shops, and places of worship were singled out and torched. 53 people died, many more were injured and thousands were affected. In Ashutosh Varshney's words, who is the Director of the Centre for Contemporary South Asia at Brown University, "On the whole, the Delhi riots ...is now beginning to look like a pogrom, á la Gujarat 2002 and Delhi 1984.... Mobs unleashing savage violence while the cops look away, or join the mob, instead of neutrally intervening to crush the riot."

In both instances the Delhi government came out looking as a bystander having no control over the situation. So, when the Tablighi Jamaat incident happened, The Chief Minister's initial response "it was a highly irresponsible act" seemed to be acquiescing to the BJP brand of nationalism i.e. demonization of Muslims to maintain national unity, though it may not actually have been. Finding a scapegoat in Tablighi Jamaat helped take the focus away from the mishandling of the situation by the Delhi government and acquiescing to BJP's brand of nationalism helped win popular support. And, the harm was done.

Gujarat: While it is a fact that 1500 people from Gujarat attended the Tablighi Jamaat conference in Delhi and some of them did return with infection; it is also a fact that there is complete segregation of Hindu and Muslim living areas in cities in Gujarat, Muslims are ghettoized in limited areas in three main cities – Ahmadabad, Surat and Vadodara – and Covid 19 spread with ease

in these areas. Nevertheless, there are at least two other major factors that can be attributed to the large number of Covid 19 cases in Gujarat – a) Gujarat is a highly globalised state. There is normally a huge inflow of people from abroad so also outflow of people from Gujarat for trade, business, tourism, work, or to come home. And, between second half of January and end of March too there was substantial movement to and from Gujarat. Thermal testing was done at airports and 14-days quarantine was recommended for the travelers but implementation was not thorough; and, b) Namaste Trump, the two days (24 and 25 February) mega event planned at Ahmadabad and Agra as part of President Trump’s India visit. More than 100,000 people lined up along the road from the airport to Motera Cricket Stadium, more than 100,000 people were inside the stadium; and hundreds and hundreds of artists performed at the stadium and at fifty stages set long the route taken by President Trump. However, this event was never mentioned anywhere as the ‘single source’ or ‘super spreader’. When some chatter did happen on social media, OpIndia twisted it saying “if it was indeed the Namaste Trump event that triggered the coronavirus pandemic in Ahmadabad, then one can safely assume that the overwhelming Muslim population in Ahmadabad loves Prime Minister Modi and United States President Donald Trump and well, this is indeed Achhe Din!”⁹⁴

The Chief Minister’s statement on Tablighi Jamaat takes the blame away from the state regarding the abysmal health infrastructure and delayed response to tackle the pandemic. One news report said that during 2018-19 Gujarat government spent around Rs.10,000 crore on health and family welfare, which works out to less than Rs. 5 per person in Gujarat. While the blame is taken away from the state, a discourse targeting Muslims is re-activated. His statement worsened the anti-Muslim feeling in the state.

Odisha: One of the poorer states of India, Odisha is also ravaged by natural disasters. The Chief Minister, Naveen Patnaik has been hailed for dealing with natural disasters efficiently and the State responded to Covid 19 also as a disaster and set the measures in place in time and on a wide scale. The Chief Minister’s message to the people who had returned from the Nizamuddin event was “Do not panic. I and my government are always with you. I would also like to request all the women in the state to cooperate with us for the safety of their family members”.⁹⁵ The Biju Janata Dal led by Naveen Patnaik has been in power in Odisha since 2000. His stance on communal politics can be gauged by his response to the 2008 Kandhamal violence against Christians. In 2008 BJD was in coalition with BJP and when the violence against Christians took place, BJD broke the coalition and the Chief Minister stated on the floor of the Legislative Assembly that members of RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal were involved in the violence; and 85 RSS workers, 321 VHP and 118 Bajrang Dal workers were imprisoned for 7 years.

Uttar Pradesh: As the Tablighi Jamaat incident was rolling in Delhi; the UP Chief Minister was planning the grand Ram Navami Mela at Ayodhya, the first after the Supreme Court judgment granting the Ram Janmabhoomi Temple to the Hindus. About 12 hours after the Prime Minister announced the nationwide lockdown, the UP Chief Minister was busy with the shifting of the idol of the deity Ram from a tin shed, in the space considered to be his birthplace, to a temporary

⁹⁴ <https://www.opindia.com/2020/05/namaste-trump-ahmedabad-tablighi-jamaat-coronavirus-crisis-surge-congress/>

⁹⁵ [Odisha CM appeals to Tablighi Jamaat gathering attendees to come ahead for COVID-19 test \(thestatesman.com\)](https://www.thestatesman.com/news/odisha-cm-appeals-to-tablighi-jamaat-gathering-attendees-to-come-ahead-for-covid-19-test-2020-05-24/)

structure made of bullet proof and water proof fiber glass structure 21 feet long and 15 feet wide, where it would remain till the temple was constructed. He was adamant that the Mela should continue, where hundreds of thousands of devotees congregate every day and even took a dip in the river Saryu, saying traditions must continue.

When the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) Ayodhya expressed concern about screening such large numbers of people and protecting them from infection and advised cancelling the Mela, the District Magistrate and the local MLA said cancelling was not an option. However, after the shifting of the idol the rest of the Mela did get cancelled.

And when it came to the Tablighi Jamaat incident, the UP Chief Minister said their role was “most condemnable”. The Chief Minister in fact invoked National Security Act against six people from the Tablighi Jamaat who were quarantined at the MMG District Hospital Ghaziabad on the ground that they misbehaved with hospital staff. The CM called these six men “enemies of humanity”.

Bihar: 2020 was election year for Bihar. The NDA government led by the leader of the coalition partner Janata Dal United (JDU), Nitish Kumar was aiming for his fourth term as CM. He had first come to power in 2005, with the support of BJP, on the social justice platform i.e. advocating for the interests of Other Backward Castes (OBC) besides Yadavs and for the forward castes. He promised to remove “identity” politics and replace it with politics of development, which he did. He managed to reduce corruption, ensure the growth of Bihar, in fact it surpassed other states, and also reduced violence and crime in Bihar. He was seen as a progressive leader but due to election compulsions had to join the NDA coalition. However, by the end of three terms the BJP-JDU alliance had become quite fragile.

JDU had voted along with BJP in favor of the CAA in both houses of Parliament but later on 13 January while addressing a rally the Chief Minister took a stand against CAA, NRC and NPR. On 25 February, Bihar became the first NDA state to pass a resolution against CAA in the state assembly. Analysts say it was to win the support of the minorities i.e. Muslims, Dalits and OBCs.

So, the CM and his government was not antagonistic towards the Tablighi Jamaat but strongly urged the members who had attended the Delhi convention to come forward and be quarantined and / or treated

Tamil Nadu: By the first week of April, Tamil Nadu had 621 Covid 19 positive patients and 574 of them had attended the Tablighi Jamaat event at Delhi. As early as 30 March, the Chief Minister publicly acknowledged the connection between the Covid 19 positive cases in the state to a “meeting” that took place in Delhi but did not name Tablighi Jamaat. On 31 March, the State Health Secretary while making announcement regarding the new positive cases named the Tablighi Jamaat and identified it as a cluster.⁹⁶ But within two days, the Tamil Nadu government came up with the term ‘single source’ to refer to the Covid 19 cases traced to the Tablighi Jamaat.⁹⁷ They refrained from identifying the virus to one community. Similarly, the State

⁹⁶ [Did the silence of Tamil Nadu govt on Tablighi Jamaat link prove costly for the state? | India News \(timesnownews.com\)](https://www.timesnownews.com/news/india/did-the-silence-of-tamil-nadu-govt-on-tablighi-jamaat-link-prove-costly-for-the-state?utm_source=timesnownews.com)

⁹⁷ [Tamil Nadu Government Uses A New Term — ‘Single Source’ — For Tablighi Jamaat-Linked Coronavirus Cases \(swarajyamag.com\)](https://www.swarajyamag.com/news-analysis/tamil-nadu-government-uses-a-new-term-single-source-for-tablighi-jamaat-linked-coronavirus-cases)

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Municipal Administration Minister made it clear that “stringent action will be taken against those attempting to spread rumors linking religion to the disease.”⁹⁸

The attendees of the congregation in Tamil Nadu were seen to come forward and declare themselves voluntarily. As one political observer put it the Tamil Nadu government “has been talking to the local religious leaders to help them convince the attendees to come forward. If they come out, they will not be stigmatized in the state and, hence, we saw a good turnout unlike other states.”⁹⁹

⁹⁸ [Stringent action against those linking religion with COVID-19: Tamil Nadu Ministry - The Economic Times \(indiatimes.com\)](https://www.economictimes.com/india/national/stringent-action-against-those-linking-religion-with-covid-19-tamil-nadu-ministry-the-economic-times/indiatimes.com)

⁹⁹ [Tamil Nadu is worst-hit by Tablighi Jamaat event, but also seeing men admit participation \(theprint.in\)](https://www.theprint.in/tamil-nadu-worst-hit-by-tablighi-jamaat-event-but-also-seeing-men-admit-participation/)

Chapter - 3

Role of Media

Guidelines for Covid 19 Reporting

It is universally recognized that reporting during a pandemic of the magnitude of Covid 19 is a big challenge. WHO has stressed on the need to ensure the health and safety of journalists during the pandemic, while journalists ensure that their reporting is ethical and responsible. What is ethical and responsible reporting? According to WHO, journalistic coverage of Covid 19 must be socially responsible. It should refrain from being sensationalist or alarmist; must communicate facts and truthful information on the pandemic and the response; must use reliable, scientific, truthful and verified sources; must quote scientists, researchers, public health professionals, academics and specialists in other disciplines who can clarify public concerns about the situation; must truthfully report on measures that help contain and / or mitigate the spread of the disease; must report on the jobs performed by health workers and their situation, given their critical role in responding to the epidemic; must report on patients recovering, communities taking measures to tackle the disease, or countries that have exemplary approaches; and must provide reporting that contributes to solutions.¹⁰⁰

The Ethical Journalism Network brought out the don'ts along with the dos; journalist must avoid sensationalism and scaremongering; stereotyping; ridicule or derogatory language; and speculating.¹⁰¹

In India, the HEAL Foundation brought out guidelines for media coverage, for reporters on duty, and for media houses. The President of HEAL Foundation, Shankar Raj, stressed that just as “covering war has set rules, covering a war against a pandemic also needs rules, guidelines or precedents to follow – while reporting, covering or disseminating information. These are not rules imposed from above, but ones that should come from within the journalistic fraternity. While it is easy to sensationalize stories, the media should also focus on success stories, of ordinary and extraordinary people who have gone out of the way to fight the pandemic at the local level.”¹⁰²

On 31 March, the Government of India submitted to the Supreme Court that “deliberate or inaccurate” reporting by the media, particularly web portals, would have a “serious and inevitable potential of causing panic in larger section of the society”, therefore no media outlet should be allowed to print, publish or telecast anything on the novel coronavirus “without first ascertaining the true factual position from the separate mechanism provided by the Central government”. The Supreme Court rejected the prayer of the Government of India and stated, “We expect the media [print, electronic or social] to maintain a strong sense of responsibility and ensure that unverified news capable of causing panic is not disseminated.... We do not intend to interfere with the free

¹⁰⁰ Covid 19: An Informative Guide, Advice for Journalists, World Health Organization [covid-19_adviceforjournalists_euro_eng.pdf](#)

¹⁰¹ Covid 19 Reporting Guidelines, International Media Support [IMS Covid 19 Reporting Guidelines \(mediasupport.org\)](#)

¹⁰² A Comprehensive Report on the Guidelines for Coverage and Safety of Reporters and Media Houses, [COVID-19 Guidelines for reporters and Media Houses.cdr \(upes.ac.in\)](#)

discussion about the pandemic, but direct the media refer to and publish the official version about the developments.”¹⁰³

The Supreme Court ensured freedom of Indian media during the pandemic with a rider that the media reported responsibly. The media had the international and national guidelines for reporting too, yet, when the Tablighi Jamaat incident happened, a major section of Indian media – print, electronic and social – threw ethics and responsibility away and chose to follow and further the narrative set by the government.

Response of the Media

On 30 March 2020 when the government named Tablighi Jamaat as violating the epidemics rule and being a source of spread of coronavirus, the media did not need coercion or arm twisting; it jumped right in building on the narrative set by the government machinery. The heterogeneous media landscape in India simultaneously erupted with offensive headline aimed at the Tablighi Jamaat and by extension Muslims as a whole. In a study on Whatsapp Vigilantes done by Shakuntala Banaji and Ram Bhat, which looked at the relationship between the use of WhatsApp to spread fake news and disinformation in India and the increase in lynching and associated vigilante violence in India since 2015, it was found that “WhatsApp messages work in tandem with ideas, tropes, messages and stereotypes which circulate more widely in the public domain, in family and community conversations and in mainstream media.”¹⁰⁴ So when such a message appears it appears simultaneously on social media and in mainstream news media. So, when anyone tries to verify if a whatsapp message is true or not, he finds the same news everywhere. Similarly, when a political figure or celebrity makes a hate speech or puts out something offensive on twitter or facebook, the mainstream news media picks it up and reports it as a news article. When anyone checks for the hate speech, he is bombarded with the same speech quoted by newspapers, even the reputed one. He will not pause to read the entire news item or check the context, what matters is that the hate speech is repeated over and over. This is exactly what happened post 30 March.

On 22 March, the Prime Minister announced Janata Curfew to be observed for the day. Then on 24 March he announced a complete nationwide lockdown of 21 days effective from four hours hence. There were so many issues pertaining to the impact of such a lockdown and the preparedness of the government in tackling the situation that the journalists and media should have focused on but the focus was almost entirely on the Tablighi Jamaat. Several media outlets like Zee News, Republic TV, Times Now, media houses like Amar Ujala, and news agencies like ANI, who are known to be right-leaning launched a tirade against the Muslim community using the Tablighi Jamaat as proxy.

¹⁰³ [India: Media’s Crackdown During COVID-19 Lockdown | Rights & Risks Analysis Group](#)

¹⁰⁴ Shakuntala Banaji and Ram Bhat, [WhatsApp Vigilantes: An exploration of citizen reception and circulation of WhatsApp misinformation linked to mob violence in India](#), Department of Media and Communication, London School of Economics, 2018 viewed at [Banaji whatsapp vigilantes exploration of citizen reception published.pdf \(lse.ac.uk\)](#)

Suresh Chavhanke, the head of Sudarshan News opened his show on 31 March thus: “In today’s *Bindaas Bol*, I bring you a very serious issue and appeal to the Narendra Modi government that the Tablighi Jamaat be banned. If India’s mosques are posing a threat to Indian, and human bombs carrying coronavirus are roaming around freely, wouldn’t you call it ‘corona jihad’? We should keenly monitor these jihadis and the jihadis should be strictly punished under law.”¹⁰⁵

Zee News was one of the lead hate mongers. It added ‘Jihad’ to everything; its news programmes were aimed at inciting people; and it blatantly aired fake news, all of which were exposed as fake news later. Just to cite some examples:

- Reported that Arunachal Pradesh has 11 corona virus patients who are all traced back to the Tablighi Jamaat function at Delhi. The Arunachal Pradesh Information and Public Relations department called out Zee News for the false reporting – “This is to clarify that Arunachal Pradesh has got only 1 Covid-19 positive case till date. The reporting by Zee News is false and does not carry any authenticity.”¹⁰⁶
- On 6 April, Zee News published a news report saying the medical team that was escorting the Covid 19 positive members of Tablighi Jamaat in UP were pelted with stones. The Firozabad police called the untruth; it tweeted – “You are spreading false and misleading news when neither a medical team nor any ambulance has been pelted with stones in Firozabad district. Delete your tweet immediately.” Zee News deleted its tweet and edited the report but the headline of its Facebook post continued to read Covid-19 positive Tablighi Jamaat members were pelted with stones and the post had 7200 likes and 1400 shares.¹⁰⁷
- One of its TV anchors said “In the name of religion, they have put our lives at risk”... then the anchor accused Tablighi Jamaat of taking India into the third stage of the corona virus infection.¹⁰⁸
- It played an audio clip of a nurse at Delhi’s LNJP hospital who claimed that she had been assaulted by Jamaati patients.¹⁰⁹
- On one of its TV shows in Hindi called *Taal Thok Ke*, the Chairman of the UP Shia Waqf Board, Waseem Rizvi was featured. He is known to be allied with BJP. On the show Rizvi claimed that Covid 19 was “developed” among the Tablighis and they had been sent out across India “so that maximum deaths could be executed in the country.” The anchor, Aman Chopra then asked “It is being said it was a conspiracy to turn Delhi into Italy? You know what happened in Italy, right!”¹¹⁰
- The Zee News Editor-in-Chief Sudhir Chaudhary in his show DNA ran a segment “*Zameen Jihad*” or Land Jihad which featured a chart listing the various types of jihad aimed at destroying India. He never explained who had drawn it up. The Jihad Chart he showed on screen was as follows:

¹⁰⁵ [Audit of bigotry: How Indian media vilified Tablighi Jamaat over coronavirus outbreak \(newslaundry.com\)](#)

¹⁰⁶ [Tablighi Jamaat fake news saga continues: Arunachal Pradesh government calls out Zee News for false report \(newslaundry.com\)](#)

¹⁰⁷ [Police Says Zee News Report on Medical Workers, Tablighi Jamaat Members Being Attacked Is False \(thewire.in\)](#)

¹⁰⁸ [Tablighi Jamaat brought out Republic, Zee and Times Now’s fangs that Covid-19 had withdrawn \(theprint.in\)](#)

¹⁰⁹ [Zee News, India TV, News18 India have OCD. They are still stuck on Tablighi Jamaat \(theprint.in\)](#)

¹¹⁰ Newslaundry, n.7

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- Economic Jihad: use business and trade to spread polarization
 - History Jihad: manipulate history to speak in favor of Islam
 - Media Jihad: use paid media to speak in favour of Islam
 - Films and songs Jihad: use films to glorify Mughals and mafia and use films and songs to popularize Islamic culture
 - Secularism Jihad: take the support of leftists, communists and liberals
 - Population Jihad: Marry four wives and increase the population
 - Land Jihad: encroach on land and make mosques, graveyards and madrasas on them
 - Education Jihad: build madrasas and promote Arabic
 - Victim Jihad: demand reservation, personal law etc
 - Direct Jihad: direct armed action against non-Muslims
- In another episode of *Taal Thok Ke*, Aman Chopra while reporting on PM Modi indicating a possible extension of lockdown, made a comment “when will the insolent Jamaat brigade be cured?... you understand what sort of cure they need, right?”¹¹¹
- On 24 April, Zee News published a report titled, “Kabab was served with bodily waste, the mentality of Jamaatis prevails even abroad”. The report said, “How far can you be saved from religious fundamentalism? Not just in India, but such a mentality is spread worldwide. Two youths in Britain, Mohammad Abdul Basit and Amjad Bhatti serve human bodily waste to non-Muslim customers.” Zee News had rehashed an old news item from 2015 wherein two Muslim gentlemen, Mohammad Abdul Basit and Amjad Bhatti of the Khyber Pass takeaway in Nottingham were found responsible for an outbreak of E.coli in the area. Basit and Bhatti were sentenced to four-months in jail and fined £25,000. Justice Jeremy Lea who sentenced them had said, “what was going wrong here was the poor handwashing with soap and clean water to reduce the risk of contamination.” This article received 12000 shares and 14000 likes on Facebook.¹¹²

Republic TV was another channel that spewed venom. One man who single handedly condemned the Tablighi Jamaat and by extension the entire Muslim community was Arnab Goswami. His words were: it’s a “deliberate” attempt (by Tablighi Jamaat) to undermine “my country”. On his English as well as Hindi channels, he himself would roar out, “How can one group put everyone at risk?”, “If there is one culprit for what we are going through as a nation in an aggravated manner, like it or not, it is the Tablighi Jamaat”.¹¹³ One of his opening monologues was “They made fun of our national effort. They have compromised us all, we were just winning when they did everything to defeat us. They have been spreading hate against the lockdown and told their followers to do everything possible to defy the lockdown.” He connected the “suffering citizens of India dying in ambulances from traffic jams caused by Shaheen Bagh” for months to people “now dying because of the singular determination of the Tablighi Jamaat to spread the coronavirus in our country”.¹¹⁴ In another programme on his channel, he invited some Muslim clerics for a conversation but

¹¹¹ [Goswami’s battle lesson, Liyaquat’s ‘teekhi’ debate, ‘badtameez Jamaat brigade’ on Zee News \(theprint.in\)](#)

¹¹² [Zee News Publishes Story on Incident from 2015 With False Communal Angle \(thewire.in\)](#)

¹¹³ [Arnab Goswami: India's most loved and loathed TV anchor - BBC News](#)

¹¹⁴ [Coronavirus was a test of secular nationalism. Then Tablighi Jamaat became the scapegoat \(theprint.in\)](#)

turned it into theatrics... When one of the clerics spoke, Arnab roared “*Awaaz Kam!*” (don’t raise your voice) and repeated it a few times for effect shaking his fists and then shouted “*Desh bhar mein hahakaar phailake rakkha hai aap logon ne* (You people have created mayhem all over the country)”.¹¹⁵

On 1 April the Times Now Twitter feed read “Tablighi Jamaat shares links with terror outfits”.¹¹⁶ The accompanying article said the Tablighi Jamaat has “a long history of ties with Pakistan-based banned outfits like Harkat-ul-Majahideen” and citing WikiLeaks documents claimed “some of the 9/11 al-Qaeda suspects detained by the US in Guantanamo Bay” stayed at the Jamaat’s premises in Delhi “several years ago”, and that the Tamaat is “suspected to be involved in the burning of 59 Hindu Kar Sevaks” during the 2002 Godhra riots. The Times Now TV anchor, Navika Kumar said on prime time “They have begun to target Covid warriors, doing all sorts of horrendous things which you and I cannot imagine... such an unruly lot!”¹¹⁷

India Today’s insight story titled “The Tablighi Tangle” said “Significantly, the details of the Tabligh movement in Indi are worrying. According to an estimate, since the Modi Government took over in May 2014, nearly 10,000 foreign missionaries of the Jamaat from around 100 different countries had visited India on tourist visas and then preached radical Islam in thousands of villages across Indi covering nearly 25 of the total 30 States in the country. These missionaries came in the form of ordinary tourists and so were hoodwinking Government and the system. And they were preaching in the most unlikely of places in India including Manipur and Andaman and Nicobar.”¹¹⁸

On 4 April India Today published a graphic that showed a skull cap and a face mask with a bold red virus over it saying “56 per cent of new coronavirus cases reported in India over past 72 hours can be traced to Tablighi Jamaat.”¹¹⁹

CNN News 18 host Anand Narasimhan on his show demanded why the people of the Jamaat were given “such a long rope”? “Why didn’t intelligence flag and seal the operation?”; the BJP leader in the panel, Nalin Kohli replied, “In this country there are vested interest groups that would have immediately jumped on this and claimed we are interfering in religious activity.”¹²⁰

Amar Ujala carried a news story that Tablighi Jamaat members quarantined in Saharanpur, UP misbehaved with hospital staff. “When they did not get non-vegetarian food, the Jamaatis here threw away the food and defecated in the open.” This report was widely shared and led to frenzy on social media. Saharanpur police later issued a statement that the report by Amar Ujala was “wrong and untrue” and condemned the press report.

