#CoronaJihad

COVID-19, Misinformation, and Anti-Muslim Violence in India

Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarasingam

Abstract

On March 25th, India imposed one of the largest lockdowns in history, confining its 1.3 billion citizens for over a month to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). By the end of the first week of the lockdown, starting March 29th reports started to emerge that there was a common link among a large number of the new cases detected in different parts of the country: many had attended a large religious gathering of Muslims in Delhi. In no time, Hindu nationalist groups began to see the virus not as an entity spreading organically throughout India, but as a sinister plot by Indian Muslims to purposefully infect the population. This report tracks anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence in India related to COVID-19, as well as the ongoing impact on social cohesion in the country.

About the authors

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Introduction

On March 25[1], India imposed one of the largest lockdowns in history,[1] confining its 1.3 billion citizens for over a month to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).[2] By the end of the first week of the lockdown, starting March 29th reports started to emerge that there was a common link among a large number of the new cases detected in different parts of the country: many had attended a large religious gathering of Muslims in Delhi. In no time, Hindu nationalist groups began to see the virus not as an entity spreading organically throughout India, but as a sinister plot by Indian Muslims to purposefully infect the population. #CoronaJihad thus began trending on Twitter. Even as the Indian government struggled to provide food and transport for millions of stranded migrant labourers,[3] failed to address access to clean water and healthcare in densely populated slums, and tried to respond to the virus without adequate testing kits, ventilators, or personal protective equipment,[4] large parts of the country still maintained that the true drivers of the health crisis were a shady cabal of extremist Muslims.

From March 13th to 15th, the Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic reformist movement founded in 1927 whose followers travel around the world on proselytizing missions, held a large gathering for preachers from over 40 countries at its mosque headquarters in Delhi, known as the Nizamuddin Markaz. The mosque
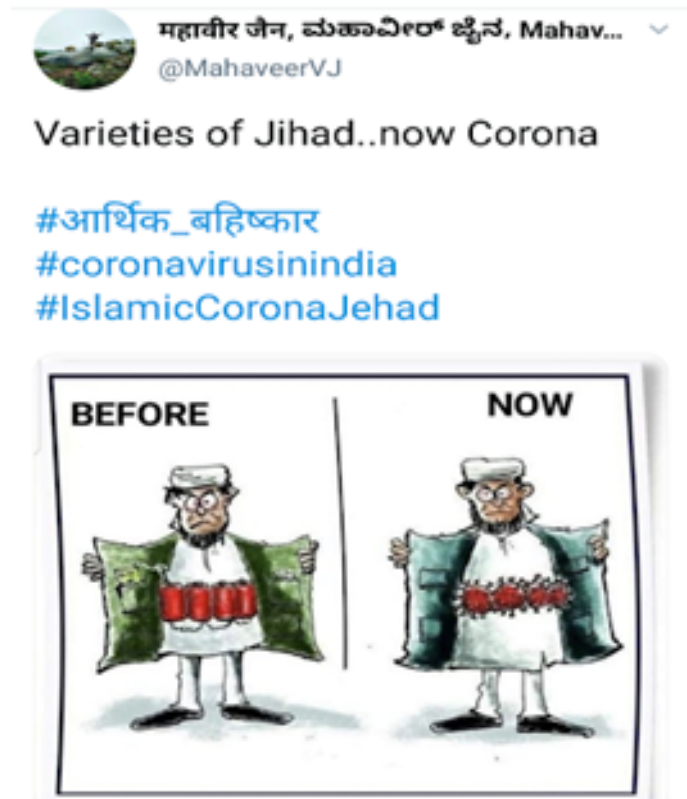

Figure 1 Caricature posted on Twitter showing before and after version of Muslim terrorist, replacing suicide vest with covid virus

is situated in a densely populated neighbourhood near the famous Sufi shrine, Nizamuddin Auliya. According to media reports, this gathering became a "hotspot" for dozens of new cases in India, as attendees left the gathering and returned to their respective homes in India: areas from the northernmost Jammu and Kashmir and Uttarakhand; Gujarat and Maharashtra in Uttar Pradesh; West Bengal in the East; Assam in the Northeast; the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Kerala; and even the remote islands of Andaman and Nicobar.[5] Subsequently, the Indian government declared the mosque to be an infection hotspot, and Delhi police

filed a first information report under the Epidemic Diseases Act and sections of the Indian Penal Code against members of the Tablighi Jamaat for disobeying government lockdown orders.[6] The Ministry of Home Affairs revoked the visas and blacklisted foreign Islamic preachers who attended the event, and the health ministry traced several cases of the virus in India back to the gathering.[7]

