

Archetypes of Health in the Gayatri Pariwar

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COVID CHAPTER

Days before my scheduled participation in a week-long naturopathic retreat in rural Uttar Pradesh, India, I received word via phone that, due to recent reports of the rapidly spreading 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19), the camp had been cancelled. The voice on the other end of the call assured me, however, that I was still welcome to visit the grounds to learn about what would have been a week of naturopathy, and so I kept my departure itinerary intact, laughing all the while at the irony of a healthcare camp advertised for its prophylactic ability being cancelled due to the threat of contagious disease. The program was a regular offering of the Gayatri Pariwar, a Hindu reform organization that touts a regime of personal and societal wellbeing based repackaged Vedic rituals, mantras, and herbal recipes.¹ Although healthcare is one aim of the Gayatri Pariwar, the institution's leaders enjoin followers to wield their knowledge of such practices to better themselves, society, their nation, and the world; indeed, members regularly find occasion to chant the slogan "when we change, the era will change."² In doing so, they superimpose acts of self-care with social service. Indeed, I spent two days on the retreat grounds in which

¹These recipes just as frequently involve one or more cow byproducts.

²In Hindi, this is *ham badlengi, yug badlegā*.

The following article is an investigation of varied reactions from members of the Gayatri Pariwar to the onset of COVID-19, which range from online broadcasts and conferences to on-the-ground conversations and activities. The overall response of the Gayatri Pariwar to COVID-19 has been an attempt to suture the societal rift caused by national and international lockdowns, quarantines, and other efforts to stymie the spread of the virus into the narrative arc familiar to members of the organization; namely, that it is the duty of the Gayatri Pariwar to save the nation and the world, and that such change begins with the individual. Whether through articulations of the threat of COVID-19, assurances of their own safety or immunity to the illness, or the endorsement of a variety of lifestyle reforms, members of the Gayatri Pariwar have drawn upon and reinforced their belonging to the institution, its ideology, and the profuse writing of its late founder. Further, these responses have routinely collapsed physiological health and moral rectitude, self-care and social service, Hindu nationalism and Indian citizenship, and religion and science. In their efforts to establish continuity between individual care and institutional identity as a way of combating COVID-19, members of the Gayatri Pariwar have articulated an archetype of health at the intersection of diet, lifestyle, citizenship, compliance, and belief.

My analysis of the Gayatri Pariwar's words and deeds in response to COVID-19 provides invites a look at the biopolitics of Hindu nationalism as taken up by one institution. This relative focus supplements the macro analysis of recent scholarship by Banu Subramaniam.³ Further this study explores further the Hindu biopolitics touched upon in the work of Daniel Heifetz,⁴ building as well upon the earlier writing of Joseph Alter.⁵

³Banu Subramaniam and Debjani Bhattacharyya, "A Viral Education: Scientific Lessons from India's WhatsApp University," *Somatosphere*, May 2020. See also Banu Subramaniam, *Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019)

⁴*The Science of Satyug: Class, Charisma, and Vedic Revivalism in the All World Gayatri Pariwar* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2021).

⁵Joseph S. Alter, *Moral Materialism: Sex and Masculinity in Modern India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2012), *Gandhi's Body : Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000)

From the Center – official responses

After arriving in Anwalkhedā, the small village twenty-five kilometers northeast of Agra in which the naturopathic retreat was to have taken place, I noticed a paper notice taped onto a prominent wall on the Gayatri Pariwar campus, according to which all camps and functions were cancelled indefinitely. The notice was issued under the authority of “Honored Dr. Sahib,” the organization’s current figurehead. As his title suggests, Dr. Sahib is a degree-holding medical doctor, and he is well-known in the organization for his research work on medical applications of *yajña*.⁶ I begin with a sustained consideration of the Gayatri Pariwar’s official responses to COVID-19 on YouTube. Doing so will clarify several of the themes that permeate the lay responses I encountered while at Anwalkhedā.

In the beginning of their videos, the AWGP assures listeners that the virus will not affect India very much due to the imminent hot weather. The virus is figured as a foreign presence in India, one that is synonymous with the corruptions of foreign meat-eating and lack of cleanliness. Yet these threats are not taken too-seriously; Doctor Sahib lauds Indians for giving cultural prominence to cleanliness, as well as for keeping vegetarianism. In an off-the-cuff claim, Pandya declares that over half of Indians are vegetarian, with the percentage growing, and he is confident that the lesson of COVID will be the importance of being vegetarian. In this respect, Pandya’s statements collapse the Indian lifestyle and the Brahmanical Hindu lifestyle. He also connects lifestyle choices in these “modern times” to an overall lack in vital power, which is used synonymously with “immunity.”