¹¹⁵ [Tablighi Jamaat Coronavirus Hotspots: Is Media Coverage Biased? \(thequint.com\)](https://thequint.com)

¹¹⁶ [TIMES NOW on Twitter: "Report: Tablighi Jamaat shares links with terror outfits. https://t.co/38f7cHnxhg" / Twitter](https://t.co/38f7cHnxhg)

¹¹⁷ The Quint, n.17

¹¹⁸ [The Tablighi tangle - India Today Insight News](https://www.indiatoday.com)

¹¹⁹ [Rahul Kanwal on Twitter: "56% of new #CoronaVirus cases reported in India over past 72 hours can be traced back to Tablighi Jamaat. This is India's version of South Korea's Shincheonji Church of Jesus which led to 7000+ cases in that country. Jamaat responsible for 28% of India's overall cases so far. https://t.co/sfuXbdBw6H" / Twitter](https://t.co/sfuXbdBw6H)

¹²⁰ [Aaj Tak's Sardana says don't mix 'dharm' and 'bimaari' & Dharavi casualty worries Sardesai \(theprint.in\)](https://theprint.in)

Regional media houses too joined in promoting hate speech. In Karnataka, Public TV and Suvarna News broadcast reports about the members of the Tablighi Jamaat showing them in negative light – of threatening doctors and nurses of infecting them by spitting on them or touching them; making ‘exorbitant demands’ that they be provided ‘luxurious service’; Public TV referred to it as ‘rowdiness by virus-affected Jamaatis; claimed they were walking around half-naked; and Public TV went so far as to say that officials could not openly state the truth, so they were. The Tablighi Jamaat was referred to with hateful slurs like *shaitan* (devil), ‘corona criminals’, ‘tablighi virus’ and ‘corona jihad’. “These terms were amplified through constant graphics and by anchors, guests and reportage of politicians’ statements... news channels chose to highlight only those politicians who confirmed their prejudiced reporting.”¹²¹

The Hindu Business Line analyzed media reportage from 20 March to 27 April using open source media analysis platform Media Cloud and it was revealed that there were 11,074 stories published from 271 sources with the term ‘Tablighi Jamaat’ during the period, of which 94 percent were English stories that appeared in print media.¹²² At its peak, on 2 April, Media Cloud tracked 1451 news articles covering Tablighi Jamaat case. The top media source was Times of India, with 1863 stories in the five-week period. These were shared 319,674 times on Facebook. At the same time, to gauge public interest in the topic, Google Trends was used to analyse the volume of web searches for ‘Tablighi Jamaat’ for the same period and it was found that web searches on Google in India for Tablighi Jamaat closely mirrored the explosion of news stories with the same term, which goes to show that media coverage and public appeal reinforce each other.

Spreading fake news and other hate crimes using social media platforms

Slurs against Muslims spread on social media around the same time. There was an explosion of fake news about Muslims “deliberately” spreading the virus. New trending hashtags such as #CoronaJihad, #CrushTablighiSpitters, #MuslimMeaningTerrorist, and #BioJihad emerged on Twitter, which again blamed Muslims for the spread of Covid 19 in India. #CoronaJihad appeared over 300,000 times on Twitter by the beginning of April and was potentially seen by 165 million people.¹²³

A 45-second video of a restaurant employee packing food was shared with a claim that a Muslim man is spitting on the food before delivering it to customers. This video was tweeted by a Mahesh Hegde, founder of a fake news platform called Postcard News with the caption “What’s the use of Janata Curfew when we have deadly sadists like this man? Arrest this lunatic immediately.” This was retweeted over 2000 times. Roop Darak, the Telangana State spokesperson at BJP’s youth wing Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha, tweeted this viral video saying “They are spitting in

¹²¹ The Wages of Hate: Journalism in Dark Times, Campaign Against Hate Speech, September 2020,

[finalhatespeechreport_lowres.pdf \(wordpress.com\)](#)

¹²² Media Cloud analysis revealed the predominance of print media over audio and video. This is very likely an artifact of Media Cloud’s search algorithms and the fact that a small share of TV news channels’ content is available and searchable online. While this analysis is a fairly accurate description of English media published during the period, the actual volume of coverage will likely be several times higher if language sources are documented. [Tablighi Jamaat: Impact of media narratives - The Hindu BusinessLine](#)

¹²³ This is according to Equality Labs, a digital human rights group based in United States. [Fueled by social media, in India Muslims are “a convenient scapegoat” for the coronavirus - Equal Times](#)

food which we give order or purchase to eat.. Please try to avoid purchasing food from such shops. Must share”. This tweet was retweeted over 1000 times. Another BJP supporter Donam Mahajan tweeted the video saying “Just watch this video and remember that incident when Zomato’s Deepinder made a big deal out of someone refusing a delivery from a Muslim guy. There have been so many incidents that you just can’t trust them. Who wants to eat food contaminated with spit?” Her tweet was retweeted over 1200 times.

Alt news found that the video was uploaded by a YouTube channel on 27 April 2019, and it was in circulation in several countries. On 22 March 2020, a report in Gulf News said, “Abu Dhabi Public Prosecution has confirmed that a viral online video of a worker blowing into a plastic bag containing food was not shot in the UAE.” On 19 March 2020, Complain Singapore published a statement by Singapore Food Agency, “We note that the video is not new as it was posted on social media last year.... Our investigations found that there is no such food shop at the said location. Our officers also inspected eating houses and food establishments in the vicinity but did not find any stall with the same or similar names.” On 1 May 2019 a report by Feed Me, a Malaysia-based lifestyle website said, “The location of the mamak (open-aired food restaurant) remains a mystery despite the post having gone massively viral, gathering over 11,000 shares since it posted on 26 April 2019.”

Another video that became viral on social media was that of a group of Muslim men seen to be licking utensils and cutlery. The message accompanying the video was, “14 China Muslims hidden in Bihari mosque have been taken to test for corona virus by Bihari police. Erode police has caught Thailand Muslim mullahs infected with corona virus. Today Salem police has caught 11 Indonesian Muslim mullahs at Salem mosque. This video shows that they are applying and putting saliva on spoons, plates and utensils and also they are in the intention of spreading corona virus disease. Nobody knows what’s happening in the Nation.”¹²⁴ Alt News reports that a keyword search on Google, ‘Muslims licking utensils’, brings up several results including the video in circulation which is from 31 July 2018 depicting Dawoodi Bohras licking leftover food from utensils to not waste even a morsel.

Similarly, a video viral on social media was that of a Muslim gathering at Delhi’s Hazrat Nizamuddin mosque sneezing with the intention of spreading coronavirus infection. Alt News checking the authenticity of the video found it was earlier circulating in the Pakistani social media ecosystem – it was a tweet done on 30 January 2020 and before that on 29 January 2020 a Youtube channel from Pakistan uploaded it. A Google search reveals this is a sufi practice called ‘zikr’ where devotees remember God in unison. The people are actually chanting ‘Allah’.¹²⁵

Another tweet featured a cartoon of a caricatured Muslim man labeled “Corona Jihad” trying to push a Hindu off a cliff. This tweet had around 2000 retweets before it was removed for violating

¹²⁴ <https://www.altnews.in/old-unrelated-video-shared-as-muslims-licking-utensils-to-spread-coronavirus-infection/>

¹²⁵ <https://www.altnews.in/video-of-sufi-ritual-falsely-viral-as-mass-sneezing-in-nizamuddin-mosque-to-spread-coronavirus-infection/>

Twitter rules but several other cartoons linking Muslims to coronavirus that was shared by the same account with more than 15000 followers, continued to be online.¹²⁶

There were also numerous videos aimed at misleading Muslims. A Delhi-based digital lab, Voyager Infosec found more than 30,000 clips circulated in the week after 30 March. The messages discourage Muslims from exercising precautions for e.g. “Coronavirus is Allah’s NRC. It’s Allah’s wish who stays and who is summoned up” and “Covid-19 doesn’t affect Muslims”.¹²⁷

Celebrities and socially known figures are followed by hundreds of thousands of people on social media, several of them start struck and several quite impressionable. When such celebrities contribute to the hate, its impact is big. Rangoli Chandel, sister of Kangana Ranaut who is a Bollywood actress tweeted, “A Jamati died of Corona when police and doctors went to check their families they were attacked and killed, secular media, make these mullahs + secular media stand in a line and shoot them dead.... F****k the history they may call us Nazis who cares, life is more imp than fake image”.¹²⁸ Her twitter account was later suspended. Similarly, Babita Phogat, Commonwealth gold winner for wrestling, posted on her Twitter account that coronavirus was only India’s second biggest problem; the “ignorant Jamaatis” were the biggest cause of concern. Another post called Muslims “ignorant Muslim pigs”. She, however, faced backlash on Twitter itself.¹²⁹

Media in the States

Gujarat

In Gujarat, social media was rife with fake news and hate stories targeting Muslims. A message that went viral called for social and economic boycott of Muslims. It said Tablighis gathered 2500 Covid 19 positive Muslims and sent them across the country to spread the disease and warned people from buying fruits and vegetables from Muslims.¹³⁰

TV9 *Gujarati* aired a CCTV footage showing a Muslim man at a petrol pump reaching for his pocket to make a payment and dropping something on the ground. It then went on to say that the man dropped a Rs. 20 note intentionally to spread coronavirus. An ABP News anchor Vikas Bhaduria tweeted the video saying “Did he purposely drop the note or it fell by mistake? What could be his intentions?” Within days the tweet drew 2.5 lakh views and 6000 retweets.¹³¹ Alt News did a check on the footage and found that the man was partially paralyzed on his right hand, which is why the currency dropped from his hand.

¹²⁶ [Coronavirus Exacerbates Islamophobia in India | Time](#)

¹²⁷ [Surge in TikTok videos aimed at misleading Indian Muslims over coronavirus precautions - India News \(indiatoday.in\)](#)

¹²⁸ [Twitter suspends Rangoli Chandel's account for hate tweet - Movies News \(indiatoday.in\)](#)

¹²⁹ [DOTO - Documentation Of The Oppressed \(dotodatabase.com\)](#)

¹³⁰ <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/9/18549/Anti-Muslim-Racism-at-Work-Again-in-its-Cradle-7-Arrested>

¹³¹ <https://www.altnews.in/disabled-muslim-man-hounded-for-accidentally-dropping-currency-accused-of-spreading-coronavirus/>

Another video that was widely shared in Gujarat was that of a mob pelting stones at police vehicles with the claim that Muslims gathered on roads despite the existing curfew. “Look at what Muslims do after the prayers, as they gathered in hundreds. Police had to run away as they started stone pelting...”¹³² Actually, the video was of December 2019 anti-CAA protests in Ahmadabad. In another case, a mentally unsound man entered a mosque in Bhuj at around 2:20 am and sounded the *Azaan* (call for prayer) over the loudspeakers. According to the Sub Inspector of Bhuj A Division, the man announced he was the “king of Kutch” and people should wake up and come out of their houses with their weapons.”¹³³ The police arrested the man later. However, OplIndia, the right wing news portal reported it as the mosque authorities had call the community members to come out with their weapons. The news item deliberately left out the Police report about the mentally unstable man.

On 1 April, a confidential letter from the special branch of Ahmadabad Police emerged on social media. The post read “2500 Tablighi Jamaat workers had attended the Nizamuddin Markaz event in Delhi and have been confirmed positive for coronavirus and the workers have entered various states of India to spread the disease which is a terror act. All Hindu brothers are requested not to buy any fruit or vegetable from Muslim vendors in their respective areas as they might be infected.” The social media post looked as if the Ahmadabad Police was circulating hate speech against a minority community. But a civil engineer running a computer repair shop in Vadodara had morphed an internal confidential letter of the Special Branch which was meant to warn police stations of a hate message.¹³⁴

Some social media messages went to the extent of blaming Muslims for the India-Pakistan ceasefire violation: “*Ye jo attacks ho rahe hain, wo sajish lag rahe hain kuchh corona infected ko ghusane ki jugaad to nahin hai, corona jihad ki agli installment bhejne ki.*” Another warned Hindus to stay united against corona jihad: “As Al Qaeda in a letter urged Indian Muslims to unite, gather arms and wage jihad against India, Hindus need to remain united and safe as they have already started with corona jihad. Next could be anything.”

On 10 April the news magazine *Desh Gujarat* reported the Gujarat DGP Shivanand Jha saying that cyber cell of the Gujarat police had blocked 165 accounts on various social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok across the State.¹³⁵ On 28 April, the Times of India reported the Ahmadabad cyber police station had written to the various service providers to block another 323 social media accounts from across the State for spreading rumors and hate

¹³² <https://factly.in/an-old-video-is-being-falsely-shared-as-muslims-gathered-on-roads-despite-the-existing-curfew/>

¹³³ [Gujarat: Mentally unstable man gives untimely azan at Bhuj Mosque, Arrested. - OplIndia uses the incident to spread Islamophobia - Media Scanner](https://www.oplindia.com/news/gujarat-mentally-unstable-man-gives-untimely-azan-at-bhuj-mosque-arrested-oplindia-uses-the-incident-to-spread-islamophobia-media-scanner)

¹³⁴ <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/ahmedabad/man-held-for-morphing-confidential-letter-of-ahmedabad-coronavirus-police-6357008/>, <https://thecognate.com/vadodara-man-arrested-for-editing-police-letter-saying-tablighis-are-spreading-coronavirus-that-muslims-should-be-boycotted/>, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/man-who-edited-special-branch-letter-arrested-in-vadodara/articleshow/75073444.cms#:~:text=Ahmedabad%3A%20Cybercrime%20leuths%20on%20Thursday,%E2%80%9COn%20March%2013%2C%202020%20%E2%80%94>

¹³⁵ <https://www.deshgujarat.com/2020/04/10/165-social-media-accounts-blocked-in-gujarat-since-march-21st-dgp/>

messages – 263 Facebook accounts, 55 Twitter accounts, 3 Instagram accounts and one account each of WhatsApp and YouTube.¹³⁶ On 4 May, the Economic Times quoted DGP Shivanand Jha that 623 FIRs had been lodged against social media users spreading fake news or rumors; 1302 people had been arrested, and 575 social media accounts had been suspended.¹³⁷

Odisha

In Odisha, there are no reports in the media calling the Tablighi Jamaat jihadis or any other names. News headlines read *Superspreader Scare: Rourkela's Sector 16 declared as containment zone*¹³⁸; *Covid 19 'Super Spreader' infects over 100 in Rourkela, two areas declared containment zone*¹³⁹; the news reports always mentioned "minority community" never "Muslim". But the social media venom against Muslims could not be curtailed.

Delhi

Delhi had experienced one of its worst communal clashes just before the nationwide lockdown. A charge sheet filed in June 2020 revealed how WhatsApp was used to mobilize crowds and organize deadly acts of violence. The Delhi Police Additional PRO Anil Mittal said, "During the investigation of these cases, it was found that during the peak rioting, a WhatsApp group was created in the intervening night of 25/26 February 2020 which had 125 members. Two active members of this WhatsApp group were located and joined in the investigation." It was revealed that:

- The WhatsApp group started as Kattar Hindu Ekta, then changed its name to Hindu Ekta Zindabad. It changed names twice again to Hindu Unity and Hindu Ekta Group. But the members were the same
- Messages of violence, murder, rape were posted with a strong sense of pride
- One post on 25 February read "I have been to Ganga Vihar, Gokul Puri, Jhoripur. And burst open 23 mullahs heads
- 25 February – Brothers, people from RSS have come here to support us in Brijpuri
- 26 February – We heard that mullahs are now entering lane number 4, Bhagirathi Vihat. I request all Hindu brothers to be prepared, take full precautions and tear them apart
- The Mullanis (slur used for Muslim women) sitting outside the mosque...rape them
- Rape their mothers
- Now whatever has to happen, will happen. But don't leave any mullahs – kill them

After the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) violence, Jamia Milia Islamia (JMI) violence, anti-CAA protests and the Delhi riots, Covid 19 did present Delhi with an opportunity for "collective healing of partisan wounds".¹⁴⁰ Corona was a common enemy and everyone could unite through

¹³⁶ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/cops-move-to-block-323-social-media-ids/articleshow/75416740.cms>

¹³⁷ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/gujarat-activists-take-legal-route-to-fight-hate-on-social-media/articleshow/75526557.cms?from=mdr>

¹³⁸ <https://kalingatv.com/state/superspreader-scare-rourkelas-sector-16-declared-as-containment-zone/>

¹³⁹ <https://odishabytes.com/covid-19-super-spreader-infects-over-100-in-rourkela-two-areas-declared-containment-zone/>

¹⁴⁰ [Coronavirus was a test of secular nationalism. Then Tablighi Jamaat became the scapegoat \(theprint.in\)](https://theprint.in/coronavirus-was-a-test-of-secular-nationalism-then-tablighi-jamaat-became-the-scapegoat/)

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shared efforts and understanding and fight the common enemy. But as has happened so many times in the recent years, Indian nationalism failed to play that unifying role. In fact, when the Tablighi Jamaat incident happened the feeling of nationalism was rallied around hatred against Muslims.

As of 16 May 2020, 102 fake news and 28 incidents of violence against Muslims because of hate speech on social media were identified.¹⁴¹

The Delhi Chief Minister became a victim as well as perpetrator of such fake news. On April 18, the Chief Minister gave a 10-minute speech on the coronavirus situation in New Delhi. It was also live-streamed on YouTube. In his speech, the CM pointed out that some people in coronavirus hotspots area continue to step out on streets and visit their neighbours. He said in Hindi, “Yesterday in a containment zone at Jahangirpuri, 26 members from one community tested positive for corona... all members are from one family. Their homes were next to each other — thus they went to each other’s homes despite containment.” This fake news was doing the rounds on social media. The Municipal Councillor later clarified that the 31-member list did not include a 26-member family. “I’m not sure why CM Kejriwal felt the need to highlight the 26-member family despite the data collected shows no such family.”¹⁴²

Delhi University teachers were found posting hate messages on the DU Teachers Facebook page. The Delhi Minorities Commission noticed these messages and filed a complaint with the Vice Chancellor of Delhi University. Some of their messages read – “Muslims should be put in gas chambers”, “doctors should not treat them”, Muslims were equated to pigs, “doctors should refuse to visit such areas, block them in their residential area, and let them die for their God, nonsense”. In the words of the Commission, “We find this very disturbing that such elements should be ‘teaching’ in a prestigious university like yours.”¹⁴³

Videos of hate and violence were also widely circulated over social media. A 45-seconds video of a vegetable vendor being beaten up by four people was shared over and over on Facebook and Twitter. The vendor was asked to produce an identity card and state his name. He responded that he did not have an ID card at that moment and that his name is Mohammad Saleem. Thereafter, Saleem was abused and hit with a stick. The man hitting Saleem said, “You people are doing jihad.” All the men in the video, including Saleem, are wearing masks. The video came up first on the Facebook page FekuExpress2.0, and received 1,200 shares and over 30,000 views. Alt News did a keyframe analysis of the video and spotted the number plate of a bike at the two-second mark. “We looked up DL 9S BX 9250 on the national motor registry and found that the vehicle’s registration is from New Delhi. At the 47-second mark, we spotted an advertisement for a spoken English centre along with the phone number 98715 42848 on the wall on the right-hand side. Using this as a clue, Alt News performed a keyword search on Google and found English Mania in Badarpur, South East Delhi”.¹⁴⁴

The West Delhi MP, Parvesh Verma, posted a video on his Twitter account with the message, “Does any religion permit this kind of behavior in the wake of coronavirus? Lockdown and social

¹⁴¹ [India: Aftermath of hateful Islamophobic Campaign and Fake news amidst Corona virus Pandemic - Media Scanner](#)

¹⁴² [Fact-check: Did a 26-member Muslim family test positive in Delhi's Jahangirpuri? - Alt News](#)

¹⁴³ [Minorities commission notice to Delhi University on teachers’ social media posts - Frontline \(thehindu.com\)](#)

¹⁴⁴ [Alt News video verification: Muslim vegetable vendor assaulted in Badarpur, Delhi - Alt News](#)

distancing norms have been torn to shreds.” The video was a two-month old video showing Muslims praying in large numbers in a mosque in Delhi. Delhi Police called it fake news and tweeted “verify before posting and spreading rumors.”¹⁴⁵

Another video that was doing the rounds on Facebook was of a group of men sitting in a circle on a public road in Shastri Nagar in Delhi. The group checks each vendor passing by, asking their names, checking their Aadhar cards, and warning the ones they suspect of being Muslims from entering the colony. Then one man gives the message, “Request you all not to let any Musalman enter your lanes. Ask their names, and if he is Musalman chase them away. They are spreading a mess. Then there are shots of the group threatening and harassing vendors. Another man says he “caught” a vendor who said his name was Misra, but he was actually Muhhamed Imran. “We beat him up and chased him away.”¹⁴⁶

Tamil Nadu

On 3 April 2020, the Organiser ran a story titled, “Irresponsible Tablighi Jamaat members put entire Tamil Nadu at risk of Coronavirus”: Through the entire story, Muslims were addressed as engaging in ‘bio-jihad’. “Organiser was the first to report that a Tablighi Jamaat group had been touring all over the country and its intentions were suspicious with more and more Muslims who come in contact with them being tested positive for the deadly Covid 19. It also alluded that it was a failure on the part of state and central intelligence agencies in not keeping them under radar for violations of visa regulations.” According to the report the first Corona death in Tamil Nadu was a Madurai based Muslim who had interacted with the Tablighis. Only then the state government, police, and health personnel “came out of their slumber to understand the alleged bio-jihad. Like locking the stable door after the horse has bolted, they visited the mosques and asked the local Muslims and foreign nationals for Covid 19 check up. To their surprise most of them tested positive and many had also taken part in a similar Tablighi Jamaat congregation in Malaysia held between Feb 27 and March 1.”¹⁴⁷ The same article quoted another journalist, Anthathi Krishnan – “It looks like an intelligence failure, the group that has been rusticated all over the world but has been given a red carpet in this country. They have been handled with kid gloves by sending NSA to do negotiation and make them undergo screening. Government has found sleeping and allowed bio jihad to take over during lockdown. It is a mockery of every law abiding tax paying common man.”

TFI Post headlined “From Bihar to Tamil Nadu: Foreign Islamic preachers have caused a real headache for the authorities fighting Coronavirus”. The news article focused on the Islamic preachers from abroad, who were “residing / hiding” in Indian mosques. “Given the manner in which Covid 19 has panned out across the country, Coronavirus can spread like a wildfire in the Indian mosques”.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Dotodatabase, n.30

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ <https://www.organiser.org/Encyc/2020/4/3/Tablighi-Jamaat-members-put-entire-Tamil-Nadu-at-risk-of-Coronavirus-infection.html>

¹⁴⁸ [From Bihar to Tamil Nadu: Foreign Islamic preachers have caused a real headache for the authorities fighting Coronavirus \(tfipost.com\)](https://www.tfipost.com/From-Bihar-to-Tamil-Nadu-foreign-islamic-preachers-have-caused-a-real-headache-for-the-authorities-fighting-coronavirus)

On 29 April, OpIndia published an article with the headline, “5,450 tonnes of free rice to 2,985 mosques, 47 temples have to pay Rupees 10 crores: Tamil Nadu government order” implying that the government has issued an order to 47 temples to pay for free rice to be supplied to mosques. Picking on this news Sirf News posted a graphic the next day suggesting that Tamil Nadu government utilizes funds from temples to support mosques. Priti Gandhi, head of social media for BJP Mahila Morcha, also tweeted about this, so also a YouTuber Anshul Saxena and together their tweets were retweeted over 12,000 times. On 2 May, *The Frustrated Indian*, a right-wing propaganda website published an article saying, “This effectively means that the Tamil Nadu government, of which the BJP is an ally, is snatching funds from Hindu temples in order to cover-up their costs of appeasing the Muslims.” Alt News did a fact check on this and found that the 2020-21 policy note issued by the government which specified the cost of rice incurred in 2019 was distorted by OpIndia. Section 1.9 of the policy note said *Supply of Rice to Muslims during Ramzan* – “During Ramzan month, the government gives special allotment of raw rice to mosques for preparing ‘Nonbu Kanji’ (rice porridge). For the year 2019, 5,450.384 MT of raw rice was distributed to nearly about 2,927 mosques for Ramzan at the rate of Rs. 1 per Kg across the State that cost Rs.15.52 Crore to government exchequer.”¹⁴⁹

As the Tamil Nadu government kept warning against communalizing the Covid 19 pandemic, the print and electronic media were not as blatant as in the North of the country. However, social media was a different story. Ordinary citizens, say for instance, doctors and other medical professionals who were called to check upon and treat Muslims spewed venom on Whatsapp groups. Common slurs were, “You are called to check a Muslim man but when you reach there, four wives and hordes of children are lined up to be checked”.¹⁵⁰ Small businessmen, like a bakery owner who did business online, shared an advertisement on Whatsapp saying, “made by Jains on order. No Muslim staff.”¹⁵¹ Fake news to incite people against Muslims went viral, for example, a two-year-old photo of people offering *namaz* was tweeted with the message in Tamil which translates as, “For the past two days at the Jama Masjid Street in Vellore district, Tirupattur Town, around 700 people are praying in the middle of the road at midnight. The police are under the command of the elite and the guards at night are clapping their hands, obeying the orders of a high-ranking official not to take photos or videos on their phones. Sent from a friend of a policeman involved.”¹⁵² The picture was taken in Uttar Pradesh and was from two years ago.