Hindu nationalists and pro-government news channels in India latched on to components of the story and used it to feed a variety of anti-Muslim narratives. Unsurprisingly, this has led to an increase in incendiary hate speech, false claims, and vicious rumors intended to encourage violence and ostracize the Indian Muslim community. The steady flood of anti-Muslim content in WhatsApp groups, Tik-Tok and Facebook videos, Twitter posts, panel discussions on news media, and official government briefings has been astonishing.

It should be noted that since the start of the pandemic, religious gatherings around the world became sites of contestation, as many experts worried that they would inevitably become hotspots for virus transmission. In eastern France, a meeting at an evangelical church in Mulhouse in February became one of the main sources of infection which spread the virus across the country.[8] Pakistan contracted its first positive cases from pilgrims who travelled from the Iranian city of Qom.[9] A 16,000 strong gathering at the Sri Petaling Mosque near Kuala Lumpur became responsible for a surge in cases in Malaysia, as well as transmitting the infection to neighbouring countries of Brunei, Singapore, and Cambodia.[10] In the UK, the ISKON temple shut down after it came under criticism as a potential hotspot following a funeral in March with 1,000 mourners.[11]

The Tablighi Jamaat congregation was also not the only religious gathering to occur in India during the pandemic and subsequent lockdown. Days after the Tabligh meeting, devotees across India continued to throng temples, gurudwaras, churches, and mosques in large numbers. Hours after Prime Minister Modi's lockdown announcement closing all places of worship and prohibiting all religious

Figure 2 Twitter post accompanied with a news report on positive cases and deaths linked to the Nizamuddin meeting in Delhi

congregations,[12] Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath partook in a ceremony with 100 others to temporarily relocate the statue of Lord Rama, sanctioning the construction of the new Hindu temple on the site of the demolished Babri mosque.[13] Ram Navami festivities on April 2nd, which celebrate the birth of Lord Rama, saw mass religious gatherings at temples in Kolkata in West Bengal, Shirdi in Maharashtra, and in Telangana, defying strict orders of social distancing.[14] Needless to say, other religious communities have not been similarly demonized, or suspected of purposefully infecting the Indian population, as have the Muslims.

This report thus examines the evolution of anti-Muslim rhetoric related to coronavirus and examines how the global pandemic has been integrated into ongoing hate speech, conspiracy theories, and communalism in India. As a highly mediatized group through government, news media, and social media responses, we suggest the Tablighi Jamaat functioned as a high-profile symbol of Indian Muslims broadly. Islamophobic rhetoric levelled against members after the gathering generally construed in four, related ways: 1) as contaminated/contaminating, 2) as 'uncivilized,' 3) as deceptive, and 4) as anti-national jihadists or terrorists. These criticisms of the Tablighi Jamaat then became generalized to all Indian Muslims in media coverage, and eventually, in-person altercations. Frequently, aggressors explicitly linked Muslim targets to the Tablighi Jamaat (often without any evidence) while invoking one of these four qualities. The promulgation of such narratives has spilled over into discrimination against Muslims as physical violence and social/economic boycotts, while also impeding India's COVID-19 response efforts.

'The Enemy Within': the Roots of Anti-Muslim Hatred

The current narrative that Muslims are plotting to spread coronavirus and participating in 'corona jihad' is a mere continuation of anti-Muslim propaganda, which has steadily developed on social media and crystallized in anti-Muslim violence since the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into power in 2014. Journalist Jency Jacob, a fact-checker with BoomLive, noted a trend after every major social and political event in India: the Uri terror attack and the subsequent surgical strikes in Pakistan in September 2016, the Pulwama attack on armed forces and the resultant Balakot airstrike into Pakistan in February and March 2019, the abrogation of article 370 in Kashmir and bifurcation of the only Muslim-dominated state of Jammu & Kashmir in August 2019, the Supreme Court judgement transferring disputed Ayodhya land to a government trust for the Hindu temple of Lord Ram in November 2019, protests against the National Population Register (NPR), the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019. After each case, Jacob suggests, a surge of anti-Muslim propaganda and discourse has appeared.