These messages of assurance – that the virus is a foreign element, and that being Indian (and/or in India) is inherently safer because of climate and culture, are paired with several prescriptions for products and practices which will prevent the onset of COVID-19, whether in oneself or in India, generally. These are the very practices and products which distinguish the Gayatri Pariwar from other institutions. Great importance is placed on conducting daily *yajña*, whether using the

⁶One of the staple practices of the Gayatri Pariwar, *yajña* is a ritual procedure in which officiants repeatedly offer ghee and dried herbs to one of several deities via a central fire altar, accompanied by mantras. Dr. Sahib’s main research involved measuring the antiseptic properties of the smoke emitted via *yajña*, and the Gayatri Pariwar promotes a smoke-based therapy called *yajñopathy* based on this work.

AWGP's premixed *havan sāmagrī* or mixing one's own using a prescribed list of herbs. Further, chanting the Gayatri mantra and Mr̥tyunjaya mantra, incorporating Ayurvedic herbs into one's diet, and conducting *yogāsana* and *prāṇāyām* are lauded as practices which will both cleanse the environment and increase immunity. Such methods and assurances are capped by the consistent closing statement of Dr. Pandya that this time will pass.

This time will pass, he says, which predicates the notion that current time is out of joint. Both he and Chinmay refer to the present as non-ordinary time (*sthitiyām pratikūl hai* and “historical time”). Yet their advice is more or less to hold on to the practices which define membership in the Gayatri Pariwar anyway, and these practices are defended as exceptionally effective in the amelioration of COVID-19 risk. In his own video detailing recommended practices to listeners, Chinmay encourages adherence to official ordinances, acts of compassion, and introspection, in addition to *yajña* and mantra chanting. Of course, such introspective self-study *svādhyāy* is also a staple part of Gayatri Pariwar identity. With regard to doing *yajña* and praying the Gayatri mantra, Chinmay defends the propriety of these practices by citing Hindu characters such as Ram, Krishna, Brahma, and Valmiki as having done the same. Further, Chinmay clarifies that praying is not the same as asking God for handouts; rather, it is to offer oneself as ready to help. In this respect, Chinmay repeats the calls to action that both define the Gayatri Pariwar's take on self-responsibilization and are meant to empower and motivate members to take on roles of familial societal, national, and global custodianship.

Following up with several calls for collective prayer, three videos are made which are dedicated to establishing a daily evening time for collective prayer to Gayatri Devi. Whereas the first video is an injunction by Pranav Pandya to carry out the exercise, the audio for the latter two videos contains recorded Gayatri Mantra recitation by the institution's founder, Ram Sharma. From 6:20 - 6:30 p.m., these videos are meant to be listened to as an aid to this prayer.

In a video posted on Ram navami, a week after Modi's initial lockdown announcement on 24 March, Chinmay Pandya addresses viewers with an injunction to stay positive and hold onto one's mental faculties. He cites well-loved Hindu religious and nationalist figures in order to give a pep

talk to viewers who may feel disheartened by the circumstances. He says there is no need for fear, for the blood of Prahlad, Sudhanva, Kabir, Savitri, Govind Singh, and Bhagat Singh are in their veins. With this confidence boost out of the way, Chinmay encourages viewers to engage in service activities (not yet to donate to the relief fund), as well as to partake in self-study.

Shortly after the creation of Modi's PM Cares relief fund (on March 28), the Gayatri Pariwar begins its own emergency relief fund (*āpadā rāhat kosh*), which is heavily advertised on April 3 in a message aired by Pranav Pandya. It is from this point onward that cash donation begins to be incorporated as another endorsed "thing to do" while in lockdown. The bank details for online donations and cash transfers are regularly flashed onscreen in the institution's YouTube content from this date forth.

These messages of assurance are supplemented by videos that exhibit the Gayatri Pariwar's outspoken support for and participation in government-sponsored COVID relief efforts. Meant to align the Gayatri Pariwar response to the pandemic with a national response, as well as to articulate the institution's own pride in taking an active role in such social work, these videos are meant to convey to viewers that being part of the Gayatri Pariwar to be a part of larger societal-betterment and national-betterment projects. Further, in the case of Modi's call for lighting oil lamps as a nation for nine minutes, Dr. Sahib folds that activity into one endorsed by Gurudev: participation in a symbolic action of national solidarity also happens to conform to a practice promoted by the founder, which establishes further continuity between national and institutional belonging. Apart from Pandya's direct alignment of the two activities, a clip from a 1988 speech by Ram Sharma and another from a lecture by Bhagwati Devi in 1986 endorse the practice of *dīp yajña*, indirectly doing the same work of aligning Modi's call to lamp-lighting with an specifically Gayatri Pariwar practice. The Gayatri Pariwar also posted a video to provide musical accompaniment to the lamp-lighting event itself.