While slurs and fake news aimed at Muslims did its rounds on social media, in Tamil Nadu, two other groups were also targeted – *dalits* and Christians. Tamil Nadu has had a strong Dravidian movement which fought against caste discrimination. The ‘Other Backward Castes’ who were earlier considered socially only slightly above the Dalits are today politically, economically and socially empowered. Caste dynamics today is very different in Tamil Nadu; the previously oppressed OBCs have emerged as the oppressors and the oppressed are the lowest in the social

¹⁴⁹ [Fact-check: Did TN govt direct temples to pay Rs 10cr to fund 5,450 tonne free rice to mosques? - Alt News](#)

¹⁵⁰ Research team, Chennai

¹⁵¹ [Chennai Bakery Owner Arrested for Advertising Discriminating Muslims \(ndtv.com\)](#)

¹⁵² [Two-Year Old Photo Of Namaz Peddled As Lockdown Violation \(boomlive.in\)](#)

hierarchy, the Dalits.¹⁵³ Caste based discrimination and violence happens throughout the year but it has accentuated during the pandemic.

As per the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, the SC/ST Protection Cells in the States are required to collect and publish data every month on the number of atrocities committed against SCs and STs. However, no figures have been published since the beginning of the nationwide lockdown.¹⁵⁴ Civil society organizations have, however, been carefully collecting data. According to one such organization, Evidence, “every month in Tamil Nadu there are about 100 to 125 cases filed under Atrocities act, five to seven of them being brutal.... During this lockdown period the brutal cases alone have shot up to thirty.”¹⁵⁵

TikTok seemed to be the preferred medium for posting hate videos aimed at *dalits* – one video had a woman from Tuticorin degrading *dalit* women; she was later arrested. Another TikTok video showed a man in an inebriated state saying, “Fight us if you are a real man, you Dalit dogs. You bastards are worthless in front of us. We’ll butcher you lowlives.”¹⁵⁶

The actual suffering and plight of the *dalits* went unreported though. One video that went viral was of a woman, Amsavalli, the elected President of T Konagapadi village panchayat in Salem. Her message was, “My family would be forced to commit suicide... My husband and I will die consuming poison or burn ourselves to death in front of Collectorate if we are not allowed to work. This is final, the government has to intervene”.¹⁵⁷

Christians were targeted mainly on two accounts: one proselytizing and two the Christian practice of burying their dead. Opindia attacked Christian missionaries accusing them of converting people to Christianity by providing financial aid and moral help when “people have lost their jobs, their earnings, their saving”. The article said that “Temples and Gurudwaras provide food and shelter to needy without asking their religion or trying to convert them. Why can’t Churches do so? Why do missionaries need to convert people for providing help and service? Can social service not be done without conversion?”¹⁵⁸

One case that was widely reported was that of Dr. Simon Hercules, who died of coronavirus, which he had got from his patients. He should have been buried in the Kilpauk Christian Cemetery (KCC) but as per the epidemic protocol, the Chennai Municipal Corporation (CMC) took charge and decided the body should be buried the same night and at KCC but at the CMC burial ground. When the family reached the CMC burial ground, about 200 people had gathered in protest and did not allow the burial to take place. The CMC then decided to go to its other burial ground at Velangadu. But when the ambulance with the body and the family reached there well past mid night, there were about 100 people gathered who attacked them. The ambulance driver, few CMC officials and family members were injured. Finally, Dr. Simon’s colleague, Dr. Pradeep Kumar

¹⁵³ [Tamil Nadu's Dalit saga - Frontline \(thehindu.com\)](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/dalit-saga-frontline)

¹⁵⁴ [Caste atrocities in Tamil Nadu have increased nearly fivefold in lockdown: Dalit organisations \(caravanmagazine.in\)](https://www.caravanmagazine.in/caste-atrocities-tamil-nadu-increased-nearly-fivefold-lockdown-dalit-organisations)

¹⁵⁵ Ibid

¹⁵⁶ [TikTok is fuelling India's deadly hate speech epidemic | WIRED UK](https://www.wired.co.uk/news/international/tiktok-hate-speech-india)

¹⁵⁷ [Across Tamil Nadu, Caste Violence Has Increased During the Lockdown, Say Activists \(thewire.in\)](https://www.thewire.in/news/india/caste-violence-tamil-nadu-lockdown-activists/)

¹⁵⁸ [Has social service become a way of Conversion for the Missionary mafia? \(opindia.com\)](https://www.opindia.com/has-social-service-become-a-way-of-conversion-for-the-missionary-mafia/)

managed to get the body into the ambulance with the help of the drivers and drove away. Later in the night, Dr. Pradeep came back himself to Velangadu and buried Dr. Simon. “The appearance of a big crowd within such a short time, that too at the middle of the night with sticks and stones is intriguing. The crowd did not appear to be spontaneous particularly at Venlangadu where the violence took place.”¹⁵⁹

Uttar Pradesh

Media in UP too, both print and electronic, were rife with news items aimed at sensationalizing and alienating the Muslims. Fake news appeared in national dailies as in the case of Amar Ujala and then had spiraling effect from thereon. For instance, a local media outlet, News 1 India, picked up the Saharanpur story that appeared in Amar Ujala and shared it on twitter adding that the Tablighi Jamaat members in quarantine wanted mutton biryani, not just non-vegetarian food. The Sharanpur police tweeted to this too as “wrong and untrue”.

Hate messages were posted and shared over and over. Videos with messages of boycotting Muslim vendors were rampant. BJP MLA Suresh Tiwari’s video doing the rounds said, “Keep one thing in mind, I am telling everyone openly, no one should purchase vegetables from Muslims.”¹⁶⁰ Another video showed yet another BJP MLA Brij Bhushan Rajput driving a Muslim vegetable vendor out of the residential area and warning him not to appear there again.¹⁶¹ Another video of a mob pelting stones and firing shots in a narrow alleyway was widely shared across social media platforms. The National Executive member of BJP Kisaan Morcha, Amit Dixit, shared the video claiming that it was “gangster” Akram attacking a doctor and his family in Aligarh. “Jihadi Akram is absconding,” he wrote. His tweet received close to 2,000 retweets.

Whatsapp messages targeting specific vendors giving their exact locations were widely circulated, which led to violence against them. In Lakhimpur Kheri, one fruit seller, Chand Ali was thus targeted. The message said he was spitting on the fruits in a bid to spread coronavirus. “Public surrounded me and started hitting me. Police did not help, they hit me a lot. The more I pleaded, the more they hit me”. The police later clarified, it was hot and Chand Ali carried a bottle of water with him. Some local youth came by and accused him of spitting on the watermelons and then before long whataspp messages started to circulate.¹⁶² Similarly two videos of an elderly fruit seller were widely circulated on social media – one showing him standing near his fruit cart. He is asked, “did you urinate in a bottle?” and he replies, “Don’t talk stupid”. The second video shows the man apologizing profusely. He is being made to do push-ups while the man filming says he urinated in a bottle and then sprinkled his urine on the bananas. When the old man tries to leave, the man filming shouts, “Don’t go anywhere. Stay right there. If you go, you will get a bad (beating). It’s because of you, the problem will arise. Bijnor will be destroyed.”¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ [Christians in Tamil Nadu Targeted Over Covid Positive Doctor Burial \(thecitizen.in\)](http://thecitizen.in)

¹⁶⁰ <http://sabrangindia.in/article/bjp-mla-asks-people-not-buy-vegetables-muslim-vendors>

¹⁶¹ <https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/metro/lucknow/other-news/up-charkhari-bjp-mla-brijbhushan-rajpoot-viral-video-misbehaved-with-muslim-vegetable-seller/articleshow/75444073.cms>

¹⁶² Dotodatabase, n.30

¹⁶³ Ibid

Bihar

In Bihar, the media reported about the letter sent by the Nalanda District Magistrate to the Bihar Disaster Management Department on 12 April, which said that a meeting of Tablighi Jamaat was held in a mosque campus in district headquarters Bihar Sharif on 14 and 15 March before the Delhi event. The letter said there were 640 participants at Nalanda – most of them from Bihar and some from Jharkhand. The letter also mentioned that the authorities did not have any idea if the people who attended the Nalanda meeting later attended the Delhi meeting.¹⁶⁴ The news triggered panic through the State. As in other States, a section of the traditional media as well as the social media added fuel to fire by spreading misinformation with a communal tinge. Swarajyamag reported that of the 640 who attended the Nalanda event, 277 have been traced and quarantined but 363 of the Tablighis were “missing”.¹⁶⁵ Nalanda became the focus as it was where the Tablighi Jamaat meeting happened and because it is the Chief Minister Nitish Kumar’s constituency.

In Bihar Sharief in Nalanda district, members of Bajrang Dal (youth wing of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)), started putting saffron flags on vegetable, fruits and ration shops run by Hindus. Then videos were made of the shops with the flags and were tweeted with the message that Hindus should buy what they need only from shops with the saffron flags.¹⁶⁶ The Block Development Officer (BDO) acted fast, visited the place and filed police complaints. He reasoned, “Ours is a ganga-jamuni culture, we cannot allow such things to happen in society and let them destroy communal harmony. If one side does so, another side will also do something. Hence we must stop such things.”¹⁶⁷

Hate messages came up online but the police acted fast most of the time. Ajit Singh, a BJP leader from Bihar and a Railway Board member put up “objectionable post regarding Coronavirus and the Jamaat congregation” and he was arrested by the police.¹⁶⁸ A Bajrang Dal worker posted false information on Facebook about a Muslim family having attended the Tablighi Jamaat meeting and one of the family members testing positive for Covid 19. The man was also arrested.¹⁶⁹

The government machinery was also complicit in spreading fake news. On 3 April, a Commandant of the 47th battalion of the SSB posted at Pantoka in Ramgarhwa, West Champaran district sent a letter addressed to the District Magistrate and Superintendent of Police alerting them to the “movement of suspected Corona positive Indian Muslim nationals from Nepal to India.” The DM forwarded this letter to the Bihar Home Secretary and who in turn forwarded it to the Union Home Ministry. It was later found to be fake news but neither the administration nor government gave any explanation.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁴ [How a Tablighi Jamaat meet in Nalanda in March has set off panic in Bihar \(theprint.in\)](https://theprint.in/bihar/2020/04/12/how-a-tablighi-jamaat-meet-in-nalanda-in-march-has-set-off-panic-in-bihar/)

¹⁶⁵ [After Nizamuddin, Tablighi Event In Bihar’s Nalanda Markaz Now Under Scanner; 363 Tablighis Missing, Claims Report \(swarajyamag.com\)](https://swarajyamag.com/news/after-nizamuddin-tablighi-event-in-bihar-s-nalanda-markaz-now-under-scanner-363-tablighis-missing-claims-report)

¹⁶⁶ [FIR against Bajrang Dal members for unfurling saffron flags at Hindu shops - The Hindu](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bihar/fir-against-bajrang-dal-members-for-unfurling-saffron-flags-at-hindu-shops/article26484411.ece)

¹⁶⁷ [Discrimination in times of coronavirus: Sangh boys will be Sangh boys - Telegraph India](https://www.telegraphindia.com/1200403/india-story/discrimination-in-times-of-coronavirus-sangh-boys-will-be-sangh-boys)

¹⁶⁸ [Bihar BJP Leader Arrested For Writing Objectionable Post On Coronavirus & Tablighi Jamaat \(abplive.com\)](https://abplive.com/news/bihar-bjp-leader-arrested-for-writing-objectionable-post-on-coronavirus-tablighi-jamaat/)

¹⁶⁹ [Bajrang Dal Worker Arrested in Bihar For Spreading Misinformation On Coronavirus | HW English \(hwnnews.in\)](https://www.hwnnews.in/news/bihar-bajrang-dal-worker-arrested-in-bihar-for-spreading-misinformation-on-coronavirus/)

¹⁷⁰ [» Digital platforms create counter narratives to counter hate campaigns in Bihar \(groundxero.in\)](https://groundxero.in/news/digital-platforms-create-counter-narratives-to-counter-hate-campaigns-in-bihar/)

Government – Media Nexus?

At the beginning of the nationwide lockdown, on 31 March, the Central government pleaded with the Supreme Court to suppress the freedom of opinion and expression of the media relating to Covid 19 but the Supreme Court rejected the prayer and ruled that the “media must maintain a strong sense of responsibility and ensure that unverified news capable of causing panic is not disseminated”. However, a large section of the media resorted to the opposite of “responsible reporting”. In April, a petition was filed before the Supreme Court seeking directions to curb media coverage that said the spread of coronavirus was due to the congregation at Markaz Tablighi Jamaat in Nizamuddin.¹⁷¹ The Court ruled in September that a five-member panel of distinguished citizens must be set up to lay down standards governing airing of shows that vilify a particular community.¹⁷² The response of the Central government to this was to submit an affidavit to the Court urging the Supreme Court not to embark on any exercise that would regulate electronic media to curb fake news or hate speech stating, “balancing between the journalist freedom and responsible journalism is a field already occupied either by the statutory provisions made by the Parliament or by the judgements of this court”. The Court should only venture into areas in which Parliament has not expressed its will i.e. it should first regulate the digital media.

There were several journalists and media houses that refused to be part of the scapegoating machinery and continued to report on the mismanagements, deficiencies and corruptions of the government, hunger of the migrant workers, lack of adequate PPE for doctors at hospitals, etc. The government came down heavily on these journalists and media houses. Prominent newspapers like The Hindu, The Indian Express and webportals like The Wire were targeted. On 13 May 2020, the Editors Guild of India expressed concern over “a growing pattern of misuse of criminal laws to intimidate journalists in different parts of the country.” A total of at least 55 journalists faced arrest, registration of FIRs, summons or show cause notices, physical assaults, alleged destruction of properties and threats for reportage on Covid 19 or exercising freedom of opinion and expression during the nationwide lockdown.¹⁷³ However, interestingly, when the Supreme Court was to hear a petition filed by Jamiat Ulama-I-Hind about the communal manner or reportage of media outlets, especially on TV, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting submitted an affidavit on 17 November saying the media in India had provided a “balanced and neutral perspective”. As evidence, the Ministry cited the coverage of the very media houses the government had targeted, namely, The Indian Express, The Wire and The Print. It also cited political leaders like Y. S. Jaganmohan Reddy and Sharad Pawar, both opposition leaders, to show political efforts made to prevent communalization of the virus. The Ministry pleaded with the Court that there was no need for the Court or the government to act against any channels.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ [SC to hear Tablighi Jamaat media coverage issue after 2 weeks | Business Standard News \(business-standard.com\)](#)

¹⁷² [To curb fake news and hate speech, first regulate digital media, Centre tells Supreme Court - The Economic Times \(indiatimes.com\)](#)

¹⁷³ [India: Media's Crackdown During COVID-19 Lockdown | Rights & Risks Analysis Group](#)

¹⁷⁴ [COVID, Communal Reporting and Centre's Attempt to Use Independent Media as Alibi for Inaction \(thewire.in\)](#)

In conclusion, it is clear that the media played a big role in the scapegoating of Muslims in India during the Covid 19 pandemic. The media rhetoric played repeatedly implied that Muslims were either solely or mainly to blame for the spread of corona virus. Some media sources even argued that Muslims were intentionally spreading the virus, that they had declared *jihad* against the country.

While the media played and replayed the rhetoric on Muslims, it kept quiet about other big gatherings, be it political, religious or social¹⁷⁵, which were happening all over the country at the time when the Tablighi Jamaat congregation was happening in Delhi; thereby implying by omission that only the Tablighi Jamaat had congregated during the pandemic and hence put the entire nation at risk. In fact, Zee TV, which lost no time in accusing Tablighi Jamaat and the Muslim community as a whole for “singlehandedly derailing India’s efforts” to fight Covid 19 was itself a Covid 19 hotspot and that news was conveniently omitted. On 18 May, one of the employees of Zee TV tested positive for corona virus. 51 people who came in contact with him were tested and 28 of them tested positive but Sudhir Chaudhary and Purushottam Vaishnav, the Chief Executive Officer of Zee Media maintained “the show must go on” and continued with 100 per cent attendance of employees which they had made compulsory from 1 May onwards.¹⁷⁶ The media even concealed, underreported and suppressed the Bombay High Court ruling quashing the FIRs against the foreign Tablighi Jamaat delegates. Most mainstream dailies did not report but the ones who did either published it on the inside page, gave very little space to it or gave captions that diluted the issue completely as in the case of the Hindi daily *Dainik Jagran*. English dailies like The Times of India published the story in a single column on page 1 but made a story on Dawood the lead story. Similarly, The Indian Express made “23 Congress leaders writing to Sonia Gandhi for sweeping change” its lead story. But the biggest positive story that was concealed by the media was that of Tablighi Jamaat members who had tested positive for corona virus and were later cured, came forward in huge numbers to donate their blood plasma, which contained anti-viral antibodies, which could be used to treat other patients, and which actually helped cure many affected people. This was one story which could have healed wounds and helped give the Tablighi Jamaat members a sense of penance (for lack of a better word) and helped others to ‘forgive’ and ‘forget’ and move forward. The opportunity was lost by the deliberate omission of the media.

The media had been warned about ethical and responsible reporting; guidelines were provided by international and national agencies; even the Supreme Court ruling directed them to be responsible, verify the news items and not to report anything that spread panic. But each and every guideline was violated by the Indian media be it by disclosing the group’s identity, naming the Tablighi Jamaat ‘super spreader’, sensationalizing the news, playing and replaying fake news, playing hate messages repeatedly made by politicians and other personalities, and not focusing on positive stories. In a lockdown scenario, when people are forced to stay at home, with no other means of engagement, people spent their days listening to such news. The media even went so

¹⁷⁵ See Chapter 2

¹⁷⁶ [How Zee News became a Covid-19 hotspot: Sudhir Chaudhary told employees he didn't want to hear complaints about fever and cough. He also demanded 100 percent attendance in office. \(newslandry.com\)](https://www.newslandry.com/2020/05/18/how-zee-news-became-a-covid-19-hotspot-sudhir-chaudhary-told-employees-he-didnt-want-to-hear-complaints-about-fever-and-cough-he-also-demanded-100-percent-attendance-in-office/)

far as to advocate the economic and social boycott of Muslims, which led to discriminations in countless ways and bloody attacks on Muslims in different parts of the country.

Long held stereotypes about Muslims such as them being “outsiders” having loyalty with the Muslim world was exploited by hinting at Tablighi Jamaat being a foreign organization, Tablighi Jamaat engaging in channeling illicit funds, or the international participants of the Tablighi Jamaat convention hiding in Mosques across the country and violating the visa rules, thereby painting Muslims as anti-nationals. Reports such as Muslims still assemble in Mosques to pray when all other religious groups have closed their places of worship or that Muslim youth are scaring innocent people by saying they attended the Nizamuddin Markaz event paint Muslims as religious fanatics. All in all, these reports dehumanized Muslims and presented them “through stereotypes and prejudices, thereby constructing and reiterating their supposed ‘dangerous’ difference from other religious communities”.¹⁷⁷

Similarly, multimedia digital utterances like fake news, memes, videos and digital images during the pandemic adapted the language of biological contagion to amplify notions of religious and ethnic purity or impurity.¹⁷⁸ Therefore, terms such as Corona Jihad or Bio Jihad, which had ‘Corona’ or ‘Bio’ as the biological contagion; combining them with ‘Jihad’ brought out the impurity of Islam and by implication purity of the other i.e. Hinduism. Such terms are double edged swords; they do blame Muslims for the virus but they also imply that the Muslim community have weaponized the virus and are targeting the majority i.e. the Hindu community with it. A Hyderabad-based fact checking website, Factly, identified 8-10 similar videos, translated to various Indian languages, all with the common theme of showing Muslims as “working hard to spread the virus”.¹⁷⁹ At the same time, such terms and messages completely negate the fact that the infected Tablighi Jamaat people are also people who have fallen ill and could possibly die or are dying. Yet again, the “Muslim Villain” was created to deflect from real issues.

But the biggest and most worrying consequence of such dehumanization of Muslims was that ordinary people, who otherwise kept away from the ‘Hindutva’ ideology and / or the ‘anti-Muslim’ rhetoric, in the pandemic scenario, believed what they heard and turned against friends and neighbours who were Muslims.

¹⁷⁷ N.121

¹⁷⁸ [Hate in the Time of the Virus: Covid-19, Fake News, and Islamophobia in India - Covid-19 and the Social Sciences - Social Science Research Council \(SSRC\)](#)

¹⁷⁹ Equal Times, n.23

Chapter - 4

Discrimination and Violence against Muslims

As the Indian government identified the Nizamuddin Markaz as a ‘virus hotspot’, linked more than a thousand Covid 19 positive cases to the Tablighi Jamaat, and sealed off the area; and, the Indian media and social media pinned the blame of spread of Covid 19 on the Tablighi Jamaat, said it was a deliberate attempt to undermine India, and continuously peddled hate against Muslims; overnight, Muslims were looked upon as the sole culprits responsible for the spread of Coronavirus in India.

Scapegoating, especially during a pandemic, puts minorities under special risks, which some experts have referred to, in the present case, as “coronavirus-stigma”. The UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed had expressed concern about “the upsurge in incitement to hatred, scapegoating religious or belief communities” and warned that it could lead to increase in harassment, discrimination, stigmatization and violence against such communities.¹⁸⁰

In India, the scapegoating of Muslims had serious consequences; it put the lives of ordinary citizens at risk. Some of the consequences are listed below:

Witch hunt

The government ordered a witch hunt to find the Tablighi Jamaat members who were at the Nizamuddin Markaz prior to the nationwide lockdown. There were really three categories of people the government was trying to trace – one, the people who attended the Tablighi Jamaat meeting at Nizamuddin Markaz in Delhi and / or stayed at the Markaz. They may have contacted the disease and had returned to their respective homes. The government did not have a figure for this category but was trying to trace them. This included the 1500 people who left the Markaz on 23 March, a day before the nationwide lockdown was imposed. The fact that even though the government had already noticed that the Tablighi Jamaat had, at least according to the government, broken the rules of congregation during an epidemic, yet both Central government and Delhi government allowed these 1500 people to just leave the Markaz is disturbing. Why were they not taken into quarantine centres; why were they not tested for Covid 19; and why did they not know where these people were going? Once they left the Markaz, it became a mammoth exercise for the State governments to trace them. At the same time, it was a horrendous experience for the Tablighi Jamaat members as they tried to get to their homes even as nationwide lockdown was imposed and they knew they were being hunted. The second category of people were the ones who could have come in contact with the first category of people; and the third category comprised of the foreign participants who had scattered to different parts of the country, as per the practice of the Tablighi Jamaat, to preach in Mosques among Muslims.