Recently, right-wing Hindu radicals have shifted the focus of anti-Muslim narratives from the external enemy Pakistan, to the internal enemy of Indian Muslims living in the country — 'the enemy within.' Anti-Muslim propaganda was formerly reserved predominantly for Kashmiri nationals for having aspirations to secede from India. Indians supporting the Kashmir cause were called the '*tukde tukde* gang' — the gang that wants to divide India. With the revocation of article 370 guaranteeing Kashmir's special status, the distant possibility of holding a referendum for independence from India now stands nullified. Consequently, right-wing Hindu radicals have turned their attention to the larger Indian Muslim community within India. A shift in access to social media in recent years has also radically altered the information ecosystem in the country.

India Pre-COVID: Mounting Communalist Tensions

This shift from Pakistan to Muslims internally became pertinent in the wake of widespread December protests by Muslims from various social locations — students, housewives and elderly ladies in hijab, religious figures, working-class men, activists, and artists — to the controversial CAA, which critics argued would make Indian Muslims into second-class citizens, and the NRC, which many Muslims fear may be used by the Modi government to revoke citizenship status and render them stateless or remove non-citizen Muslims.[15] The sight of Muslim women leading protests in India for constitutional rights (not just religious) was especially rare. Many protesters deemed the CAA to be against India's constitution, which guarantees equal citizenship for people regardless of their religion. Critics of the protests labelled those opposing the citizenship law anti-national and anti-Hindu.[16] The BJP and its supporting ecosystem that has fervently stoked in Hindu nationalism, were among the critics of the protests, choosing to term those criticising Modi and his policies as anti-nationals. Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah strongly defended the citizenship law[17] and took a dig at the mostly Muslim protestors, suggesting violent protestors could be identified by their clothes and should instead protest Pakistan's 'atrocities' against religious minorities.[18] The branding of protestors as anti-national was later picked up by others within the BJP, giving rise to calls to "shoot the traitors" — *desh ke gaddaron ko, goli maaro saalo ko.[19]* The equation of CAA protestors with Muslim anti-nationals and the enemy of Hindus thus evinces a shift towards explicit anti-Muslim sentiment directed not only towards Pakistan but Indian Muslims.

It is in this context that the Tablighi Jamaat gathering should be seen. Barely two weeks before the gathering, clashes between pro- and anti- CAA protestors resulted in the most horrific communal violence in Delhi in recent decades, with the targeted killings of Muslims and widespread destruction of Muslim

property.[20] The February riots created intense public reactions of anger and hate, thus exacerbating existing Hindu-Muslim tensions just before the Tablighi Jamaat retreat occupied news media attention.[21] Muslims were already living under fear before the COVID-19 crisis hit India, but since the Jamaat case, this fear has multiplied exponentially. Social media posts about COVID-19, which had primarily centered around social distancing, handwashing, and sanitisation, lit up overnight with posts communalising the virus. The Tablighi Jamaat gathering, as well as reports of Muslims who had contracted COVID-19, provided a tailor-made opportunity for the Hindu right-wing. "Every hate needs an impetus, and for the Indian right-wingers, it came in the form of the Tablighi Jamaat," Jacob observed.[22] Further, this sentiment that Muslims are anti-national or 'the enemy within' emerges again and again in Hindu nationalist attacks against the Tablighi Jamaat after the mid-March gathering, and later, Muslims across India, as we will see. In turn, fears amongst Indian Muslims of the government, made sharper by the CAA, NRC, and NPR, have impeded the government's COVID-19 response.

Social Media Access in India: A Shifting Landscape

To appreciate the Tablighi Jamaat case more fully, it is necessary to appreciate the rapidly changing social media landscape in India. Whatsapp, the Facebook-owned instant messaging app with 2 billion users worldwide and over 400 million users in India[23] —— the biggest market of WhatsApp users —— is the largest source of COVID-19 misinformation in the form of images, videos, memes and posts, followed by Facebook and Twitter. Pratik Sinha, co-founder of the digital fact-checking platform, AltNews, has recorded a tremendous increase in the scope of misinformation, false claims, incendiary fake news and rumours circulating in India through these social media channels over the last four years.[24] The entry of Reliance-owned Jio Mobiles, who provides free calls and unlimited data, into the Indian telecom market in 2016 led to a restructuring of the telecom market, pressuring competitors to give cheaper data and increasing the penetration of wireless infrastructure in rural areas at an unprecedented pace.[25] This proved to be the biggest game-changer in broadening the access of Indians, especially rural Indians, to social media and instant messaging. If earlier rumours were limited to urban and wealthier areas with access to the internet and social media, the availability of free data —— and the widespread penetration of WhatsApp into the market —— has enabled their elevation to provincial, regional, and even national levels, leading to pervasive misinformation and in the present instance, hate-mongering. Such claims are further supported by poor reporting and journalistic sensationalism, as well as targeted campaigns by certain news agencies on the regional and national levels.