The role of Gurudev as the authoritative voice of the Gayatri Pariwar's stance on issues is not lost amid the posturing of Pranav and Chinmay Pandya: both figureheads make reference to Gurudev's teachings within their speeches, and his literature is often referred to when either leader

encourages self-study as a course of action when home-bound. Further, several videos published in the meanwhile have excerpted Gurudev's speeches (March 28, April 4, April 6). Yet these too have been edited in order both to make them more readily relevant to viewers and to disambiguate several notable phrases in his oratory. For example, two videos, published on March 28 and April 6, are excerpts from a speech Gurudev gave in 1986. The earlier video is subtitled in Hindi, and the latter in English. That Gurudev's recorded words need Hindi subtitles (which, it should be noted, are not auto-generated but embedded within the video) suggests that Gurudev is less-than-perfectly legible to contemporary viewers. Further editorial decisions underscore a felt need to render explicit certain points deemed relevant.

For example, the video caption reads "Ref: Present Corona Crisis, Video recorded in 1986," which both attributes near-prophetic abilities to Ram Sharma and primes viewers to connect his statements to contemporary circumstances not only casually, but as prophecy. Further, the English-subtitled video breaks in the middle of Gurudev's speech in order to explain what he means by "*ek dharm aur ek rājya*." The recording pauses and a block of text is displayed onscreen. The text defines *ek dharm* as "scientific spirituality" and *ek rājya* as a world free from nationalism, to which the editor attributes "proxy wars, hidden economic and biological attacks." This last phrase connects the onset of COVID-19 with widespread suspicions that China deliberately released (or had at least planned to deliberately release) the virus as an act of biological terrorism. In doing so, the mission of the Gayatri Pariwar to transcend narrow nationalism is distinguished from stereotyped nationalist regimes with insidious motives (in this case, China).

Pranav Pandya's participation in these videos constitute the an explicit endorsements of Modi's government and his COVID relief initiatives. Pandya urges viewers to salute COVID first-responders such as the police by obeying them – "do not cross them," he warns. Further, Pandya is shown video conferencing with Modi, during which time he directly tells Modi that the latter has Pandya's full support. This is followed by explications of the ways which the Gayatri Pariwar has helped (including food distribution and the conversion of two residential halls at Shantikunj into isolation

wards which can accommodate 2,000 people each). In a way, Pandya models a type of ingratiation to the BJP government with regard to COVID relief work.

Dr. Sahib's support of Modi's government efforts does not come without qualification. On April 18, in a digital address to the Gayatri Pariwar youth mission in Mumbai (DIYA), published to YouTube for a general Gayatri Pariwar audience, he reminds listeners that despite displays of solidarity and promises for relaxed lockdown measures (in reference to a promise made by Modi that such relaxed policies would take effect from April 20), the fight against COVID is not over. Far from a critique of Modi's policies, however, Pandya explains that partial lockdowns in select areas must continue because the country is variegated, with several types of people who do not follow government directives, instead follow only their "*iṣṭa*, *arādhya*, *allāh*, etc." This not-so-subtle attribution of noncompliance to the country's Muslims simultaneously passes blame from the government action to Indian Muslim inaction, suggests Indian Muslims are dissidents, and suggests an "us" vs. "them" binary in which the Gayatri Pariwar stands with official national interest, as opposed to religious others whose loyalties are not to the nation.

This video also foregrounds several other injunctions: Pandya calls for self-discipline and lifestyle-betterment, framing practices such as yoga and reading literature written by Gurudev and Vivekananda as important ways of aligning one's lifestyle with nature. He goes so far as to define God as "ecological discipline," by which he refers to something akin to natural laws or natural order (he cites the axis of the Earth). His words suggest that modern lifestyles, though equipped with amenities, are not in line with God (read: natural order). This opposition to nature is the real reason for COVID-19, and the response from the Gayatri Pariwar should be to give to the world a "package," including knowledge of yoga, Ayurveda, herbs, *yajñā*, the Gayatri Mantra, etc. Once again global custodianship by the Gayatri Pariwar is linked to shoring up a lifestyle understood as aligned with God/nature and distinct from a "modern lifestyle." The institution must educate the world, and this begins with reforming one's own lifestyle. Note that this rhetoric links empowerment to self-responsibility.

Pranav Pandya's triumphalist statements about Indian culture and Gayatri Pariwar praxis as models upon which global betterment ought to take shape, contrapuntal to the lack of discipline and lack of national support of Indian Muslims and "modern" nations, are very different from the call to unite as a common humanity articulated by Chinmay Pandya (April 21). Referencing Gurudev all the while, Chinmay's call is to focus on our common humanity in order to confront COVID-19, "as one race, species, religion, family, civilization."

Anwalkhedā

My arrival at Anwalkhedā, a small village twenty-five kilometers northeast of Agra, coincided with a surprising amount of activity on the small Gayatri Pariwar campus on March 17th. Since the retreat had been cancelled several days before, and since a recent WhatsApp message indicated that most Gayatri Pariwar functions had been postponed indefinitely across the country, I had expected the grounds to be empty, or nearly so. Yet the cancellation of routine Gayatri Pariwar camps and retreats did not mean that the organization would remain idle as COVID-19 spread. From mid-March, the Gayatri Pariwar began producing and circulating food, face masks, and healthcare-related information to the public from local centers nationwide as acts of relief work.

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