Across the country, police were ordered by the respective State governments as per the intimation of the Central government, to round up anyone associated with the Tablighi Jamaat. The police

¹⁸⁰ [Will COVID-19 increase religious hostilities and discrimination? | OpenGlobalRights](#)

relied on phone surveillance, SIM locations, door-to-door visits and even roped in specialized units such as anti-terrorism squads to trace them.¹⁸¹ In Uttar Pradesh, the police offered up to Rs. 10,000 for information on anyone who had attended the gathering. The son of a Tablighi Jamaat member from Tamil Nadu who had attended the gathering in Delhi recounted his family's harrowing experience to a leading newspaper. He said that a convoy of ten cars carrying police and health workers along with an ambulance came to their house. His father and six other family members, including himself, were taken away in the ambulance. They asked for some time so that they could plan as every family member was being taken away, also they needed some time to pack essentials as there were two children also in the family but they were given no time. At the hospital, the father, who had attended the gathering tested positive; he was taken to the isolation ward. The rest of the family was in the quarantine ward. They were left there with no information, not even regarding their test results. He implored that "the health teams could be more compassionate."¹⁸²

As mentioned in the WHO guidelines against scapegoating, "scapegoating can drive people to hide the illness to avoid discrimination, prevent people from seeking healthcare immediately, and discourage them from adopting healthy behaviors"; several of the Tablighi Jamaat members and the people who had come in contact with them chose to hide. Moreover, because the Muslims, especially the poor, are forced to live in ghettoized communities, they were unable to practice social distancing and hence became targets yet again for the spread of Covid 19.

A statement put out by the Indian Scientists' Response to Covid 19 group said that "the available data does not support the speculation" that the blame for the spread of coronavirus in India lies mainly with Tablighi Jamaat. They further emphasized that testing as such was low across India in the early days of the pandemic and a disproportionate number of those tested were members of Tablighi Jamaat because of the government order; and therefore, the figures were skewed.¹⁸³ When only a certain demographic was tested, positive Covid 19 cases that were either mild or asymptomatic and which would otherwise not have been qualified for testing were found. The result would have been similar if random samples were taken from anywhere in the country or any religious gatherings that were held around that time. WHO had warned against profiling and selective testing, but profiling did happen in India. Muslims were singled out, leading to their further alienation, and discrimination and violence against them. Noorul, a Muslim resident of Katpadi in Vellore district in Tamil Nadu was harassed even though he never left Katpadi. "They did not even ask me whether I had been to Delhi or not. People threw stones at me and one among them took a rod and started to hit me. Police had to intervene later."¹⁸⁴

In Orissa, the news portal *OpIndia* reported that a 35-year old man, Asid Khan, who had visited Nala Road in Rourkela which came under the containment zone, was kept in a quarantine centre in Jharsuguda district. Before his swab results could come, the man fled the centre. He was

¹⁸¹ [Tablighi Jamaat case: Story behind the Covid hotspot that set cops on a frantic nationwide hunt - The Economic Times \(indiatimes.com\)](https://www.indiatimes.com/india/in-tamil-nadu-tablighi-jamaat-members-seek-compassion-not-hostility/articleshow/75024828.cms)

¹⁸² <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/in-tamil-nadu-tablighi-jamaat-members-seek-compassion-not-hostility/articleshow/75024828.cms>

¹⁸³ [Coronavirus conspiracy theories targeting Muslims spread in India | World news | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/14/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-targeting-muslims-spread-in-india)

¹⁸⁴ [COVID will die but not hate, Muslims in TN feel after Delhi incident \(thefederal.com\)](https://www.thefederal.com/news/covid-will-die-but-not-hate-muslims-in-tn-feel-after-delhi-incident)

booked under Sections 188, 269, 270 and 271 of Indian Penal Code and an investigation was ordered by the police into his escape.¹⁸⁵ Contrast this news with another news reported in Hindustan Times that said that 150 migrant workers had fled earlier from a quarantine centre in Ganjam district. While 50 were traced and brought back, 100 could not be traced.¹⁸⁶ How is the case of Asid Khan different from the 100 migrant workers who could not be traced? But no case was filed against any one of them. Orissa post reported that this was the third such incident in the state.¹⁸⁷ In Delhi, the police randomly picked up more than 20 Muslim men from north-east Delhi on 1 April for allegedly being associated with the Tablighi Jamaat conference. None of them had been to the conference or knew anyone who had gone. They all tested negative for Covid 19. Though they tested negative twice, they were confined at the quarantine facility at Wazirabad Delhi Police Training Academy. They were not allowed to get in touch with their families; their phones were confiscated. They were kept there for over 27 days.¹⁸⁸ The Chairman of Delhi Minority Commission, Zafar-ul-Islam Khan said, “It looks like they were picked up when they were outdoors. They were detained for no reason. In their eagerness to show results, the Delhi Police caught people with a beard, pyjama and kurta. They were identified as Tablighis. Most of the people who were detained were at the wrong place at the wrong time.” One report said that in Delhi, even after being tested negative and being detained for 40 days in quarantine centres, 3013 Tablighi Jamaat members were not allowed to leave. The Delhi Health Minister said the Delhi government repeatedly sought “directions and protocols” from the Ministry of Health for the release of the 3031 people but no reply came.¹⁸⁹

One consequence of such discrimination and violence against one community is the members of the community experiencing psychological trauma. According to Sabah Siddiqui, a psychotherapist and an Assistant Professor at FLAME University in Pune, who has been holding pro-bono counseling sessions during the pandemic, such vilification of Muslims “is affecting their mental health, their way of thinking and perceiving things. There is anxiety as to what the world is going to meet us as?”¹⁹⁰ The Wire reported the case of a boy from Bihar who was in counseling because his friends, who were Hindus and friends with him from childhood, and who had supported him in the anti-CAA protests but post-Tablighi Jamaat incident had started sharing hateful messages and posts against Muslims on social media. According to the boy’s counselor, “He was ready to fight against anyone but not his own friends. This had mentally drained him.... Things can turn really ugly in your head”.¹⁹¹

At least two cases of suicide were reported – one, a Mohammad Dilshad from Bangarh village in Himachal Pradesh had given a lift on his scooter to two people who had been at the Tablighi Jamaat meet at Delhi as they were passing through his village on their way to their homes in Bilaspur. The villagers complained to the police that Dilshad had ventured out during lockdown

¹⁸⁵ <https://www.opindia.com/2020/05/odisha-man-flees-quarantine-coronavirus-jharsuguda/>

¹⁸⁶ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/covid-19-update-35-year-old-man-flees-quarantine-centre-in-odisha-police-issue-notice-seeking-public-help-in-tracing-him/story-0k7BMLpgSTQl6pyNkjcG3H.html>

¹⁸⁷ <https://www.orissapost.com/150-surat-returnees-flee-quarantine-in-ganjam-50-nabbed/>

¹⁸⁸ [Muslims with no link to Tablighi Jamaat detained by Delhi Police, sent to quarantine \(nationalheraldindia.com\)](https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/Muslims-with-no-link-to-Tablighi-Jamaat-detained-by-Delhi-Police-sent-to-quarantine)

¹⁸⁹ [India: 3,000 Muslims forced to quarantine after 40 days \(aa.com.tr\)](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/india/3000-muslims-forced-to-quarantine-after-40-days)

¹⁹⁰ [Islamophobia Is Worsening the Anxieties of the Lockdown \(thewire.in\)](https://www.thewire.in/news/india/islamophobia-is-worsening-the-anxieties-of-the-lockdown)

¹⁹¹ Ibid

and had given lift to Tablighi members. They kept taunting him. He got himself admitted in the hospital and got tested. His reports came back negative and the next day he committed suicide. His suicide note read “I am nobody’s enemy”.¹⁹² The second was a 30-year-old man who was a member of the Tablighi Jamaat. He committed suicide at a hospital in Aloka, Maharashtra. He himself had approached the hospital, got tested and admitted. But once admitted he used a blade to slit his throat in the hospital washroom.¹⁹³

The plight of the third category of Tablighi Jamaat members the police was searching, the foreigners, who had passed through the Nizamuddin Markaz was even worse. As per the Home Ministry’s directives, such foreigners were arrested across the country. They were found mainly residing in Mosques. They were charged with violation of visa conditions and various other provisions of the Penal Code and Disaster Management Act.

Violation of visa conditions was the main charge that was leveled against the foreign participants. As early as 1 April, the Gujarat High Court took it upon itself by way of a suo motu action¹⁹⁴ (“Suo Motu vs State of Gujarat”). In its order, the High Court asked the government to (a) furnish details of all the Tablighi Jamaat members who arrived in Gujarat after attending the congregation at Nizamuddin Markaz; (b) directed the Central and State governments to inform what corrective or punitive measures were being taken, or could be taken, if the participants from abroad were found to have travelled to India and travelled within India in violation of Visa rules; and, (c) citing the difference between tourist visa and missionary visa, the Court offered a solution to the government that “any person entering India on tourist visa is not permitted to indulge into any religious activities much less any religious congregation being attended and the same can be considered to be violation of visa granted to such foreigner. In case of any visa violation, the action can be taken against such foreigner upon it being brought to the notice of the authorities which includes penal proceedings as also deportation with immediate effect”.¹⁹⁵ Considering that most of the foreign Tablighi Jamaat participants had come to India on tourist visas, FIRs were filed against them for violating visa norms.

In May, petitions for quashing FIRs against the foreign participants of the Tablighi Jamaat were filed in the Madras High Court. The court’s judgement was that the State and Central government detention and prosecution of the foreign Tablighis was “unreasonable, unjust, and unfair” and directed the arrested persons to be released on bail and be placed in government camps. They were however barred from leaving the country. Bail was granted on two conditions – one, they would file an affidavit apologizing for violating the visa conditions; and two, they would not be allowed to return to India for 10 years.¹⁹⁶ By making them file such an affidavit, the Court was implying that visa norms were violated. Similarly, the Karnataka High Court also said that the visa conditions and lockdown conditions had been violated by the petitioners, but there would be no

¹⁹² <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/mohammad-dilshad-suicide-himachal-pradesh-una-covid-19-suspicion>

¹⁹³ [Tablighi Jamaat member commits suicide at Maharashtra hospital after testing positive for Covid-19 - India News \(indiatoday.in\)](#)

¹⁹⁴ relating to an action taken by a court of its own accord, without any request by the parties involved

¹⁹⁵ C/WPPIL/42/2020, *Suo Motu vs State of Gujarat* on 1 April 2020, Gujarat High Court viewed at [Suo Motu vs State Of Gujarat on 1 April, 2020 \(indiankanon.org\)](#)

¹⁹⁶ [‘Unjust and unfair’: What three High Courts have said about detentions of Tablighi Jamaat members \(scroll.in\)](#)

useful purpose in detaining them in India.¹⁹⁷ But the Bombay High Court judgement was a landmark judgement.¹⁹⁸ The Bombay High Court extended rights to foreigners by saying when visa is granted to them certain articles of the Constitution get “attracted” – articles 20, 21 and 25. “Religion is part of life at least for those who are believers and so Article 21 is applicable in case like present one.” In view of Articles 21 and 25, “after granting visa to the foreigners, the authority could not have prevented visit of the foreigners to Masjids or even the places like Markaz. Article 20 shows that the “acts which were not prohibited at the time when they were committed cannot be treated as offence and violation of law subsequently”. Therefore, there was no violation of visa conditions.

The Bombay High Court brought to light the gross injustice meted out to the foreigners and it quashed the FIRs filed against the foreigners. First of all, the Court noted that “record shows that most of these foreigners had arrived in India in February 2020, some of them had arrived in March 2020, but before 10th of March 2020”, which was well before the nationwide lockdown and when international travel had not stopped. On the issue of their visa, the Court said, “Updated provisions regarding the visa show that there is no prohibition to such foreigners to visit the religious places and to have religious discourse.”

“The record shows that many Muslims from all over the world come to India as they are attracted to the reform movement of Tablighi Jamaat and they visit aforesaid Markaz Masjid from Delhi. It is a continuous process and it appears that there are arrangements of the stay also made by the Muslims at Markaz Delhi. Considering the dates of arrival of the petitioners to India and their departure from Delhi also shows that there was no particular day fixed for congregation or any function.” Further, “the visits of these foreigners to Masjids from India is not prohibited and even discourse was not prohibited... [and], there is nothing on the record to show that this activity is prohibited permanently by the government.”

On the role of the Central government, the Court said the record showed that the FIRs filed initially were against the people who gave shelter to foreigners. FIRs against the foreigners was filed later after “getting directions from Central government.” Further, the decision taken by the Central government on 2 April 2020 to black list 950 foreigners and then again on 4 June 2020 to black list more foreigners was “unconstitutional and void as due process of law was not followed before making such declaration by the Central government.” On the issue of blaming the foreigners of bringing the infection into the country, the Court said, “considering the dates on which these persons were taken in custody, it can be said that there is more possibility that they got infected in India and they were not already infected when they arrived in India. Further, admittedly screening at the airport was done of these petitioners before allowing them to leave the airport. The entire aforesaid exercise was done by the Central Government against the persons like petitioners with presumption that they were already infected when that contention cannot be substantiated.” But the biggest vindication for the foreigners was when the Court said, “There was big propaganda in print media and electronic media against the foreigners who had come to Markaz Delhi and an attempt was made to create a picture that these foreigners were responsible

¹⁹⁷ [Bombay High Court defends constitutional rights of Tablighi followers - TheLeaflet](#)

¹⁹⁸ Cri.W.P. 548/20 & Ors., Criminal Writ Petition No. 548 Of 2020, In the High Court at Bombay Appellate Side, Bench at Aurangabad, viewed at [pdf_upload-380282.pdf \(livelaw.in\)](#)

for spreading Covid 19 virus in India. There was virtually persecution against these foreigners. A political government tries to find the scapegoat when there is pandemic or calamity and the circumstances show that there is probability that these foreigners were chosen to make them scapegoats. The aforesaid circumstances and the latest figures of infection in India show that such action against present petitioners should not have been taken. It is now high time for the concerned to repent about this action taken against the foreigners and to take some positive steps to repair the damage done by such action.”

The Court thereafter went into the issue of malice, in taking action against the Tablighi Jamaat attendees and Muslims in general, tracing it back to the CAA / NRC issue which had led the Muslims in India to feel totally insecure. It observed, “This action indirectly gave warning to Indian Muslims that action in any form and for anything can be taken against Muslims. It was indicated that even for keeping contact with Muslims of other countries, action will be taken against them. Thus, there is a smell of malice to the action taken against these foreigners and Muslims for their alleged activities. The circumstances like malice is an important consideration when relief is claimed of quashing of FIR and the case itself.”

Blame leading to violence

The repercussions of witch-hunting and profiling were immediate – from all over the country there were reports of incidents of violence against Muslims, of Mosques being attacked, private hospitals and in some cases even government hospitals refusing to treat Muslim patients, of Muslim vendors not allowed to sell their wares, of Muslims being denied relief measures, and so on.

Even in remote areas, rumors started to spread that Muslims are going from village to village intentionally spitting to spread the virus. In Gumla district, Jharkhand, such a rumor had spread. A young man was found roaming near Bhadauli village and a group of people from the village attacked him. He was seriously injured. This led to a clash and one person died.¹⁹⁹ In Bagalkot, Karnataka, two Muslim men were attacked accused of spreading coronavirus. They were made to kneel and apologize for doing so.²⁰⁰ It was shot on video and circulated on social media. In West Bengal, in Telinipara town a rumor spread that “hundreds of Muslims” had been infected with Covid 19 and they were now infecting the Hindus in the town. The rumor triggered violence between the two communities and over three days, 10 to 12 May, 45 Muslim homes were set on fire by mobs led by Hindus. The Muslims retaliated by vandalizing nine Hindu houses and shops.²⁰¹ In the National Capital Region (NCR), on the day PM asked the nation to light candles, 5 April, Mehboob Ali, a 22-year-old resident of Harewali village in Bawana was attacked. He had gone to Bhopal for a Tablighi Jamaat conference. He was there for 45 days and returned to Delhi in a truck carrying vegetables. He got off at the Azadpur vegetable market where he went through a medical examination to check for symptoms of Covid 19. After being cleared he left for his village on foot. When he reached his village, rumor spread that he had plans to spread the virus

¹⁹⁹ [Jharkhand: One dead after clashes over rumours of Muslim men spitting to spread coronavirus \(scroll.in\)](#)

²⁰⁰ [VIDEO: Two Muslim men attacked in Karnataka's Bagalkot, accused of 'spreading COVID-19' \(timesnownews.com\)](#)

²⁰¹ [Coronavirus Rumors Spark Communal Violence in India | Voice of America - English \(voanews.com\)](#)

and the villagers got together, beat him and threatened to douse him with fuel and set him on fire.²⁰² The video footage doing the rounds shows the men beating Ali demanding “tell us who else is behind this conspiracy”. He was then taken to a nearby Hindu temple and told to renounce Islam and convert to Hinduism before they would allow him to go to hospital.²⁰³ In Gurugram, a Muslim family was attacked for taking video of a procession that took to the streets as part of the lighting of candles.²⁰⁴ They accused the Muslim family of taking video to undermine the PM’s initiative and spread that people were congregating and not maintaining social distance.

A former army officer was going from Delhi to Haryana riding his motorcycle. He was stopped at an improvised barricade. As the men at the barricade identified him to be a Muslim, they grabbed him saying, “these people are spreading the coronavirus”. A rope was thrown around his neck and the noose was tightened until he fell unconscious. He was later rushed to a hospital. He has lost his ability to speak. His family is bitter and their anguish reflects in the army officer’s son’s words, “You spend 26 years serving the country and then you get treated like this just for being a Muslim.”²⁰⁵ In Delhi, a young doctor from Safdarjung Hospital and her sister, also a medical student, were assaulted when they were buying fruits outside their residence in Gautam Nagar. A man came up to them and asked them to maintain a distance of one meter from each other. When they mentioned they were doctors, the man got angry saying “you are the reason why coronavirus is spreading across the country.” He then slapped the doctor, twisted her arm and pushed her sister.²⁰⁶

Attacks on Mosques

Mosques across the country were attacked. In Gurugram, a mosque was shot at; the people arrested for the shooting said they fired to “check if anyone infected with coronavirus was hiding inside.”²⁰⁷ They said they were sitting together and discussing about the Covid 19 situation and they found the social media posts about Tablighi Jamaat; they also saw a post that men were evacuated from Dhankot Mosque. This angered them and they went to check if any more Tablighi Jamaat people were hiding in the Mosque. In Hyderabad, members of the Hindu community objected to prayers being held at a Mosque saying that the prayers were in violation of the COVID-19 social distancing rules. The local Muslims said they were observing all social distancing norms and only five people were inside the mosque praying at a time. However, later that night a mob gathered and pelted stones at the Mosque which resulted in a clash between members of both communities. Two people were injured, vehicles and houses were damaged and some women sustained injuries due to pelting of stones.²⁰⁸ In Bori sarai village of Khandwa district in Madhya Pradesh, when the call to prayer (azaan) was

²⁰² <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/23/839980029/blamed-for-coronavirus-outbreak-muslims-in-india-come-under-attack>

²⁰³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-targeting-muslims-spread-in-india>

²⁰⁴ [With coronavirus, hate crimes against India’s Muslims are spreading too \(scroll.in\)](#)

²⁰⁵ [India coronavirus: Muslims blamed for outbreak as world looks for covid-19 scapegoats - The Washington Post](#)

²⁰⁶ [Delhi: Man assaults Safdarjung doctor, sister, accuses them of spreading virus | Cities News, The Indian Express](#)

²⁰⁷ [4 nabbed for firing at mosque : The Tribune India](#)

²⁰⁸ [Dispute over social distancing led to clashes in Telangana, 25 held - india news - Hindustan Times](#)

made, a mob gathered at the mosque's doors. There were only three people in the mosque which was in accordance with the government order but the three were called outside and beaten up and verbally abused. The mob put a lock on the door of the mosque and threatened to kill anyone who came to the mosque. Apparently, an Inspector of Police was present at the scene but he took no action.²⁰⁹ Similarly, a mosque in Gorakhpur was vandalized and the muezzin was attacked for giving azaan on a loudspeaker amid lockdown. The attackers thrashed the muezzin, desecrated the Quran and also broke the sound box of the loudspeaker.²¹⁰

In Mumbai, stones were pelted at a Masjid after Isha prayers. The people caught throwing stones said that they were doing so because people were congregating in mosques for prayers whereas no such activity was allowed in temples. The Police had to fire five rounds of ammunition in order to diffuse the crowd. Vehicles around the mosque were burnt. The police barricaded the area and imposed curfew for two days.²¹¹ Similarly, in Delhi, the Delhi Minorities Commission sent a notice to the Commissioner of Delhi police saying a mosque was attacked and burnt in Alipur in North West Delhi. The Commission had received a report and a video which showed that at around 8 pm on April 3, around 200 people attacked the mosque while there were two or three persons inside. The mob attacked the mosque, ransacked it, burnt it partially and demolished some of its parts, including the roof, all the while shouting that the spread of Coronavirus can be stopped only when all the mosques were demolished.²¹²

The Prime Minister had asked people of the country to shut off their lights for nine minutes at 9 pm on Sunday 5 April 2020 and light candles instead. In Belgaum, Karnataka, a mob of men attacked two mosques in Belagavi district during this time saying that when the whole country was switching off the lights and lighting candles, the mosques should also do the same.²¹³ In Sitamrhi district in Bihar, saffron flags were found hoisted on the main gate of a Mosque and Madrasa. This Mosque is located in a Hindu majority area.²¹⁴

Access to medical facilities denied

A woman pregnant and bleeding, reached MGM hospital in Jamshedpur; she was accused of spreading coronavirus, asked to clean up her blood, and asked to leave the hospital. She lost her unborn child in the process.²¹⁵ “I was abused on the lines of my religion and was asked to wipe the blood. I could not because I was shivering. I was beaten up with slippers. I was shocked and rushed to a nursing home. There it came out that my child had died” she

²⁰⁹ [Locals forcefully stopped calling of azaan in Khandwa Madhya Pradesh : DOTO Database & Jamiat Ulema e Hind : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

²¹⁰ [Mosque vandalised, muezzin among 3 attacked in Gorakhpur village - lucknow - Hindustan Times](#)

²¹¹ [Communal Tension arises while people pray Isha Prayer in Ravir, Mumbai : Jamiat Ulema e Hind, DOTO Database : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

²¹² [Alipur Mosque Attack: Minority Panel Issues Notice to Commissioner of Delhi Police \(thewire.in\)](#)

²¹³ [COVID-19: Muslims and Muslim volunteers heckled, harassed in Karnataka | The News Minute](#)

²¹⁴ [Saffron Flag hoisted on Main Gate of Mosque : DOTO Database : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

²¹⁵ <https://mobile.twitter.com/NCWIndia/status/1251886850525900800?s=20>

wrote in her letter to the Chief Minister. In another case, a newborn child delivered in an ambulance died after a hospital in Bharatpur refused to admit a Muslim family. The husband, Irfan Khan said, "My pregnant wife had to deliver a child. She was referred from Sikri to the Janana Hospital in the district headquarter but the doctors here mentioned that we should go to Jaipur because we are Muslim. As I was taking her in the ambulance, she delivered the child but the baby died. I hold the administration responsible for my child's death."²¹⁶