With a national lockdown seeing millions of people confined to their homes, social media and WhatsApp have especially become a go-to source of information.[26] As people try to make sense of the global crisis and panic surrounding them, the consumption and spread of fake news, conspiracy theories, unverified claims, and extremist narratives have seen an upsurge. This paper draws on such misinformation circulated on popular Indian social media WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and the relatively-new platform, TikTok. The COVID-19 crisis has provided an apt opportunity for right-wing and Hindu radical groups to exploit the fears of the majority community to incite hatred and violence against Muslims using these platforms. Sinha argues the social media barrage of hate propaganda against Muslims during the pandemic is not unexpected: "We have not reached this stage of polarisation overnight; it's been built up from the last many years."[27]

The Evolution of Anti-Muslim Rhetoric in the Pandemic

Social media misinformation around the COVID-19 pandemic was supported by a prevailing sense of fear, panic, and anxiety around the virus, driven by a limited availability of facts on the origin of the

pathogen, its transmission, and ways to contain it. As an emergent pathogen, little was known about the disease when it arrived in India, except that it is highly contagious and sometimes fatal, especially for elderly and immunocompromised persons.[28] In the Indian context, social media trends show the evolution of Indian sentiment towards the virus as the pandemic progressed, transforming from initial phases of generalized paranoia, fear, and panic to the current phase of irrational, anti-Muslim hate-mongering. Below we present a general periodization of social media misinformation across the pandemic, recognizing that this periodization captures broader trends rather than minutiae and that these are flexible timepoints across various social media platforms rather than strict ones.

Phase 1 (January)

When the virus was offshore and limited to China, many videos circulating false information about China went viral on Indian social media: Chinese police were thought to be shooting infected patients in the streets,[29] footage of an Indonesian wet-market was circulated as footage of the Wuhan wet-market at the epicenter of the outbreak,[30] and videos of people, supposedly in Wuhan under lockdown, were shown screaming and crying for help.[31] At this stage, the bulk of the misinformation circulating on social media was directed at China.

Phase 2 (February to early March)

When the first COVID-19 cases emerged in India at the end of January and the start of February, there was a flood of health-related misinformation advising people to drink warm beverages, eat certain kinds of food to raise immunity and keep the virus away.[32] The ministry of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy) was severely criticised by the medical community for promoting bunkum in advising the use of homeopathy and unani medicines to prevent coronavirus infections.[33]

Phase 3 (early March to the present)

As the number of positive cases began rising in India and the number of dead increased in Europe, there was a growing clamour to hold China responsible for spreading the virus around the world. Indian social media accounts started labeling COVID-19 as #ChineseVirus #WuhanVirus in early March.[34] Photos and videos of mass graves and bodies dumped in pits were passed off as victims of coronavirus and warning of the forthcoming doom that people in India would have to face.[35]

Figure 3 Twitter post showing a caricature of a Tablighi member as a suicide bomber using covid virus as explosives

Figure 4 Caricature shared by a Twitter user accusing China as a producer of the virus and Jamaat members as its distributors

Figure 5 Photoshopped image of a snake wearing skull cap releasing virus droplets. The user on Twitter shared with a post, ``These types of snakes are found in Tablighi Jamaat...very poisonous spit corona from 2 meter away.

As the total number of confirmed cases surged following the Jamaat gathering from March 13 to 15th, social media posts shifted from the threat China poses to India, to the threat Jamaat poses to India. Posts and hashtags began labelling Jamaat members as Jaahil (uncouth or uncivilised) Markaz pigs, and Nizamuddin Idiots, and the virus as the Tablighi Jamat (sic) Virus. On March 31st, the hashtag #CoronaJihad trended in second place on Twitter in India.[36] Images combining conspiracy theories about China and the Tablighi Jamaat also began to circulate, and by the start of April, images blatantly comparing the Tablighi Jamaat (or Indian Muslims generally) to terrorists or venomous snakes became widespread on social media. As we later describe, it is in early April when a wave of Islamophobic attacks began across the country.