Valentis Cancer hospital in Meerut issued a newspaper advertisement announcing it will not admit Muslim patients unless they produce medical certificates confirming they are free of the virus. "Hospital administration requests new Muslim patients to get themselves and their attendants checked and only come to the hospital for treatment when their report comes back negative."²¹⁷ These were the words of the advertisement in a Hindi newspaper *Dainik Jagran*, which is widely circulated in the State of UP. The explanation provided was that the measure was needed to ensure the safety and security of staff, following allegations that Muslims were hiding symptoms of the infectious diseases and in some cases attacking healthcare providers. The advertisement also appealed to 'wealthy Hindu and Jain families' to donate generously to the PM-CARES fund and said that Hindu and Jain families are known to be 'miserly'. The next day, the hospital issued a clarification in the same daily and apologized to Hindus and Jains for 'hurting their sentiments'. But there was no regret or apology to the Muslims. The National Human Rights Commission's charter of patients' right, which is adopted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, clearly says a patient cannot be denied treatment based on his / her religion or illness. The Inchauli police station House Officer, Brijesh Kumar's response was "They have not said that Muslims will not be allowed. The only objectionable part was the part about Hindus and Jains being miserly. And they have apologized for that. So it doesn't look like any action is needed at the level of the police station."²¹⁸

Similarly, the Kanpur Medical College Principal, Dr. Aarti Lalchandani in her statement to journalists on treating Muslims said, "These people are terrorists and we are giving VIP treatment to them by providing food and water. We are exhausting our resources and manpower on them. We are paying hotel bills and are wasting our kits, food, medicines on them.... Admitting them to hospitals is appeasement. Those who should be thrown in to jails are being admitted to hospitals.... Appeasement is being done for these 30 crore people at the cost of 100 crore people."²¹⁹

In Gujarat, the Ahmedabad Civil Hospital, a government-run hospital, set aside 1200 beds for coronavirus patients but created separate wards for Hindu and Muslim patients. The Medical Superintendent of the hospital, Dr. Guntant H. Rathore told the news reporters that the segregation was made as per the directive issued by the government of Gujarat. "It is a decision

²¹⁶ [Pregnant woman refused attention in government hospital, alleges Rajasthan Minister - The Hindu](#)

²¹⁷ [Indian hospital shuns Muslims as coronavirus spurs discrimination | The National \(thenationalnews.com\)](#)

²¹⁸ <https://thewire.in/communalism/fir-meerut-hospital-muslim-patients-covid-19>

²¹⁹ [Coronavirus: UP Doctor Aarti Lalchandani's Hate Rant Against Islamic Sect Tablighi Jamaat Members \(ndtv.com\)](#)

of the government and you can ask them.”²²⁰ The Deputy Chief Minister and Health Minister of Gujarat, Nitin Patel denied knowledge of such directive, “I am not aware of such a decision... Generally, there are separate wards for males and females. I will enquire about it.” The Ahmedabad Collector, K. K. Nirala also reiterated that no such instruction was given by the government. “There has been no such instruction from our side and we are not aware of any such government decision.” The Progressive Medicos and Scientists Forum (PMSF), an organization of doctors and scientists condemned such segregation of patients on the basis of religion and demanded an unconditional apology from the Gujarat Chief Minister and the dismissal of the Deputy Chief Minister.²²¹ When the international community reacted, for example, USCIRF tweeted “Such actions only help to further increase ongoing stigmatization of Muslims in India and exacerbate false rumors of Muslims spreading Covid 19”; India’s official response made by the MEA Spokesperson, Anurag Srivastava was, “As if its peremptory commentary on religious freedom in India is not enough, the USCIRF is now spreading misguided reports on the professional medical protocols followed to deal with spread of Covid 10 in India.”²²²

A 46-year old Muslim man from Vadodara had been undergoing dialysis for the past two years, three times a week, at Tri Colour Hospital. But, after the fake news, the hospital refused to treat him further. “The hospital authorities told me that I should get tested as the area I reside in was declared a red zone. Eventually, I got tested and the result of the test was negative but the hospital still refused to continue with my dialysis.” He went to several other private hospitals, but all refused to treat him. Finally he went to Sir Saiyajirao General Hospital but there was a waiting list of patients. He got one dialysis a week instead of three. Now he travels to Al-Mahmood General Hospital 53 kms away from Vadodara twice a week for his dialysis. Three other patients, all Muslims, travel with him, as they were also refused treatment by Tri Colour Hospital and Rhythm Heart Institute.²²³

In another case from Ahmedabad, a patient who had been undergoing dialysis at Zydus Hospital was made to sign a declaration stating: “I do not have even a remote association with the Tablighi Jamaat.” He is made to do this every week. The hospital claims this is necessary as it helps assure other patients that the hospital does not entertain members of Tablighi Jamaat or people related to them.²²⁴

In Rahhiyel area of Ahmedabad, the Muslim residents are scared of falling ill. A 17-year old boy had severe diarrhea and was taken to the civil hospital. The hospital insisted he first get tested for Covid 19 and come with a certificate saying he is negative only then he would be treated. The boy died four hours later.²²⁵

²²⁰ [Ahmedabad hospital splits COVID wards on faith, says govt decision | coronavirus outbreak News, The Indian Express](#)

²²¹ <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/doctors-scientists-demand-apology-from-gujarat-cm-for-discrimination-between-covid-19-patients-on-faith>

²²² ['Misguided' Report: India Slams USCIRF's Claims of Religious Segregation of Covid-19 Patients in Gujarat \(news18.com\)](#)

²²³ <https://www.newsclick.in/COVID-19-Gujarat-Negative-Muslim-Patients-Face-Discrimination-Hospitals>

²²⁴ Ibid

²²⁵ Ibid

In Bihar, a Muslim woman was denied admission as a patient in a private hospital in Patna due to her religion. A legal notice was issued to Saroj Hospital in Kankarbagh for discrimination of patients on the basis of faith. It has been stated that the sister of Shahnawaz Hasan, a Muslim patient was refused to be admitted and treated due to her religion earlier last week. A legal notice was sent to the hospital which demanded a public apology for the discrimination based on religion and stated that if such apology was not furnished, appropriate legal action would be taken. The hospital immediately issued a public apology and stated that it has never discriminated on the grounds of religion. Acknowledging that it might have shown disaffection against a particular patient, the authorities requested an apology for the same.²²⁶

In Orissa too, a patient suffering from chronic kidney disease who had been undergoing treatment at Shanti Hospital in Cuttack for the last one-and-a-half years was refused his regular dialysis when he went to the hospital in early April because he was a Muslim. The patient, Sayed Abdul Hasan died the same day. Azra Jamal, a lawyer activist, who moved the High Court seeking legal action against Shanti Hospital said the repeated news that the Tablighi Jamaat congregation in Delhi had resulted in the spread of Covid 19 at many places had resulted in fear and hatred towards the community. She sought the court's intervention for ensuring healthcare for everyone irrespective of caste, creed, colour, sex and religion.²²⁷ The Division Bench issued, "The State shall also ensure that no person is denied treatment for any ailment by any hospital of the government or private [Sector] if such facility is available with the hospital and if not available, he or she be referred to appropriate hospital where such facility is available. However, such treatment must be guided by the guidelines or instruction given by the State Government in the wake of Covid 10 pandemic." "Right to life is a fundamental right for all citizens. One should not be denied medical facilities on ground of religious identity." Khirod Rout, a senior counselor at the Orissa High Court saidt.

Micro level – everyday violence

Mohammed Zeeshan Ayyub, an actor acclaimed for his roles in films such as Ranjhanna and Article 15 expressed his anguish in an interview. He said, "Dalits have always been in a terrible state and have always been targeted, but the new thing they are doing, the specific witch-hunting of Muslims, helps you understand that while it is true I am privileged, it is not a big deal – they will lodge an FIR against me too, they can arrest me any time too. I have been made to realize in 2020 that my name and Muslim identity put me at risk. If my name comes from Arabic, my life and dignity are in danger."²²⁸

Muslims in India have been subjected to symbolic violence ever since the partition.²²⁹ It could be the way Muslims are depicted in films, as traitors, anti-nationals, pro-Pakistanis, illegal

²²⁶ [Patna hospital sent legal notice for refusing to admit Muslim patient – TwoCircles.net](https://www.two-circles.com/news/patna-hospital-sent-legal-notice-for-refusing-to-admit-muslim-patient/)

²²⁷ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/orissa-hc-orders-probe-into-denial-of-dialysis/article31473958.ece>

²²⁸ [Mohammed Zeeshan Ayyub on being an Indian Muslim during the COVID-19 pandemic: 'The communal virus has infected India's entire body' - Entertainment News, Firstpost](https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/mohammed-zeeshan-ayyub-on-being-an-indian-muslim-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-the-communal-virus-has-infected-india-s-entire-body-31473958.html)

²²⁹ Symbolic violence is the unnoticed (partly unconscious) domination that people or group of people maintain in everyday life over another group. The term was first used by the renowned sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. He used

Bangladeshis and so on, or the slurs directed at them in day-to-day life like *haramzade* (non-Hindus hence bastards) or their place is in Pakistan or *kabaristan* (graveyard). They are stigmatized on the basis of their way of life, the way they dress and their appearance, for example, their beard, skull cap, etc., their eating habits and worship patterns. But the Covid 19 scapegoating has brought it so much closer, in everyday life for Muslims in India; much viler and life threatening; and from people who were only till recently friends, neighbours, or close acquaintances.

From Bhagalpur, Bihar, the Study researcher recounts an incident – a young Muslim boy whose name no one in the locality knows but goes by the name Khuspus has been delivering fish at the door steps of the residents in the area for years. One day, during lockdown, he came with fish and the researcher was buying fish from him when a neighbour came out and said to Khuspus, “how did you come out during lockdown...we will cut you to pieces”. The boy replied, “so cut me” and then just as if nothing had happened the neighbour asked the price of the fish.

In Mumbai, the Study Director who lives in a residential society block in a respectable area had gone to the USA along with his family before the lockdown was imposed in India. When he was to return, his friend and neighbour, who along with the Study Director held official positions in the residential society and worked together well, who was like family called and asked them not to return to the India, to Mumbai and to their residence in the society. He even called the Director’s driver threatening him not to go to the airport to receive them.

Access to relief measures denied

Muslims philanthropists distributing food to migrant workers, daily wage labour and the poor were attacked saying they were deliberately passing food that was infected, and poor Muslims were denied food and other aid just because they were Muslims. In Bangalore, Zareen Taj, an activist with Swaraj Abhiyan, was distributing food to the poor along with her team. A group of men came and shouted at them accusing them of spitting on the food and spreading coronavirus. Zareen, her son, three brothers and her son’s friend were injured as the men attacked them. When she returned two days later a group of six people, different from those who confronted them earlier attacked her team members with *lathis* (sticks) and cricket bats “on the hands and head”.²³⁰

Migrant workers across the country suffered during the lockdown as they were stuck in different parts of the country without work or income. State governments did make shelter homes and food available to those who needed it; also, NGOs, self-help groups and philanthropists distributed food and other essentials. In Maharashtra, Muslim workers from West Bengal faced discrimination and humiliation when they lined up for food. In the words of one Muslim migrant worker from West Bengal, “The food is clearly organized for those in need but we are not counted in them. We are driven away after being told that we are “outsiders”. When one of us argued and demanded that food be made available to all, someone in the crowd called us Bangladeshis. We retreated immediately.” Another worker said it was humiliating, “we earned and we ate, we never had to

the term to explain cultural / social domination occurring within the everyday social habits i.e. gender violence and class domination. See <http://www.e-ir.info/2007/12/22/pierre-bourdieu-%E2%80%93-challenging-symbolic-violence-and-the-naturalisation-of-power-relations/>

²³⁰ [Volunteers distributing relief material attacked - The Hindu](#)

beg before anyone. But today we have to do that too.” They say the police is particularly harsh; they caned people who queued up for food.²³¹

Access to public spaces and livelihood opportunities denied

The people living in a slum in Bhatpara in West Bengal access drinking water from a community tap. Rukhsar Parveen, a resident of the slum says the Hindus do not allow the Muslim families to get drinking water from this community tap saying they will spread infection. The Muslim families are now drinking water from the pipes that supply non-potable water for bathing.²³²

In Kerala, a film based on the life of Variyamkunnath Kunjahammed Haji, a freedom fighter in the Malabar region of Kerala who fought the British in the early 20th Century was announced and it led to a hate campaign against the proposed film and its crew. Prithviraj, the hero to play the role had tweeted, “He stood up against an empire that ruled a quarter of the world. Etched out his own country with an army that waged a never before war against the British. Though history was burned and buried, a soldier, a patriot. A film on the man who became the face of the 1921 Malabar revolution. #Vaariyamkunnan. Filming begins in 2021 on the 100th anniversary.” Immediately the right-wing Hindutva aligned ecosystem erupted – OplIndia referred him as a ‘jihadi’ and a ‘terrorist’ in an article posted on 23 June. It accused the freedom fighter of murdering ‘thousands’ of Hindus in 1921. His reign led to destruction of ‘hundreds of Hindu temples’. The film crew was threatened saying the film will not be allowed to be shot.²³³

In Punjab State, loudspeakers at Sikh temples broadcast messages telling people not to buy milk from Muslim dairy farmers because it was infected with coronavirus.²³⁴

In Ankanahalli village in Ramanagara district in South Karnataka, it was reported that a member of Kailancha gram panchayat hired an elderly man to make an announcement to residents. The announcement was, ‘Listen, everyone! The gram panchayat is making this announcement. No sahibs (Muslims) should come into the village. No one should work for Muslims. If you do, you should pay a fine of Rs 500 to Rs 1,000.’²³⁵

In Mumbai, a man refused to take delivery of the grocery items he ordered online from a Muslim delivery agent. The man asked the delivery agent his name. When he learned the agent was Muslim, he asked his wife to return the order. The delivery man found it “very shocking and saddening that people are focusing on religion in such difficult times. I have been risking my life delivering food items to homes.”²³⁶

In Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh a Muslim civic worker, Shoaib, and his co-worker Rahul Dongar were on duty spraying sanitizer in Jamalpura area. A man came up to Shoaib and accused him of “intentionally spitting” to spread the infection. The man’s words were “[we]

²³¹ [For Bengali Muslim Migrants in Wadala, Discrimination and Hunger Go Hand in Hand \(thewire.in\)](https://thewire.in)

²³² [Bhatpara Muslims being called Corona, not allowed to collect water from municipal taps \(enewsroom.in\)](https://enewsroom.in)

²³³ <https://thewire.in/film/announcement-of-film-on-muslim-freedom-fighter-from-kerala-leads-to-hate-campaign>

²³⁴ [In India, Coronavirus Fans Religious Hatred - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com)

²³⁵ [Two booked for banning entry of Muslims in Karnataka village - The Hindu](https://www.thehindu.com)

²³⁶ [Mumbai man refuses to take grocery from Muslim delivery boy, arrested | Cities News, The Indian Express](https://www.citiesnews.com)

cannot trust one particular community because of the various media reports that show them spitting in 50 different places and spreading coronavirus... I have seen you spitting. I don't trust you people. There is one community whom nobody trusts". Shoaib and Rahul have been working as sanitation staff with the Bhopal municipal corporation for the last 12 years. They said they had never encountered such aggressive communal discrimination before.²³⁷

In Jammu, the Muslim Gujjar community who are traditionally the cattle rearers and suppliers of milk in the area say they are "facing a vilifying campaign of being coronavirus carriers and business boycott from sections of society". They say the "hate campaign" directed at them has directly impacted the livelihood of the entire community which produces more than 200,000 litres of milk daily to sell in different districts of Jammu. They are also not allowed to graze their animals in the areas they have already made annual rental payments for grazing. In the words of the President of the Dodhi Gujjar Association in Jammu, "This country runs on perceptions created by electronic media. And we have become its latest victims. Some elements in Jammu want to hurt us financially and started a campaign that all Muslims especially Gujjars are coronavirus carriers. Many people stopped buying milk from us." The Gujjars however, gave the milk free of cost to all the quarantine centres in Kathua, Samba, Jammu, Reasi and Udhampur districts.²³⁸

Kashmiri laborers living and working in Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh were attacked by a group of unidentified locals at night while they were sleeping. They beat the Kashmiris with cricket bats, hurled obscenities at them, kept calling them 'terrorists' and warned them to leave Mandi or bear the consequences. The police dismissed it as the result of a scuffle between one of the labourer and a local earlier. However, Advocate Deshraj, a lawyer living close by says, "It is a result of the hate campaign which is creating a communal divide between two communities... There is no other reason. The police are calling it an altercation, which is not the case. We have not seen such cases here before this, but what is being circulated on social media and also by certain sections in the media, has made a target out of these labourers right now. People have also circulated posters about not providing rooms to Muslims on the grounds that they are responsible for spreading the coronavirus."²³⁹

In Arunachal Pradesh, Muslim truckers were beaten up and they had to abandon their trucks and flee to neighbouring Assam. The truckers said they had just finished unloading rice at Koloriang when a group of men attacked them saying they were spreading coronavirus.²⁴⁰

²³⁷ [Bhopal: Without Proof, Muslim Sanitation Worker Accused of 'Spitting to Spread COVID-19' \(thewire.in\)](https://thewire.in/bhopal-without-proof-muslim-sanitation-worker-accused-of-spitting-to-spread-covid-19)

²³⁸ [Government assures help as J&K Gujjars face bocyott - The Economic Times \(indiatimes.com\)](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/government-assures-help-as-j-k-gujjars-face-boycott/articleshow/72444477.cms)

²³⁹ [Himachal Pradesh: Kashmiri Workers Say Communal Corona Campaign Led to Assault \(thewire.in\)](https://thewire.in/himachal-pradesh-kashmiri-workers-say-communal-corona-campaign-led-to-assault)

²⁴⁰ [Muslim truckers 'beaten up' in Arunachal; concern over supplies of essential items | Business Standard News \(business-standard.com\)](https://www.business-standard.com/news/india/muslim-truckers-beaten-up-in-arunachal-concern-over-supplies-of-essential-items-1190914.html)

In Nainital, Uttarakhand, a video which went viral on social media showed six men inquiring about the names of the fruit vendors in the area. When they found a Muslim vendor they threatened him and asked him to shut his shop and go away.²⁴¹

In Kaithal Haryana a Muslim welder's shop was set on fire by a mob. According to the welder Gayur Hasan, his son had 'liked' a Facebook post of a Muslim religious leader from Delhi. The family apparently apologized before the panchayat for this 'crime' in spite of which stones were pelted on his house and they were told to leave the village. They were considering sending the son away once the lockdown ended, but in the meantime a mob set their welding shop on fire. Gayur says, "We have been living in this village for 55 years and have never seen such an incident. This has instilled fear among the 10-12 Muslim families in the village." The Superintendent of Police in this case says the miscreants had set the shop on fire after the victims refused to remove their skullcaps and shave their beards.²⁴²

In Tamil Nadu a bakery owner in T Nagar, Chennai put out an advertisement for his restaurant which said that the products were "made by Jains on orders, no Muslim staffs". He was later arrested.²⁴³

In Uttar Pradesh, there were several cases of intimidation of vendors: in Mehoba district vegetable vendors were misbehaved with and not allowed to sell their goods by a group of people saying they were Muslims, who were responsible for spreading the disease.²⁴⁴ One of the vendors in his complaint to the police said, "We had gone to a village to sell vegetables. Over 100 people came to buy in the 15 minutes we were there. About 10-15 people had already bought from us. Then some other people came and said 'these people are Muslims don't buy from them'. The vegetables we had sold were returned to us. For two days we have not stepped out. Those men were saying we were Muslims and had images of the crescent moon (Islamic symbol) on our vehicles. They also claimed we were members of the Jamaat and were spreading coronavirus."²⁴⁵ In the small town of Bachhrawan, near Lucknow, Pankaj Gupta, a vegetable vendor, says "people, especially in the Hindu dominant areas, want to see my Aadhar card, want to know my name and then only they come to buy the stuff they want. In the first few days, people were angry and when I did not show them my Aadhar card, they shooed me away and one young lad even tried to assault me and hurled the choicest of abuses."²⁴⁶ Now his cart has a 'saffron flag' which saves him from getting beaten up and also gets him good business in Hindu localities. Similarly, in Bijnor, a fruit seller, Noor Mohammad was assaulted by three youths while he was at work. In his complaint, he said, "On Thursday at around 12PM I was selling fruits in Awas Vikas Colony. I was also wearing a mask while doing so.

²⁴¹ [Attacks on Muslims in the Name of COVID-19 Surge Across India \(thequint.com\)](https://thequint.com)

²⁴² [Muslim welder's shop set on fire in Kaithal | Chandigarh News - Times of India \(indiatimes.com\)](https://indiatimes.com)

²⁴³ [Chennai bakery owner held for 'no Muslim staff' advertisement | Cities News, The Indian Express](https://www.thehindu.com)

²⁴⁴ <https://scroll.in/latest/959111/covid-19-muslim-vendors-stopped-from-selling-vegetables-in-up-accused-of-being-tablighi-members>

²⁴⁵ [Muslim vendors allegedly 'abused', 'stopped' from selling vegetables in UP \(thestatesman.com\)](https://thestatesman.com)

²⁴⁶ <https://www.newsclick.in/Uttar-Pradesh-Communal-Caste-Divide-COVID-19>

A car with three youths came in front of me and asked my name and what I was selling. They then began cursing me for no reason. One of them got an iron rod and hit me on the head. I asked what my fault was, and they said that I was spreading the virus. They told me to not be ever seen again in this locality. They also punched and kicked me and while all this was going on, residents of the locality came out of their homes and stood watching. Nobody tried to help me."²⁴⁷

Fauzia Anjum, an NGO worker with the Gramin Purna Yojana and Asian Bridge India distributed toiletries to the women of Bhatpurwa village in Varanasi once the lockdown was imposed. She was staying with her colleague Sarita. However, the villagers started threatening Sarita and her husband, traders refused to transact with them, and the villagers staged a protest in front of Sarita's house demanding that Fauzia be sent away or they would set the house on fire. Police arrived and took Fauzia away. Fauzia says she has been working as a social worker for the last two years and she never faced anything like this.²⁴⁸

In Bihar, members of the right-wing Bajrang Dal unfurled saffron flags at vegetable, fruit and ration shops belonging to Hindu community and urged people to buy essentials from shops owned by Hindus only.

In Delhi, in the posh area of Defence Colony, a Muslim security guard was blamed when three members of the family that had employed him tested positive for coronavirus. The family filed a police complaint against the guard because they felt the guard had attended a religious gathering of the Tablighi Jamaat at Nizamuddin after it was declared a "hotspot". The same day, the local police station sent a Whatsapp message to residents expressing "doubt" about the guard, identified only as Mustaqim, who had gone into hiding. "So all are requested to stay a bit more alert and keep watch on your [domestic helps], drivers and guards," said the message sent from the station house officer's phone.²⁴⁹

Covid 19 became yet another excuse to attack the livelihood of Muslims. The above mentioned are but a few of the cases that were reported. There would be so many more that remain unreported. Also, such cases were reported from all corners of the country. The coronavirus bias is reminiscent of the cow vigilantism which attacked the livelihoods of Muslims and Dalits, the two communities engaged in the bovine and leather industries. Covid 19 became an excuse to do the same to the Muslims engaged in the informal sectors.²⁵⁰ These are nothing but criminal offence against Indian citizens. Article 15, which encapsulates one of the fundamental rights of India's constitution, explicitly prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, besides race, caste, sex or place of birth. Article 15(2) further proclaims that no citizen be subject to any disability,

²⁴⁷ <https://www.twocircles.net/2020/apr/14/covid-19-delhi-attack-muslim-guard>, <https://www.twocircles.net/2020/apr/14/covid-19-delhi-attack-muslim-guard>, <https://www.twocircles.net/2020/apr/14/covid-19-delhi-attack-muslim-guard> – TwoCircles.net

²⁴⁸ [Varanasi Muslim NGO worker thrown out from the village : DOTO Database : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](https://www.doto.org.in/2020/04/14/varanasi-muslim-ngo-worker-thrown-out-from-the-village/)

²⁴⁹ [Covid-19: In India, fake news and hate speech against Tablighi Jamaat fed Islamophobia \(scroll.in\)](https://scroll.in/latest/761000/covid-19-in-india-fake-news-and-hate-speech-against-tablighi-jamaat-fed-islamophobia)

²⁵⁰ [Covid an excuse to push Indian Muslims out of informal sector jobs. Apartheid the next step \(theprint.in\)](https://theprint.in/news/covid-19-an-excuse-to-push-indian-muslims-out-of-informal-sector-jobs-apartheid-the-next-step/)

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liability, restriction or condition with regard to 'access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment; or the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public'.

The scapegoating of Muslims, initiated by the government, intensified by way of hate speech by politicians and other celebrities, and made widespread by both mainstream and social media, made the Muslim community in India targets of discrimination and violence at economic, social and individual levels. The fact that those who engaged in hate speech and perpetrated violence enjoy impunity implies that democracy in India is at risk.

Chapter - 5

Scapegoating and Democracy

Robert Dahl, the political theorist, stressed on two factors essential in any democracy - inclusiveness and public contestation.²⁵¹ Inclusiveness means every citizen should have full access to all information, freedom of expression, and equal voting rights. Public contestation means that all political organizations and parties should be able to compete in elections and express their opinions on an equal footing. Along with these the “right to dissent and the demand for social justice are core concepts. Since it includes all citizens, its inclusiveness requires it to be secular.”²⁵²

If we were to look at India through this lens then democracy in India seems to be backsliding. The BJP led government has shown it will not shy away from using the might of the state to deprive certain citizens of basic civil rights for its own political purpose – as was seen in the case of locking down Kashmir for months, promulgating a citizen registration system (NRC) and a naturalization process (CAA) that would render many of the Indian Muslims stateless, denying right of choice of what to eat (beef), whom to marry (love jihad) and so on. At the same time, increasingly voices critical of the government are stifled and intimidated. The hold of the government over media and the sources of political funding does not allow political opposition to find expression.²⁵³

Samuel Huntington in his essay, “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order” had said that economic or ideological conflict of the Cold War would give way to cultural conflicts across the world. In the West, nation states are consolidated around a particular ethnic or religious identity, therefore cultural conflict can be witnessed in aggressive anti-immigration policies. But in India, “this cultural conflict has taken the form of defining a Hindi-speaking Hindu nationalist identity at the expense of other regional, linguistic, or religious identities within its own borders, particularly the Muslim community.”²⁵⁴

The government is ready to quash political dissent through the use of anti-terrorist laws like UAPA and NIA. The government justifies its position saying dissent, especially coming from marginal spaces, both geographical and with regard to power, threatens the coherence of the Indian nation and therefore must be policed.²⁵⁵ Therefore, the blatant, partisan use of police powers to stifle dissent. This further undermines democracy in India.

The RSS thinking of “insiders” and “outsiders” divides the people as “we” (the majority, Hindus and/or nationalists) and “them” (minorities especially Muslims and Christians and/or anti-nationals, i.e. anyone who criticizes the government). A narrative has been set that “Hinduism is

²⁵¹ Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, University of Chicago Press, 1956

²⁵² Romila Thapar quoted in “Right to dissent is a core principle of democracy”, *The Hindu*, 7 December 2019 viewed at [Right to dissent is a core principle of democracy: Romila Thapar - The Hindu](#)

²⁵³ Neelanjan Sircar, “Is India’s democracy in danger?” viewed at [725 Neelanjan Sircar, Is India's democracy in danger \(india-seminar.com\)](#)

²⁵⁴ Ibid

²⁵⁵ Christopher Finnigan, “India’s Public Order Acts: Dissent and Democracy”, 11 June 2019 viewed at [India's Public Order Acts: Dissent and democracy | South Asia@LSE](#)

under threat” and the threat is in the form of a ‘Muslim’ as an Islamic fundamentalist, which has led to lynching over issues like beef eating, not saying ‘Jai Shree Ram’, or love jihad, and now coronal jihad. Progressives from within the majority community, who criticize the government or point out the wrong doings in society are singled out, they are physically attacked, or even eliminated, and more often their personal image, their institutional image and political image are tarnished. Autonomy of institutions is destroyed – be it the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Election Commission (EC), CIC, CVC or universities or academic bodies like JNU, ICSSR, ICHR, or Vice Chancellors of universities. And, lastly, the tendency is to deviate from the issues that matter. For example, when the issue of hardships faced by common people during demonetization was raised, citizens were told the Indian armed forces give their lives for the country and people complain about standing in queue to exchange the demonetized currency; when coronavirus was spreading, people were asked to bang on plates and chant ‘go corona go’ to cultivate ‘collective resolve and solidarity’; when issues of unemployment, poverty or growth are raised it is diverted to threat from Pakistan.

If this has been going on since 2014, Covid 19 has intensified it. Given that every country is fighting its own Covid war, the fear is that the threat to democracy in India may go unnoticed. Some of the instances of threat to democracy during the pandemic are listed below.

Show of Strength: Majoritarianism

In Gudur checkpoint in Bibinagar, seven persons dressed in RSS uniform – khakhi trousers, white shirts and black caps – carrying lathis, were checking the documents of those seeking to cross the barricades; images of which were tweeted by the handle ‘@friends of rss’ which described it as “RSS volunteers helping police”. Even if RSS volunteers were helping out, why did they carry lathis? What power did they hold or who authorized them to check documents of citizens? The Rachakonda Commissioner of Police, Mahesh Bhagwat, said that RSS activists had asked him if they could volunteer. But he emphasized that the police said “nothing doing”. The police department had decided not to take help from any religious or political organization.²⁵⁶ In the pictures, policemen were seen standing in the background. In the words of senior lawyer, L. Ravichander, “If you are not an authority and are doing this, then it is an infringement on fundamental rights, and therefore, impermissible... if police personnel are seen in the background in the photographs, it could be perceived as a failure of law and order.”

Similarly, in Telengana, emergency duty passes were issued to RSS activists. The Social Initiative for Legal Remedies, an NGO, working for peace and communal harmony questioned the Telengana Revenue Department why such passes were issued to RSS activists. How many such emergency duty passes were issued to RSS workers? Were they issued to Muslim and Christian organizations too? But with no reply.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/lathi-wielding-rss-activists-checking-id-of-commuters-sparks-outrage/articles31319329.ece>

²⁵⁷ <https://www.siasat.com/ngo-questions-govt-move-issuance-duty-passes-rss-workers-1874287/>

In Tamil Nadu, the BJP planned to have the *Vetrivel yatra*, which is a tribute to Lord Murugan, a popular local deity. They planned to cover all six abodes of Lord Murugan, thereby covering the state from north to south from 6 November to 6 December. All major political parties opposed it saying the yatra is BJP's pretext to do "riot politics" in the state, that it could lead to the spread of Covid 19 which was very much prevalent in the state, and that there was a conspiracy behind BJP's plan to end the yatra on 6 December, which is BR Ambedkar's death anniversary and also the anniversary of the demolition of Babri Masjid. The fear was that such a yatra would incite violence in the state.²⁵⁸ The Tamil Nadu government led by AIDMK, an NDA partner, denied BJP permission to carry out the proposed *Vetrivel yatra*.²⁵⁹ But the Tamil Nadu unit of BJP tried on multiple occasions to undertake the yatra. The Tamil Nadu BJP President was arrested as well while trying to undertake the yatra.²⁶⁰ The Madras High Court also pulled up the BJP state unit for going ahead with the procession despite the state government not granting them permission.²⁶¹

Having huge gatherings

It was not just the Tablighi Jamaat that had a convention in Delhi, there were dozens of examples of government, political parties and other religious groups who also flouted the coronavirus restrictions and gathered in large numbers. Hundreds came out on the streets across India after 5 PM on the day of *janata* curfew to celebrate the non-existent defeat of coronavirus. Similarly, on the day of the announcement of lockdown people rushed out to purchase essentials. Following the Prime Minister's abrupt announcement of a 21-day nationwide lockdown on 24 March, people across India were stranded as transportation services were suspended. In addition to the Tablighi Jamaat members who had not yet left Delhi's Banglewali Masjid Markaz after the event, Hindus and Sikhs in other places were also affected. In Majnu Ka Tilla gurudwara in Delhi, approximately 200 Sikhs were stuck. In Jammu city, approximately 400 Hindu pilgrims who had visited the Vaishno Devi were unable to proceed home after train services were cancelled. However, the media used different linguistic devices and strategies in the reporting of these three similar humanitarian crises.

On 23 June the annual Jagannath Puri rathayatra was held. The Supreme Court had banned the 10-day festival in the light of Covid 19 but a day before the event, in another order, it gave permission to hold the festival under certain restrictions. An Orissa-based NGO, Odisha Vikas Parishad (OVP) had filed the petition with SC for stopping the Rath yatra this year citing the case of Tablighi Jamaat. Also a servitor at the Jagannath Temple had already been tested positive for coronavirus. But the media, politicians and all those who spewed hate against all Muslims "did not care much about the health of those at the temple".²⁶² Similarly, in the end of April, hundreds

²⁵⁸ [Why Opposition wants Tamil Nadu govt to ban BJP's 'Vetrivel' yatra - News Analysis News \(indiatoday.in\)](https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/why-opposition-wants-tamil-nadu-govt-to-ban-bjps-vetrivel-yatra-1287777)

²⁵⁹ [No permission for BJP's Vel Yatra, Tamil Nadu govt informs Madras high court | Chennai News - Times of India \(indiatimes.com\)](https://www.indiatimes.com/news/national/no-permission-for-bjps-vel-yatra-tamil-nadu-govt-informs-madras-high-court-chennai-news-times-of-india)

²⁶⁰ [Vetrivel Yatra: BJP leader L Murugan courts arrest in Tiruvannamalai- The New Indian Express](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/bjp-leader-l-murugan-arrested-in-tiruvannamalai/article17444444.html)

²⁶¹ [AIADMK fires warning to BJP over 'Vetrivel Yatra' ahead of Amit Shah's Tamil Nadu visit \(republicworld.com\)](https://www.republicworld.com/news/national/aiadmk-fires-warning-to-bjp-over-vetrivel-yatra-ahead-of-amit-shahs-tamil-nadu-visit)

²⁶² <https://theprint.in/opinion/pov/indians-who-made-covid-muslim-virus-after-tablighi-jamaat-are-cheering-odishas-rath-yatra/447717/>

of people gathered at the Vardharaja Perumal temple for Chitirai festival in Kancheepuram despite the lockdown.²⁶³

The Central Government ordered tax raids on close aides of Chief Minister of Rajasthan, which were timed to coincide with his disgruntled deputy's revolt, in an attempt to topple the Congress government in the state. However, the bid failed but in the middle of a pandemic, the attempt was made in the first place shows the contempt in which the regime holds the values and procedures of constitutional democracy. In Karnataka, MP and now Rajasthan, the BJP has sought to change the result of an election that went against it. Seeking to overturn the verdict of the voters, in each state, the BJP sought to induce legislators of the parties in power to defect or resign their seats, so that their party could come to form the government instead. In Goa and Manipur independent MLAs of MLAs from smaller parties were poached with promise of material means. In Madhya Pradesh, on 23 March the BJP engineered a split in the ruling Congress and returned to power, a celebratory meeting sparked a rash of infections: health officers, bureaucrats and politicians who attended had to be quarantined.

Show of Strength to Intimidate

On 25 December, about 300 members of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) and other right-wing organisations took out a rally in Begumbagh area in MP. They shouted inflammatory slogans in a Muslim dominated area, which prompted residents to object, and resulted in a clash between the rallyists and the residents; 11 people were injured. The police however, arrested 18 residents, all Muslims. None of the RJYM members were arrested in spite of video evidence showing them pelting stones. And the very next day, the officials from the Ujjain Municipal Corporation reached Begumbagh to demolish "illegal structures" in the area. As they were about to demolish a house, the officials realised it belonged to a Hindu woman named Meerabai. They immediately moved to the next house, a 2-story house of Abdul Hameed, and demolished it.²⁶⁴ On 28 December, around 200 people were out in Chandankhedi area, again a Muslim dominated area, in a rally organised by right-wing groups. The people chanted *Hanuman Chalisa* and *Jai Shri Ram* outside a Mosque when prayers were being offered inside. This led to heated exchange between the group of 200 people and the Muslims in the Mosque and led to clash and stone pelting. The people from the rally climbed the Mosque with saffron flags in hands and tried to damage the minaret. They damaged houses and vehicles parked. Video evidence exists. The very next day, the district administration began demolishing 80 houses in the Muslim-locality of the village for 'widening the road.'²⁶⁵ On 29 December, a rally of about 5000 Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) workers marched the streets of Dorana village in Mandsaur district. At the same time, a large mob played loud DJ music outside the Mosque, vandalised and looted properties of the Muslims for almost 3-4 hours, and they place a saffron flag on the mosque. The Muslims, terrified, fled their homes and hid in the fields. Again, on 3 January 2021, a rally was taken out in Rajgarh district for the Ram Temple. As in the previous three cases, the mob gathered outside a Mosque, the Markaz Masjid in Jirapur, they shouted slogan, waved saffron flags, and attacked the Mosque. This time, however, there was no clash, no one got hurt, as the Muslims did not react

²⁶³ [Hundreds gather at Kancheepuram Temple for 'Chitirai festival' during lockdown in TN \(asianetnews.com\)](https://www.asianetnews.com/hundreds-gather-at-kancheepuram-temple-for-chitirai-festival-during-lockdown-in-tn/)

²⁶⁴ [BJYM Rally Sparks Communal Clashes in Ujjain: What We Know So Far \(thequint.com\)](https://www.thequint.com/news/india/bjym-rally-sparks-communal-clashes-in-ujjain-what-we-know-so-far/)

²⁶⁵ [MP: 'Inflamatory Slogans, Weapons' at Ram Temple Collection Rallies Lead to Communal Clashes \(thewire.in\)](https://www.thewire.in/news/india/mp-inflamatory-slogans-weapons-at-ram-temple-collection-rallies-lead-to-communal-clashes/)

or confront. As an Instagram user wrote, “The media won’t show this and neither would the administration or police intervene. You have to save yourself because the police would stand there and watch you die and, in all probability, will also be doing the same thing these radicals are doing. Democracy? Joke.”²⁶⁶

These are all instances of a majority community using the strength of its numbers to intimidate and terrorise the minority community.

Police

Traditionally, the role of police is recognised to be suppression of crime and the maintenance of law and order; and as stated by Sir Robert Peel in creating the London metropolitan police force in the 19th Century, reconcile close relations between the police and the community. Further, the police are expected to be respectful of human rights of the people and to be non-partisan. Their role remains tracking down offenders and placing them in the hands of the judicial authorities.²⁶⁷ However, during the pandemic, reports of police excesses have poured in from all parts of the country – against minorities, more so Muslims but also Christians and Sikhs; Dalits; migrant workers; also, essential service providers and people on public duty.

Gujarat: On 8 May, there was a clash between the police and a crowd of people at Shahpur in Ahmedabad. Shahpur is a Muslim majority area and it had been declared a containment zone after the Tablighi Jamaat incident. On the said day, it was during the Ramzan season, some women stepped out in the evening to buy milk. The police stopped them. Three men sitting outside came to argue with the police which led to a scuffle. Soon, the scuffle attracted others and the people accused the law-enforcers of harassing the minority community in the holy month of Ramadan blaming them for enforcing a stricter lockdown than elsewhere in the city – where a sudden ban on the sale of fruits and vegetables was announced two days ago with only milk and medicines available. The following day, the police went berserk and arrested 20 people with brute use of force. The policemen barged into homes, dragged the men outside and thrashed them mercilessly. The police even assaulted women with batons, including a woman who was three months pregnant as well as an elderly woman and a child with disabilities.²⁶⁸ The National Commission for Women (NCW) took cognizance of the issue and demanded an inquiry and initiation of strict legal action against the police officials who assaulted the young pregnant woman after the violence of 8 May.²⁶⁹ Reports and videos from the spot reveal police brutality – of the police throwing objects, shelling tear gas, breaking parked bikes with their lathis (sticks), some of the police were not even in their uniforms, and one video shows policemen mercilessly beating a Muslim man in the middle of the road. However, the FIR filed by the police

²⁶⁶ [Watch: Hindu mob gathers outside mosque in MP, chant ‘Jai Shri Ram’ slogans \(siasat.com\)](#)

²⁶⁷ [UNH Role of Police Publication.pdf](#)

²⁶⁸ [Gujarat Lockdown: Barged Into Muslim Homes, Assaulted Pregnant Woman: Claims of Atrocities by Ahmedabad Police During Shahpur Violence \(thequint.com\)](#)

²⁶⁹ [‘They hit a pregnant lady with a baton’: Shahpur’s Muslims accuse police of using brute force – TwoCircles.net & NCW seeks inquiry into assault of pregnant woman by cops in Gujarat \(outlookindia.com\)](#)

against the 27 accused for the clash said, “a crowd started shouting that the police harass them every day and they need to be taught a lesson” and about 2000 people “ran towards the police and following a criminal conspiracy, started pelting stones, with an intention to kill.” It further said several policemen were injured and then the police “had to lob a total of 71 tear gas shells”.²⁷⁰

When the nationwide lockdown was imposed, migrant workers all over the country were agitated and demanded to be allowed to go home. In Gujarat too migrant workers took to the streets and at least in 12 cities the police came down heavily on the workers, resorting to lathi charge and tear gas shelling. On 17 May, police clashed with the workers in Rajkot; on 18 May the police shelled tear gas to disperse the migrant workers assembled at the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad. More than 50 workers were detained by the police.²⁷¹

Uttar Pradesh had the most reported incidents of police violence and discriminatory treatment against Muslims. Before the Covid 19 pandemic broke out, during the anti-CAA protests, stories from UP stood out because of the extent of police clampdown and violence. In fact, a people’s tribunal jury had said, “the state of affairs in UP shows a complete collapse of rule of law.. the very state administration that is charged with protecting the rule of law is perpetrating violence upon its own people”. The jury further said, “It is convinced that the entire state machinery, led from the top, acted with grave prejudice and perpetrated violence targeting one particular community, the state’s Muslim population, and the social activists leading the movement.” Regarding the police, the jury said, “the complaints of the victims about police brutality, violence and destruction of property were either not filed or filed incorrectly. On the other hand, thousands of FIRs were filed against unnamed persons on accusations that protestors had become violent with the intention of continued harassment and intimidation.”²⁷² During the pandemic, the UP government took it further by announcing that eight battalions of UPSSF (Uttar Pradesh Special Security Force) would be constituted; any member of this force “can, without the prior permission of any magistrate and without any warrant, arrest any person”.²⁷³

Far from suppressing crime and maintaining law and order, the UP police more often than not, was found to be the instigators of crime; as in the case of Firoz Ahmed, who was a Delhi Police head constable. Normally, policemen when they show their ID are allowed to pass but, in this case, Firoz was stopped, harassed and robbed. Firoz was on his way home from Jewar, from where he had bought two goats for Bakrid. He was stopped by the police at Noida. The police asked him where he was headed, why he had animals and then searched his car. He answered all their questions but the police got agitated and started abusing him. “They said I was in the illegal animal smuggling business. I told them that I was a head constable with the Delhi Police. I started to show them my identity card but

²⁷⁰ [Shahpur violence: Court seeks CCTV footage while hearing bail applications | Cities News, The Indian Express](#)

²⁷¹ [Migrant workers, police clash in Ahmedabad - The Hindu](#)

²⁷² [UP Police Inflicted 'Enormous Violence' on Muslims During Protests: People's Tribunal \(thewire.in\)](#)

²⁷³ [Uttar Pradesh Special Security Force Can Search, Arrest Without Warrant Says Yogi Adityanath Government \(ndtv.com\)](#)

they took my wallet from me and punched me. When I objected, they started manhandling me.”²⁷⁴ The police took his wallet that contained his ID cards, ATM cards, and some Rs. 15,000 cash and asked him to collect it from Kasna police station but when Firoz went to Kasna police station along with his brother, they found the police personnel and the jurisdiction for the incident came under Dankaur police station. When Firoz went to Dankaur police station, he did not get any help. He was told they stopped him during routine checking and on finding he was not wearing seat belt, he was fined; and denied manhandling and stealing of his wallet; no complaint was filed and no help offered to him.

A Sikh student from West Bengal National University of Juridical Sciences who was visiting Agra had stopped at an ATM to withdraw cash along with his friend. Some police men approached them and according to the student, “Seeing two young men in the car, they started harassing us, whereupon, ASP Saurabh Dixit started verbally abusing me after seeing that I had long hair tied in a bun”. The police checked his ID, confirmed he was Sikh, abused him, physically assaulted him, and pulled his hair. “My friend rushed out of the car to help me after which he was beaten up too. When I told him that he had outraged my religious sentiments and that I had taken note of his name from the badge he was wearing, he told me he is IPS and there is nothing I can do about it.”²⁷⁵

On 25th May, in Taprana village of Shamli, Uttar Pradesh, the police came looking for a man named Afzal to arrest for cow slaughter. When they could not find Afzal, the police officers along with the Superintendent came back the next night and vandalised about 35 houses. According to the villagers, they barged into houses, attacked innocent bystanders, broke household appliances and damaged cars. Women said their jewellery and money was taken away by the police. The violence lasted two nights.²⁷⁶ But the police allege that the residents pelted stones on them and injured three officers, after which they arrested 30 people including Afzal and registered cases against 100.²⁷⁷

Again, in UP, in Faridpur Kazi, the police, with no explanation, entered seven Muslim homes and assaulted and verbally abused the family members. The police arrived around the time of iftar, hurled abuses, and started to rummage through their homes with a focus on kitchen items in most houses – they threw around utensils and leftover food. Three men were arrested and taken to Kotwali Thana, a police station in Bijnor city. The next morning, the village sarpanch, Iqbal, went to the police station, after which the men were released without any charge sheet or first-information report. The police told Iqbal they “came to the village on the basis of a suspicion. They had been informed that a cow has been slaughtered”.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁴ [Noida cops accused of harassing Delhi Police head constable - cities - Hindustan Times](#)

²⁷⁵ [Sikh Student Alleges Assault & Communal Slur by UP Police, Inquiry Ordered \(thequint.com\)](#)

²⁷⁶ [DOTO - Documentation Of The Oppressed \(dotodatabase.com\)](#)

²⁷⁷ [Bumrah generating pace with short run-up still amazes me: Bishop \(outlookindia.com\)](#)

²⁷⁸ [In Bijnor, Muslim villagers allege UP police harassed them on suspicion of cow slaughter \(caravanmagazine.in\)](#)

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In Patna, Bihar, Sonu Shah, a pickup driver was ferrying tomatoes during lockdown. The policemen asked for a bribe, when he refused, they shot him on his foot.²⁷⁹ Essential services such as trucks carrying food items and essential products providers such as e-commerce companies were allowed and permitted to continue their activities even during lockdown but the police thrashed and harassed delivery persons.

In Bihar, a day before the elections was the final day of Durga puja celebrations. The celebrations ended with the immersion of the idol in the Ganges. In Munger, the residents say, the festival has grown over the years. Over 120 idols are immersed in the river from Munger and neighbouring Jamalpur. "The administration told us that because of the elections, we need to finish the immersion quickly. We told them this is a festival, which has rules. But the administration kept pushing the devotees, who numbered over a thousand, to hurry up.... They had no patience in dealing with devotees. When people resisted, they began to lathicharge everyone and assaulted us." And then the police started to fire in the air to disperse the crowd. A young boy of 22 was hit by a bullet and died and seven others were injured.²⁸⁰

In Tamil Nadu, a Christian man Jayaraj and his son Emmanuel Benicks were arrested by the Thoothukudi police for keeping their mobile accessories shop open after permissible hours. The police beat both of them and sexually tortured them in custody. They were rushed to the hospital, both bleeding profusely. Both father and son died in the hospital.²⁸¹

In Kerala, the Palakkad North Division police turned up at the house of two brothers, Abdurrahman (18) and Bilal (20) one evening to question them in connection with a physical assault attempt on an RSS worker. They were taken into custody. According to their advocate, "When sub-inspector Sudheesh Kumar's team of nine officers barged into the house, not a single male family member was present. Their younger sister attempted to call her father, but the police threatened that they would pick her up too. They took the boys away without any intimation to the family members. When his family eventually came to know, they called up the police station, but the police denied keeping the youths in their custody.... A group of ten police officers started by beating both the youths on their feet. They were tied up and 150-200 lashes were inflicted on them. They stood on their thighs and beat them on the head. Then, two police officers sat on their chests while the others used a cigarette lighter to burn their genitals. They even sprayed their private parts with pepper spray". The Sub Inspector Sudheesh Kumar while beating the boys is believed to have said, "Now, you will not be able to give birth to any more Muslims".²⁸²

In Barrack 2 Gurdaspur, Punjab, two inmates, Sajad Hussain and Irshad Ahmad were harassed by the other inmates. They were stripped naked, beaten and humiliated. They were allegedly called "terrorists" because of their identity as Kashmiri Muslims and

²⁷⁹ [In Posters: The Rise In Police Brutality During The COVID-19 Pandemic \(feminisminindia.com\)](https://www.feminisminindia.com/)

²⁸⁰ [Night before polls, grief over death in puja-police clash | Elections News, The Indian Express](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/night-before-polls-grief-over-death-in-puja-police-clash/article38454477.ece)

²⁸¹ [Police Brutality in India During COVID - 19 Pandemic \(lexforti.com\)](https://www.lexforti.com/)

²⁸² ["Policemen sat on their chests, burnt their genitals with lighter," lawyer recounts horrific custodial torture by Palakkad police of 2 Muslim youth – TwoCircles.net](https://www.twocircles.net/2020/09/22/policemen-sat-on-their-chests-burnt-their-genitals-with-lighter-lawyer-recounts-horrific-custodial-torture-by-palakkad-police-of-2-muslim-youth)

threatened with grave consequences. Both of them were also stopped from offering "namaz" and made to do menial jobs for other inmates. When their lawyer reported this to the jail authorities, they downplayed the situation stating that "verbal duels" were normal in jails.²⁸³

In Betul, Madhya Pradesh, a lawyer named Deepak Bundele, a non-Muslim, was brutally beaten up by the state police. It was during lockdown. The police stopped him for violating lockdown norms. The lawyer explained he was diabetic, had high blood pressure and was unwell, so he was going to the hospital. But the police paid no heed and beat him up. The police defence for beating Bundele was that it was a case of mistaken identity; they thought he was a Muslim.²⁸⁴

Use of Laws to target Minorities and 'Dissenters'

The draconian counter terrorism laws passed (amended) last year, like UAPA and NIA, are being used during the pandemic / lockdown to repress rather than combat terrorism. As per the amendment, no objective criterion has been laid to categorise an individual as a terrorist and the government has been provided "unfettered powers" to do so. The laws are being used to book and arrest Muslims, especially the youngsters, and others like lawyers, senior editors, activists and intellectuals who criticize the government or raise their voices against injustice. The Delhi Police arrested Muslim youths every single day weeks after the riots in North-east Delhi. They were arrested and kept in judicial custody even amidst Covid 19 scenario. Students who participated in the ant-CAA protests were consciously targeted. Two such students from Jamia – Meeran Haider and Safoora Zargar were arrested under UAPA for "hatching a conspiracy to incite communal violence over CAA" which the police said was a "premeditated conspiracy". Two rights activists, Ambedkarites, who advocated annihilation of castes and the socialist vision of Ambedkar – Anand Teltumbde and Gautam Navlakha – were arrested on the grounds that they support Maoist insurgency. They were asked to surrender to the NIA.²⁸⁵ Khalid Saifi, a human rights defender associated with United Against Hate campaign, was arrested in the context of Delhi riots on the charge of 'conspiracy'. The court granted him bail after months in November saying charge-sheeting Saifi over "insignificant" material was total non-application of mind by the police which went to the extent of "vindictiveness".²⁸⁶ Ishrat Jahan, a former Congress Councilor was arrested under UAPA in the Delhi riots case. In prison she was continuously harassed, physically and verbally. In a submission to the Court, she said, "This is the second incident in a month. In the morning today at 6:30 am, they (inmates) beat me badly and abused me verbally. One of the inmates even slit her hand so that I am punished on a false complaint... They kept calling me a terrorist..."²⁸⁷ Asif Iqbal Tanha, a third year BA student from Jamia was arrested under UAPA for the violence at Jamia in connection with the anti-CAA protests.²⁸⁸ Natasha Narwal, a JNU student

²⁸³ [Two Kashmiri Under-trials In Punjab Allege Harassment In Jail \(kashmirilife.net\)](http://kashmirilife.net)

²⁸⁴ [India's police brutality targets Muslims, journalists as Hindu nationalism grows \(religionunplugged.com\)](http://religionunplugged.com)

²⁸⁵ [Why Is Anand Teltumbde So Dangerous for the Narendra Modi Government? \(thewire.in\)](http://thewire.in)

²⁸⁶ [Delhi riots: Court grants bail to activist Khalid Saifi, says 'non-application of mind by the police' \(freepressjournal.in\)](http://freepressjournal.in)

²⁸⁷ [Harassed, Abused: Ex-Councillor Ishrat Jahan, Jailed In Delhi Riots Case \(ndtv.com\)](http://ndtv.com)

²⁸⁸ [Northeast Delhi violence: Jamia student Asif Iqbal Tanha arrested, action being taken under UAPA \(scroll.in\)](http://scroll.in)

activist associated with women student collective Pinjra Tod, was arrested under UAPA saying she was involved in the riots in North-east Delhi. Sajid Bin Sayed, another JNU student, also President of Campus Front of India, was arrested for promoting hate and enmity. He had criticised the Indian army and the RSS in a tweet. There were other arrests as well, all said to be involved in the anti-CAA protests and accused of instigating violence in North-east Delhi. “If anybody needed proof that raising one’s voice against the government in a democracy was now akin to sedition, it was provided over and over again with the arrests of activists who had agitated peacefully for equal rights as citizens.”²⁸⁹

Masrat Zahra, a photo journalist from Kashmir was booked under UAPA for posting some of her old pictures on twitter. The old picture was of a group of Shia mourners carrying a poster of slain Hizbul Mujahidin commander Buhani Wani during a procession on Muharram and in the text Wani was described as “shaheed”. The police statement said, “the facebook user is also believed to be uploading photographs which can provoke the public to disturb law and order. The user is also uploading posts that tantamount to glorify the anti-national activities and dent the image of law enforcing agencies besides causing disaffection against the country.”²⁹⁰ Another noted author and commentator, Gowhar Geelani was booked by cyber police saying, “his social media posts are prejudicial to national integrity, sovereignty and security of India.” Peerzada Ashiq, a journalist, was booked under UAPA in Jammu & Kashmir for his article in the Hindu on the grounds that “the details quoted in the news item....could cause fear or alarm in the minds of public.”²⁹¹

The Delhi Minorities Commission Chairman, Zafarul Islam Khan, was slapped with sedition charges for his tweet on 28 April where he thanked Kuwait for taking note of the “persecution” of Muslims in India in the context of the North-east Delhi violence. A delegation of BJP MLAs met the Lt. Governor and demanded the removal of Khan from the position and that a case be registered against him. He was so pressurised to apologise on social media – “I realise that my tweet was ill-timed and insensitive in view of our country facing a medical emergency and fighting an unseen enemy. I apologise to all whose sentiments were hurt.”²⁹²

Legislations and Policy Changes in Covid Period

The Prime Minister, in one swoop, imposed a lockdown on the entire country. In India, the lockdown restrictions were brought in when the Covid infection had just begun. There were about 500 positive cases. Surely there was time to convene a meeting of major political parties for consultation, deliberations and informing them about this extraordinary step being taken by the Government of India. The PM did not consult the Parliament which was in session till just the previous day nor did he consult the Chief Ministers of States, giving cooperative federalism a go-by.

²⁸⁹ Ziya Us Salam, “Hate in the time of a pandemic”, Frontline, 05 June, 2020 viewed at [Hate in the time of a pandemic - Frontline \(thehindu.com\)](https://www.frontline.in/stories/hate-in-the-time-of-a-pandemic)

²⁹⁰ <https://www.news18.com/news/india/two-quote-marks-could-have-saved-me-kashmiri-journalist-reacts-to-uapa-charge-for-social-media-posts-2589643.html>

²⁹¹ [J&K police file FIR on The Hindu report - The Hindu](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/jk-police-file-fir-on-the-hindu-report-on-the-hindu)

²⁹² <https://www.news18.com/news/india/delhi-minorities-commission-chairman-zafarul-islam-slapped-with-sedition-charges-over-provocative-post-2602025.html>

Changes in Labour Laws

The nationwide lockdown hit the economy hard. The worst sufferers were the migrant workers. After the lockdown was lifted, as economic activities resumed, the employers started to tighten labour conditions and the different states started to amend the labour laws. For instance, some states tried to extend the working duration beyond eight hours a day. The Labour Ministry disapproved it by saying it was illegal, it cannot be done without a directive from the Parliamentary Standing Committee. According to Section 5 of the Factories Act, it is clear that during any emergency in the country or any part of the country, a state government may, by issue of a notification, exempt any factory or class or group of factories from all or any provision of the Act, for maximum of three months except Section 67 related to working hours.

The BJP-ruled Karnataka Government has undertaken a major revision of the labour laws including the Industrial Dispute Act, 1947, the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act 1970, and Factories Act, 1948. In the face of opposition from trade unions, the government has defended its move saying that it was necessary to help industries hit by Covid 19 and to attract investment under the new Industrial Policy 2020-2025.

In another change in the Industrial Dispute Act, 1947, any industry employing up to 300 workers will be exempt from its provisions.²⁹³ Earlier the limit was up to 100 workers. By increasing the number, they have absolved many industries from being drawn into disputes. Secondly, the overtime limit for workers will be increased from 75 to 125 hours as per the amendment to the Factories Act, 1948. Third, another Amendment allows women to work in night shifts in the registered factories between 7 pm to 6 am. Fourth, a factory with electricity connection employing 10 workers came under the Factory Act; the limit has been raised to 20 workers. This disallows registering even legitimate grievances by the workers.

In Uttar Pradesh, as many as 34 labour laws have been suspended including Trade Union Acts, 1926, the Industrial Dispute Act, 1947, the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946 (IESOA), etc; and retained the provisions in the Factories Act and the Building and Construction Act, 1996. The State has omitted clauses relating to working hours, overtime payment, and minimum wages. Madhya Pradesh Government has suspended sections of the Factories Act, 1948 that are related to working hours, health and welfare of the workers for next three years. The States of Tripura, Goa and Bihar have increased the employment of contract labour from 20 workers to 50 and Himachal Pradesh has from 20 to 30.²⁹⁴

Arguably, the reasons for such changes include the shrinking of the economy and its impact on the industries, which is why reforms in labour laws in order to attract investment were necessary. On the other hand, the proposed changes will exempt factories from several provisions in the labour laws rendering workers vulnerable to manipulation by their employers. It was reported that 30 industrial accidents occurred in the month of May alone in India killing 75 and injuring over 100

²⁹³ [Explained: In the three new labour codes, what changes for workers & hirers? | Explained News,The Indian Express](#)

²⁹⁴ [Who needs national codes and laws? - The Hindu BusinessLine](#)

workers.²⁹⁵ Note the changes made by UP and MP governments which divest the workers of their right to join trade unions, sit on strikes, raise industrial disputes and so on. Raising the threshold in different areas could release the factories out of purview of Labour Laws.

What is worrying in the context of a democratic process is that the changes were brought in without consultation with workers collectives.

Farmers Bills

As the present government is prone to, it introduced the Farmers' Bills with no consultation with farmers, no discussion in the Parliament, no discussion with states, which is necessary in the federal frame of our politics. As per the Constitution, agriculture is in the State List. The Bills were rushed in Lok Sabha as well as Rajya Sabha, where voting was denied leading to row among Members of Parliament and the Deputy Chairman. Eight members were suspended, a Union Minister resigned, and the Deputy Chief Minister of Haryana threatened to resign on the bills.²⁹⁶ The three Bills were 1) The Farmers' Produce and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020: The Bill abolishes the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC), which are the government-controlled marketing yards and also the *mandis* run by the APMC. It also marginalises the licensed commission agents known as *Arhatiyas* in Punjab and Haryana. 2) The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020: The Bill provides a framework for setting up contract farming; and 3) The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill 2020: The Bill prohibits State governments from levying any market fee, cess or levy outside APMC areas.

The Farmers are unhappy about firstly, the non-mention of Minimum Support Price (MSP), which is the lifeline for most farmers. "The government maintains that MSP will not be abolished. If so, why did they not record it in the Bill? It is like the CAA where Muslims were excluded. Government then said the Muslims will not be discriminated against. But the NRC implied to do so. NRC and CAA put together could exclude them. Not mentioning MSP raises similar doubts. To assuage the angry and frustrated reaction of the farmers the government raised the MSP for wheat by 2.6 per cent. This amounts to double speak. On the one hand you do not assure MSP in the Bill and then raise it for some crops."²⁹⁷ Secondly, the farmers use the *ahartiyas* for services like cleaning, sorting, displaying and auctioning the crops for a commission between 1.5 to 3 per cent. These agents work as an interface between the farmers and the market, in terms of supplying them farm inputs like seeds, technology, pesticides, and marketing intelligence. Taking them out of the picture would rob the farmers of these services. Thirdly, contract farming allows big corporates to enter and the farmers fear the corporates will have upper hand in fixing prices and settling disputes in courts. There is a huge power disparity between corporates and farmers. Also, corporates will not like to deal with small with small farmers who constitute 85 per cent of the

²⁹⁵ Interview with Prof. D. K. Giri, Professor of International Relation in Jamia Milia Islamia & Secretary General of the Association for Democratic Socialism, on 24 August 2020

²⁹⁶ D. K. Giri & Francisco Sardinha, "Farmers' Bills: A Case of Governance Deficit", *Mainstream*, Vol. VVIII No.42, 3 October, 2020 viewed at [Farmers' Bills: A case of Governance Deficit | Francisco Sardinha & DK \(...\) - Mainstream \(mainstreamweekly.net\)](#)

²⁹⁷ Ibid

farming community. And lastly, the issue of hoarding, which the government says will improve storage quality, eliminate food wastage and enhance price, but the farmers fear freedom to hoard will lower prices for them.

Since 26 November, farmers are out of their homes, camping along the Delhi border, braving the cold and Covid 19 in protest against the Bills and demanding that the government speak with them.

Environmental Bill

India's first major environmental law was in 1986, two years after the gas leak from the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal. The law was supplemented with Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) rules in 1994 and 2006, which required new projects to carry out an environment impact assessment. In the midst of the pandemic the Environment Ministry issued a draft Environmental Impact Assessment Notification 2020, which is disastrous for India's environment and its people on at least two counts – firstly, it proposes to weaken the environmental regulations i.e. it allows post-facto clearance of projects. This means even if a project has come up without environmental safeguards or without getting environment clearances, it could carry out operation under the provision of the new draft EIA 2020; and, secondly, it exempts projects from public consultation.

The fact that there were several industrial disasters during the pandemic because of lack of compliance of environmental norms and safety standards, it is disturbing that the government feels the rules are too “onerous” and “deter investment”. There was a gas leak in the polymer plant in Vizag, Andhra Pradesh; boiler explosion in a thermal power plant, a steel factory and a chemical plant in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat; and, fire in biodiversity rich landscape in Assam caused by natural gas extraction. Instead of solidifying safety standards, the Ministry of Environment and Forests was busy taking decisions on major projects when public engagement and ground verification were not possible. Reports say the Ministry has signed off a new coal mine in an elephant reserve, preliminary drilling inside a wildlife sanctuary that is home to endangered lion tailed macaques and great Indian hornbills, and a contentious project to remake New Delhi's Parliament district. These hint at serious threat to the environment and long-term sustainability of the country's economic development and well-being of its people.

Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance 2020

The Uttar Pradesh government promulgated the Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance 2020 which is aimed at countering alleged attempts of “forcible” or “fraudulent” religious conversions, including those involving marriages.²⁹⁸ In the run up to the promulgation, the Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath had warned, “the government will work to curb ‘love jihad’. We will make a law. I warn those who conceal their identity and play with our sisters’ respect... If you don't mend your ways, ‘*Ram naam satya*’ (the chant associated with Hindu funeral) journey will begin.”²⁹⁹ Within a month, the Madhya Pradesh cabinet also approved the *Dharma Swatantrya*

²⁹⁸ <https://m.economicstimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/uttar-pradesh-yogi-adityanath-cabinet-approves-love-jihad-ordinance/videoshow/79391406.cms>

²⁹⁹ <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/love-jihad-yogi-adityanath-allahabad-high-court-your-ram-naam-satya-journey-yogi-adityanaths-love-jihad-warning-2318637>

(Religious Freedom) Bill 2020. While advocating for the Bill, the Chief Minister had said, “Government belongs to everyone, all religions and castes. There is no discrimination but if someone tries to do anything disgusting with our daughters, then I’ll break you.”³⁰⁰

Hours after the promulgation of the Ordinance in UP, the UP police lodged its first case under the said Ordinance in Bareilly. The FIR was lodged by a man named Tikaram who said a Muslim man had befriended his daughter as they studied together and wanted to “coerce, coax, and allure her into converting.” The point to be noted is that this was an old case, which was resolved in 2019 when the Court decision led to the girl going back to her family and later getting married to another man; and the Muslim man and the girl have had no contact since the Court decision. According to the girl’s brother the family had not approached the police for this new FIR. The police came to their house and questioned them about the case and took their father away. And, the police charged the Muslim man under Section 3 of the new Ordinance for trying to convert the girl through coercion.³⁰¹

Since the Ordinance, several cases have been filed in UP. In one such case, the Allahabad High Court quashed the FIR against a Muslim man for marrying a Hindu girl saying “she had a right to live her life on her own terms.”

But it has become one more bullet in the UP police’s arsenal to harass Muslim men. An 18-year-old Muslim boy had met up with a former classmate, a 16-year-old Hindu Dalit girl for pizza and soft drink. They finished and were taking a walk and the police arrested the boy for “inducing” a minor girl to elope with him with the intention to marry and forcefully change her religion. The FIR was based on a complaint filed by the girl’s father. The girl’s father accuses the local police of “dictating” the complaint to him and “blowing the episode out of proportion.”³⁰² Another Muslim-Hindu couple, married and living in Jamia Nagar in Delhi under police protection as per the order of the Delhi High Court was threatened at their doorstep by the girl’s brother and UP police after the Ordinance. The man’s younger brother was beaten up in order to get the whereabouts of the couple. In another case in Moradabad, a Muslim man and Hindu woman got married in July. Five months later, they went to the courthouse to register their marriage and they were attacked by Bajrang Dal members. It was captured on camera and the video went viral on social media – the men surrounded the woman and can be heard telling the Muslim man “Have you read the new law or not? *Yeh tum jaise logon ke liye banana pada hai* (The law had to be made for people like you)”.³⁰³

The National Education Policy 2020

The NEP was approved during the pandemic by the Indian cabinet on 29 July 2020, not the Indian Parliament. Further, even though education is in the concurrent list, the contents of the new policy

³⁰⁰ https://m.hindustantimes.com/india-news/10-years-jail-for-inter-faith-marriage-in-mp-priests-to-be-penalized-says-new-draft/story-7aRCr6hpOA2J3wiwCv2V5L_amp.html

³⁰¹ <https://m.thewire.in/article/government/uttar-pradesh-anti-conversion-ordinance-first-case/amp>

³⁰² [UP Muslim teen meets Dalit girl for ‘pizza outing’, lands in jail under anti-conversion law \(theprint.in\)](https://www.theprint.in/481111/up-muslim-teen-meets-dalit-girl-for-pizza-outing-lands-in-jail-under-anti-conversion-law/)

³⁰³ [Moradabad UP Woman Heckled, Husband Arrested Over Anti-Conversion Law \(ndtv.com\)](https://www.ndtv.com/moradabad-up-woman-heckled-husband-arrested-over-anti-conversion-law-1977777)

was never discussed with the state governments.³⁰⁴ Even in terms of its contents, as Amita Rampal, Professor and former Dean of the Faculty of Education and Delhi University says, “It took 60 years to make education a fundamental right through the Right to Education Act (RTE). This guaranteed every child, up to the age of 14 years, quality education in a neighbourhood school.” The NEP says RTE is restrictive and hence introduces “multiple pathways” or an alternate model of education, which contradicts RTE. The NEP says small suboptimal schools will not be functioning meaning “it’s already taking away access from those in remote, small rural habitations.” Further, NEP talks of school complexes; “the notion of school complexes, or colleges, with a minimum of 3000 students, under the name of consolidation, is giving up on equity and inclusion.” Then, it says some children can do with other children as tutors, the children who would otherwise drop-out. Dr. Rampal says, “we call them push-outs because children don’t drop-out on their own, they are pushed out of the system”.

“These are the kinds of things that tell us that it (NEP) has completely given up on the right to equitable education for children who are already disadvantaged. We know who they are... we know which community, which religion or caste or geographical areas these children might belong to. Clubbing them all together... not even using the word Dalit, tribal or a Muslim child.”³⁰⁵

The Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan (The Self-Sufficient India Drive)

The biggest controversial decision the government had taken during the pandemic is the privatization of Private Sector Units (PSUs) on mineral resources under its flagship programme called *Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan*. The beginning of privatization was made before Covid 19 but the process was accelerated and completed in the pandemic times. The PSUs were apparently sold off to generate extra revenue not because they were dysfunctional or sick.

In agriculture too, the *Mandis* (government sales counters) were abolished, allowing companies to buy directly from farmers. *Mandis* were maintaining minimum support prices for the farmers; the companies will not, which means marginal farmers will be left open to be exploited.

PM CARES

On 28 March 2020, the Prime Minister created a new fund called PM CARES i.e. Prime Minister’s Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situation Fund. The Fund was set up even though such a fund already exists in the form of the Prime Minister’s National Relief Fund (PMNRF). Two major criticisms against this fund are one, it uses the funds that come from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and CSR funds are not meant for government schemes. A government panel has earlier recommended against allowing CSR donations to PMNRF then why is it allowed for PM CARES? Secondly, PM CARES fund is beyond RTI (Right to Information) or audit. PMNRF

³⁰⁴ [National Education Policy not passed in Parliament, states not taken into confidence : WB minister | Hindustan Times](#)

³⁰⁵ Shreya Khaitan, “The New Education Policy has no Commitment to Children, Equity, Inclusion or Quality”, [IndiaSpend](#), 28 September 2020, viewed at <https://www.indiaspend.com/the-new-education-policy-has-no-commitment-to-children-equity-inclusion-or-quality/>

expenditure is audited by an independent auditor, then why not PM CARES? The Prime Ministers Office has now appointed an auditor in the face of rising public demand.

Challenges faced by *Dalits* and Women

On 14 September 2020, a 19-year-old girl went to the fields in her village in Uttar Pradesh. She was a *dalit* girl. Four men raped her and then beat her up. The girl identified and named the four men as rapists but the police refused to file an FIR for five days. She was moved to a hospital in Delhi where she died on 29 September. The body was brought back to the village but not handed over to her family. Instead, at mid-night, with policemen on guard she was cremated and the family was not allowed anywhere near the site.

A transcript of a woman journalist³⁰⁶ trying to figure out what was burning at night under full police guard is available on the net – it reflects the state of the country's criminal justice system.

Protests were held in the village demanding justice, not for the girl but for the four men 'wrongly accused'. The local panchayat was held; almost all the attendees favoured the four men and claimed that some political parties were making use of the case for their own benefit.³⁰⁷ This shows the regression the country has gone through in the last few years. The Constitution, providing equal rights to all citizens, is sought to be set aside and the Manusmriti, with its long-standing hierarchies on caste lines and discriminatory practices, is rearing its head. Being a *dalit*, the girl would have faced discrimination and humiliation all her life; but being a woman, she faced cumulative disadvantage. "A shudder ran through me as I read that caste-based panchayats are being openly organized to challenge the processes laid down by the judiciary and the constitution. These panchayats are a part of a larger design to bring back the laws of the Manusmriti and strip Dalits of the rights provided to them by the Constitution."³⁰⁸

The Manusmriti prescribes tight control of women's autonomy. It says, "A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in (her own) house. In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons." The harm Manusmriti does is that it asks that women as daughters, wives, mothers be tightly controlled by fathers, husbands, sons. Such a tight control over women is required so that caste hierarchies can be maintained. Therefore, a lower caste woman can be with an upper caste man without facing any punishment but if a woman is with a lower caste man then she must be isolated and kept in confinement. In the words of Kavita Krishnan, "In every household where women are surveilled, their movements restricted; in every opposition to inter-caste, inter-faith marriage; in every attack on *dalits'* villages after a *dalit* man

³⁰⁶ Shuddhabrata Sengupta, "In UP, Maintaining 'Law and Order' also means a Secret, Rushed Cremation of Dalit Rape Victim", The Wire, 1 October 2020, viewed at [In UP, Maintaining 'Law and Order' Also Means a Secret, Rushed Cremation of Dalit Rape Victim \(thewire.in\)](https://www.thewire.in/news-and-analysis/UP-maintaining-law-and-order-also-means-a-secret-rushed-cremation-of-dalit-rape-victim/)

³⁰⁷ Kumar Abhishek, "Hathras Case: Upper Caste Group holds Panchayat in favour of accused, demands CBI Inquiry", India Today, 2 October 2020, viewed at [Hathras case: Upper caste group holds panchayat in favour of accused, demands CBI inquiry - India News \(indiatoday.in\)](https://www.indiatoday.in/hathras-case-upper-caste-group-holds-panchayat-in-favour-of-accused-demands-cbi-inquiry/)

³⁰⁸ Vaishali, "The Panchayat in Hathras is still trying to replace the Constitution with Manusmriti", The Wire, 5 October 2020, viewed at [The Panchayat in Hathras Is Still Trying to Replace the Constitution With Manusmriti \(thewire.in\)](https://www.thewire.in/news-and-analysis/the-panchayat-in-hathras-is-still-trying-to-replace-the-constitution-with-manusmriti/)

marries a non-*dalit* woman, in the Sangh's campaign to brand love between Hindu women and Muslim men as "love jihad" – it is the Manusmriti that you see in action."³⁰⁹

Such regressive mindset is visible more and more in the country. A Brahmin judge of the Kerala High Court, while speaking at a Brahim convention, listed special traits of Brahmins that made them alone capable of ruling the country; the same was reiterated by the Governor of Gujarat. The RSS Chief in a public meeting in Pune defended the caste system saying if there had been only one caste instead of four, it would have spelt disaster for the country.³¹⁰ Just like the 'cow', Manusmriti has also become a symbol for the Hindutva forces to unite the Hindus against the others. Recently, in a TV show, *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, the equivalent of 'Who wants to be a Billionaire' in India, one of the questions posed to the celebrity contestants, activist Bezwada Wilson and actor Anup Soni, was – "On 25 December 1927, Dr. BR Ambedkar and his followers burned copies of which scripture?" and the options given were Vishnu Purana, Bhagavad Gita, Rigved and Manusmriti. The right wing erupted at this saying all four options given were Hindu texts and it was an attempt to insult Hindus and create a rift between Hindus and Buddhists. A BJP MLA from Maharashtra even filed an FIR against the show's host, the famous actor, Amitabh Bachchan.³¹¹ Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, a Member of Parliament, Thol. Thirumavalavan, in a public meeting while discussing whether India is being governed according to the Constitution or the Manusmriti, quoted the Manusmriti saying, "As per Hindu Dharma, all women are created by God as prostitutes. They are prostitutes as per Hindu Dharma...Manu Dharma. The status of all women is less than that of a man."³¹² The BJP again reacted but this time got its woman member, a famous actress from the South, Khushboo Sunder to condemn Thirumavalavan stating that not a single word in the Manusmriti demeans women.

Victimization of Dalits and women in general but especially those "who dare to exercise their freedom of choice" continue in the form of caste-based violence and violence against 'love jihad'. In Bhojpur district of Bihar, during lockdown some upper caste men entered the house of a Mahadalit (the most economically backward community within the Scheduled Castes) and tried to take the hens the family was raising. When the family resisted the upper caste men fired their country-made revolver and five people from the Mahadalit community were shot.³¹³ In Kerala, a Facebook page exists called "Kavipada" (saffron army), which has posts on marriage notices i.e. notices that solemnize marriages under Section 5 of the Special Marriage Act, which are signed by the couple who want to register their marriage and are displayed on notice boards of the registration offices in their native places for 30 days starting from the day they sign. This Facebook page has scanned copies of such notices complete with the name, address, age, occupation, photos and signatures of the bride and groom, but only the ones where the groom is Muslim and the bride is Hindu. The accompanying message is, "These are love jihadis. We are the next scapegoats of these people. If you know these people, you should help them." Another message

³⁰⁹ Kavita Krishnan, "One cannot be a feminist in India if you are not fighting the Manusmriti", The Indian Express, 27 October 2020, viewed at [One cannot be a feminist in India if you are not fighting the Manusmriti | The Indian Express](#)

³¹⁰ [The Manusmriti and a Divided Nation \(thewire.in\)](#)

³¹¹ [FIR filed against Amitabh Bachchan over KBC question on Manusmriti \(scroll.in\)](#)

³¹² [VCK calls for State-wide protest demanding ban on Manusmriti - The Hindu](#)

³¹³ [Bihar: 5 Dalits Injured in Firing by Members of Dominant Caste Groups, Two Arrested \(thewire.in\)](#)

read, “Sacrificial lamb this month (July) ready to be sacrificed in the name of love jihad, after deceiving their parents. Save them if you can.” The responses to these are vile, spiteful messages against Muslims. When several affected couples flagged these accounts and reported the posts for harassment and bullying, the same people started WhatsApp groups, continuing with the spewing of hate.³¹⁴

In Assam, an actress, Preety Kkongana, who plays the protagonist in a TV series called “Begum Jaan”, which is a story of a Hindu girl who has to fight against society and is helped by a Muslim man in a difficult situation, is accused of promoting ‘Love Jihad’. The production company clarifies the show has nothing to do with love jihad but the right wingers threaten the actress. In a complaint to the police she wrote, “Two persons, namely Bikram Nath and Kishor Das, have been threatening me and harassing me mentally for a long time. Bikram Nath has even threatened me with rape, acid attack, and murder. Kishor has used abusive words against me on social media and spoke of rape and murder. This is extremely disturbing to me, and I’m worried for myself and my family. They have also called me a prostitute.”³¹⁵ In Punjab, in Bathinda, the BJP Punjab Secretary, Sukhpal Singh Sra was irked over the inter-faith marriage between a Muslim man and Hindu woman living in Jogi Nagar. He got his supporters and the girl’s parents and attacked the couple’s home saying their marriage was love jihad.³¹⁶ In Ayodhya, in the run-up to Holi, the festival of colours, several music videos were in circulation over social media that encouraged Hindu men to put colour on Muslim women. One such video is a song by Sandeep Acharya, which says “*Chaahe naqaab pehanke niklo bhaijaan ke sath, ragad ke rang lagega suno Mohtarma seedhi baat* (Even if you go out in a veil with your brother, we will rub colour on you, just understand this simple thing)”. Another video shows a Hindu man groping a Muslim woman and forcefully applying colour on her and in the background the same song plays. There were several other videos with songs compressing Bollywood movie clips, with dance beats and added lyrics that openly call for the slaughter of Muslims. These videos spread like wildfire on popular social media platforms like WhatsApp, TikTok and Facebook.³¹⁷ The mentality behind these videos is akin to the gang-rapes of Muslim women in Gujarat and Muzaffarnagar.

Positive Stories

Does this mean all is lost, there is no hope for Indian democracy? All is not lost. There are several positive stories that shine a ray of hope; a hope of going back to the India envisaged by the founding fathers at the time of independence.

Courts

The Executive in India like in other democracies is accountable to Parliament and to the Judiciary. During the lockdown, the Executive was active, but Parliament and Judiciary were shut. The Executive got a free hand to introduce and implement new laws without undergoing scrutiny.

³¹⁴ [Kerala interfaith couples harassed by right wing vigilantes using marriage notices | The News Minute](#)

³¹⁵ [Actress receiving death threats for controversial TV show \(freemuse.org\)](#)

³¹⁶ [BJP Punjab secretary arrested for pelting inter-faith couple’s house with stones : The Tribune India](#)

³¹⁷ [The soundtrack of hate: Videos glorifying Hindu men forcefully putting color on Muslim women shared on social media - Maktoob \(maktoobmedia.com\)](#)

Popularly, it was expected that the Executive will not take undue advantage of this extraordinary situation, but Parliament and the courts were sidestepped. By how much the Executive has arrogated itself to Parliament needs time and deeper study to comment on. However, the Courts started to function with an independent order from the Supreme Court. The courts, to a large extent, continue to be fair and democratic; in fact, the Courts have been keeping a check on the Executive and Legislature.

- The Central government had made a plea before the Supreme Court that no media outlet could print, publish or telecast anything on the novel coronavirus “without first ascertaining the true factual position from the separate mechanism provided by the Central government”. The Supreme Court ruled on 31 March “We do not intend to interfere with the free discussion about the pandemic...” but observed that “fake news and panic would destroy more lives than Covid 19” and directed the media to “maintain a strong sense of responsibility and ensure that unverified news capable of causing panic is not disseminated.”³¹⁸ The Supreme Court ensured the media its freedom to report but with immense foresight and trust asked the media to be responsible... a trust that was shattered almost immediately.
- In the case of the FIRs / Chargesheets registered against the Tablighi Jamaat foreigners, the Bombay High Court ruling brings back the country’s confidence in democracy. The Court outed the media saying, “there was big propaganda in print media and electronic media against the foreigners who had come to Markaz Delhi and an attempt was made to create a picture that these foreigners were responsible for spreading Covid 19 virus in India”. There was “virtually persecution” against these foreigners. “The material of the present matter shows that the propaganda against the so-called religious activity was unwarranted.” With respect to the government, the Court said, “A political Government tries to find the scapegoat when there is pandemic or calamity and the circumstances show that there is a probability that these foreigners were chosen to make them scapegoats. The aforesaid circumstances and the latest figures of infection in India show that such action against present petitioners should not have been taken. It is now high time for the concerned to repent about this action taken against the foreigners and to take some positive steps to repair the damage done by such action.”
- The Allahabad High Court quashed an FIR against a man held for tweeting against the UP Chief Minister. The man, Yashwant Singh, had tweeted that Yogi Adityanath “has transformed the state into a jungle raj in which no law and order prevails.” The Court said, “Expressing dissent on law and order situation in the state, is a hallmark of a constitutional liberal democracy like ours, constitutionally protected under Article 19 of the Constitution” and it is not a crime.

Police

- By first week of July Tamil Nadu police had arrested 86 people for spreading communal hatred against the Muslim community linking them with Covid 19. Over 700 complaints

³¹⁸ <https://caravanmagazine.in/health/centre-places-restrictions-media-covid-press-briefings-shifts-focus-to-tablighi-jamaat>

were filed in police stations across the state. A PIL was filed by ASA Umar Farooq to quicken the action. ASA Farooq also filed a writ petition requesting the High Court to direct concerned authorities to stop media and other agencies and individuals from communalizing Covid 19 issue. A counter affidavit filed by the Director General of Police of Tamil Nadu 159 cases were registered against 356 people and from among them 86 were arrested. Madurai topped the list with 19, the highest number of complaints filed; Erode had 17 complaints, Pudukottail 12 and in Chennai 8 cases were filed. "It is a welcome shift on the part of the police to act in favour of the religious minority community to safeguard them and their interests especially in times of rising Islamophobia across the country."³¹⁹

- In Coimbatore on 3 April 2020 around 500 people had gathered at a mosque for Friday prayers despite the lockdown. A police team rushed to the spot and announced on the megaphone asking people to disperse. But "suddenly a group of people started attacking us with chairs, and four personnel were injured..." The police played its role of maintaining peace in the area and investigating and taking action. It held talks with carious community leaders and requested them to appeal to members of their community not to visit places of worship; arrested the District Joint Secretary of Bajrang Dal, D. Satish Kumar for inciting communal hatred through a post on his Facebook page.³²⁰
- The cyber police department of Gujarat has been very active, filing cases, arresting offenders and writing to social media service providers to ban the accounts of such offenders. The Additional Director General of Police CID (Crime), Shamsher Singh encouraged citizens to come forward to report hate campaigns across social media platforms and lodge police complaints, "We have been trying to get as many cases logged in the system as possible.... We have a very active cyber cell in Ahmedabad where most of such crimes generate. It helps more when people bring such issues to our notice. The more they report the better it is."³²¹

Citizens Initiatives

- The Tablighi Jamaat members who had tested positive for the virus, and had been cured, came forward in huge numbers to donate their blood plasma, which contained anti-viral antibodies required to cure affected people.³²²
- Two individuals from Bihar, Rakesh Kumud and Bittu Bhardwaj started a page on Facebook called 'Live Janshakti', and trying to put forth alternative viewpoints in the public domain. According to them, "When we saw that most mainstream, print and electronic media, is parroting only the government view and communal organisations were spreading fake news and creating enmity among communities then we decided to launch a digital platform to voice the concern of citizens. We initiated [the] 'Live Janshakti' page on Facebook on 16th April and invited people of different

³¹⁹ <https://gaurilankeshnews.com/86-arrested-for-spreading-communal-hatred-tn-police-informs-hc/>

³²⁰ <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2020/apr/04/police-attacked-while-dispersing-crowd-at-mosque-2125473.html>

³²¹ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/gujarat-activists-take-legal-route-to-fight-hate-on-social-media/articleshow/75526557.cms?from=mdr>

³²² [COVID-19 and Indian Muslims | ORF \(orfonline.org\)](https://www.orfonline.org/news/india/covid-19-and-indian-muslims/)

disciplines to voice their concern. And now after fifteen days we are getting overwhelming responses from across sections of society. We are trying to put forward a counter narrative before people so that they can judge things independently.”³²³

- In Odisha, a Muslim man, Aftab Hossen, moved the Supreme Court to allow the Rath Yatra even if conducted by the sevayats, minus the devotees, to maintain the continuity of the Jagannath culture and rituals. His petition said that if there is a break in the annual Rath Yatra, it could not be performed for the next 12 years, and that would seriously harm Jagannath culture. “Rath Yatra is dearest to people of Odisha, as it relates to culture, tradition, health and prosperity of mankind and self-respect of Odias irrespective of their caste, creed and religion”.³²⁴
- In Vadodara, a team of 22 Muslim social workers belonging to the Baroda Muslim Doctors Association perform last rites of Covid 19 patients who died irrespective of their religion. The last rites are done as per the faith of the deceased. Their service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The members take full precautionary measures and none of the 22 have got the infection so far.³²⁵
- Abdul Malabari, a Muslim from Surat also perform last rites for the Covid 19 deceased. “My work has no fixed timings. As soon as we get a call, we proceed with the kit. We have Hindu volunteers who bury the bodies of Muslims, and Muslim volunteers who cremate the bodies of Hindus. We find bodies in rivers and canals, on railway tracks. We sometimes deal with decomposed bodies. In my heart I feel a sense of satisfaction from doing this that nothing else will ever give me.”³²⁶
- In Tamil Nadu, the Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam, a non-government organization extended funeral services to people of all faith during the pandemic. They conducted funeral rites on the basis of the religious beliefs of community the dead person belonged to. This was a big service when even the relatives of Covid patients who had died were reluctant to come near the dead bodies. Even the Tamil Nadu police department called TMMK directly for help in burying the dead.³²⁷
- Anbunithi, a lawyer from Tamil Nadu, distributed meals three times a day to lab technicians, sanitary workers and other labourers attached to the Rajaji Government Hospital in Madurai for 75 days during the lockdown and thereafter. For his good work, a Hindu organization, Andal Bakthargal Pervai, gave him a cash award of Rs. 50,000. The lawyer donated the entire amount to TMMK and set an example for religious harmony.³²⁸

Inclusiveness and right to dissent are under threat in the Indian democracy. While the strength of India has always been its diversity, its pluralism, these qualities are systematically undermined and, in its place, we see majoritarianism and show of strength. Dissent, which was considered

³²³ » [Digital platforms create counter narratives to counter hate campaigns in Bihar \(groundxero.in\)](https://groundxero.in/)

³²⁴ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/odia-muslim-moves-sc-with-a-prayer-allow-rath-yatra-without-devotees/articleshow/76489949.cms>

³²⁵ <https://m.dailyhunt.in/news/india/english/the+siasat+daily+english-epaper-siaseten/gujarat+muslims+arrange+last+rites+of+covid+victims+irrespective+of+religion-newsid-n218210648>

³²⁶ <https://www.india.com/viral/muslim-man-in-gujarat-buries-cremates-bodies-of-covid-19-victims-as-india-deals-with-stigma-around-coronavirus-4014949/>

³²⁷ [Tamil Nadu Muslim Group Offers Funeral Services Under Lockdown Irrespective of Faith | Clarion India](https://clarionindia.com/tamil-nadu-muslim-group-offers-funeral-services-under-lockdown-irrespective-of-faith/)

³²⁸ [Lawyer donates money from Hindu outfit to Muslim organisation for Covid-19 burial | Deccan Herald](https://deccanherald.com/lawyer-donates-money-from-hindu-outfit-to-muslim-organisation-for-covid-19-burial/)

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healthy in a democracy, is now suppressed and increasingly slapped with sedition charges. But we do see a ray of hope in our people and in our Courts. The people are agitating against the government be it the farmers or the employees of PSUs that were privatized like Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd or the resident of Ghaziabad, UP protesting against academic institutions being converted to Covid 19 care centres, or the criticism against the PM CARES. At the same time, people care about each other. Citizens' initiatives, however small they might be, go a long way in building solidarity.

Chapter - 6

Conclusion

The Covid 19 pandemic was, first and foremost, a medical / health emergency. Like most other countries, India too was unprepared to meet a challenge of this magnitude. As the pandemic progressed, the steps taken by the government were either too late, not adequate, or insensitive. The media and public at large had started to question the policies of the government; and so, when the Tablighi Jamaat incident happened, it offered a convenient diversion, taking the focus away from the shortcomings of the government. This is not out of the ordinary. What is out of the ordinary and a matter of grave concern is the fact that when a government deliberately turns the spotlight on a minority community and makes it a scapegoat, it had the tacit support of the media and the people believed it to be true and were already in a state of mind to take matters into their own hands. Polarization in our society has become so stark that when there is a rumor that beef is stored in one individual's – Mohammad Aqlaq's – home, hundreds of people are out, armed, and they beat Aqlaq to death. In this case, the government named Tablighi Jamaat as the super spreaders, implying that they alone were responsible for the spread of Covid 19 in India, people believed it, they accepted as truths all the fake news peddled by the media, shared such news further, were pumped and excited by every hate speech made by leaders and celebrities, and reacted with fear of the Muslims and hatred against them. People who were on the fence or did not care about the Hindutva attack on Muslims, now cared, and reacted.

Furthermore, when the Muslim world reacted to the treatment of Muslims in India – the Organization of Islamic States condemned “the unrelenting, vicious Islamophobic campaign in India, maligning Muslims for spread of Covid 19 as well as their negative profiling in media subjecting them to discrimination and violence with impunity”, PM Modi tweeted the same day “Covid 19 does not see race, religion, colour, caste, creed, language or borders before striking. Our response and conduct therefore should attach primacy to unity and brotherhood. We are in this together”. When the Emirati Royal Hend Al Qassemi wrote in Gulf Newspaper “killing your brethren doesn't make you a hero, it makes you a dictator and murderer. A snowballing has been started, which has reverberated across the Arab world”, the RSS chief, Mohan Bhagwat in his online address asked people not to harbor ill-will against an entire community for the mistakes committed by a few individuals and urged all people to help the affected persons without any discriminations. And, so, by the end of April, there was no mention of Tablighi Jamaat in the government briefings and mainstream media too stopped the scapegoating but social media continued to run rife with fake news and hate messages against Muslims; and discrimination, harassment and outright violence against Muslims continued across the country. This is because fear and hatred of Muslims seems to have become part of the psyche of the ordinary citizens, and they continued with the discrimination and violence against Muslims. They were emboldened and enabled further as they were rarely punished.

Covid 19 did incite irrational fears among people – fear of the unknown virus, fear of the disease, fear of death; and, lockdown further ensured that people became fearful of other humans. But scapegoating directed these fears of the people entirely on Muslims and they became targets

only because they were Muslims. This is the biggest concern; the freedom of religion or belief is at stake.

The second concern is that with social media, speed and time have got compressed. Any information or misinformation, news or fake news, or hate speech can reach far and wide in no time. Further, when fake news or hate speeches are received disguised as news, it increases the anxieties and biases of the people. When concerted campaigns such as scapegoating of Muslims is carried out, it creates enemies out of ordinary people trying to live their lives. These campaign prey on the most basic human emotions – fear and anger. In several States, such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, the State governments were quite firm about scapegoating and blaming Muslims but still discrimination and violence against Muslims did happen and that was because of social media.

Thirdly, even before the pandemic, like elsewhere in the world, BJP, a strong monolithic party had started to chip away at major democratic autonomous institutions, sideline civil society organisations, and undermine parliamentary procedures. Yes, Covid 19 was an emergency; lockdown was imposed invoking the Epidemic Act of 1897; yet it became a pretext for downplaying democratic conventions, protocols and provisions. The high-tech surveillance system set up to fight the pandemic continues and might even continue in the post-corona period. It is being used to perpetuate control over citizens and stifle out opposition and critics. During the lockdown surveillance was used to arrest the activists who protested against the Citizenship Amendment Act, and Muslims for the communal clashes in North-east Delhi. Legislations, Executive Orders and Ordinances have been passed without consultation, discussion or questioning. These pose questions about the future of democracy in India.

These conclusions bring the focus back to the importance of the role of civil society in any society, in a democracy. Civil society organisations have been sidelined, even crushed in the country – cutting off their sources of funds, embroiling them in bureaucratic muddle by making them renew their FCRA, open new FCRA accounts with one bank (the State Bank of India), putting restrictions on receiving and using foreign funds, and keeping them out of all government development projects. The Eleventh Five Year Plan had brought in a government – civil society partnership model, which essentially made civil society organisations implementors of all government development projects. This is completely stopped now. The spirit of partnership is now replaced with suspicion and animosity.

Civil society initiatives and peoples' initiatives were quite notable during the pandemic, especially during the lockdown. Individuals, community-based organisations, and faith-based organisations organized kitchens to provide food for the poor, the ones who could not earn and feed themselves and the ones who were forced to walk back to their villages. Civil society organisations could have played an even greater role, especially to supplement the health department. With their reach in the communities, at the grassroots level, civil society organisations could have aided in awareness building, in contact tracing, in providing care to the ill. They could have been instrumental in generating alternative livelihood options for daily wage earners during lockdown. But most importantly, as has been proved, wherever civil society organisations are active, rumors

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of the communal nature, do not lead to violence. In other words, the backlash Muslims faced owing to the scapegoating could certainly have been minimized.



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