Common Themes in Social Media Response to COVID-19

In this section, we describe common themes in social media commentary on COVID-19 and the Tablighi Jamaat gathering. As is clear, some videos ostensibly created by members of the Muslim community were woven into broader Hindu nationalist rhetoric about Muslims.

Theme 1: Muslims Believe they are Immune to COVID-19

At the start of the pandemic, some Muslims apparently took to social media claiming that they have no fear of COVID-19 as it could not affect Muslim believers. One video from TikTok (see figure 6), shared on Facebook on April 3rd (with 15k likes), shows a masked man asking another with a skull cap, "where is he going?" The man with the skullcap replies, "to the mosque," to which the interlocutor asks,

Figure 6 Screengrab of Tik Tok video

"aren't you scared of coronavirus?" The man with the skullcap responds, "we only fear Allah, not anyone's father. And coronavirus is not worthy enough to attack Namazis [people who pray]."[37] Along similar lines, another TikTok video (see figure 7) from March 21st by @snofficial (3 million views) shows one man trying to shake hands with his three friends on the street. When one of them refuses, "no brother I will get corona... I will die," the man in the black shirt expresses surprise, saying, "out of fear of death, we should leave *Sunnat* today and Islam tomorrow?" The reluctant friend, enlightened by his friend's Islamic commentary proceeds to hug him as the man in the black shirt claims, "we are Muslims and therefore we are not afraid to die."[38] Both of the aforementioned TikTok videos received condemnation, with one commentator calling them "vile creatures."[39]

In a video clip of anti-CAA protests in Shaheen Bagh, Delhi, from March 20th, a protestor opines, "there is no corona here at Shaheen Bagh. We know that. They might be afraid of the corona. Corona emerged from the Quran. What is Corona? Deadlier diseases that corona will come. God willing, we will remain unscathed

Figure 7 Screengrab of Tik Tok video showing friends on the street refusing to shake hands

from those diseases. However, it is a matter of concern for them. They should be worried."[40] This video received much media coverage and commentary on social media. In another compilation of video clips from Shaheen Bagh under the heading, "Coronavirus Jihad: Muslims in India defy lockdown— threaten unbelievers and CAA supporters," first shared by Amy Mek, an American Trump supporter and anti-Muslim propagandist on March 25th, several women at the anti-CAA protest sites praised the virus. One woman says, "it is written in the Quran that a virus would come; that virus's name is corona. We are always ready and strong. If you think you can scare us by using corona, death will come anyway; don't try to scare us in the guise of this disease."[41]

Further, an unverified audio clip attributed to Muhammad Saad Kandhlavi, a Jamaat preacher and the organizer of the Nizamuddin congregation, allegedly shows him calling Muslims to reject social distancing and continue to gather at mosques. Saad apparently opines, "they say that the infection will spread if you gather at a mosque, this is false...If you die by coming to the mosque, then this is the best place to die."[42] Though not explicitly rejecting outright the lethality of COVID-19 for Muslims, it appears Kandhlavi does downplay the possibility of transmission at mosques and advises against observing social distancing guidelines. Together, these videos, mostly from the end of March, produced the impression that Muslims need not be afraid of COVID-19, stoking claims that Muslims were either ignorantly or willingly transmitting the virus at protest sites and elsewhere.

Theme 2: Muslims Believe COVID-19 is Divine Punishment

A second wave of videos, allegedly by Muslim Indians, claimed that COVID-19 was a gift from Allah to punish the enemies of Islam and those who support the National Registration of Citizens exercise feared to render millions of Muslim citizens stateless. A 14-second TikTok clip that circulated widely on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp around April 2nd showed three Muslim men taking turns to say, "Welcome to India, coronavirus. To the ones who were for our NRC, my God (Allah)'s NRC is now being implemented. Now only He will decide who will stay and who will go."[43] A video from April 2nd that also caused outrage and spread panic, uploaded to TikTok by @ sayyedjameel48 (see figure 9), called the coronavirus divine

Figure 8 Screengrab of video shared by Amy Mek of RAIR Foundation, USA

punishment while licking and wiping his nose with currency notes. "There is no treatment for a disease like corona. It is a greeting by Allah, for you people." The creator was later arrested by the Maharashtra police.[44]

Such content gave fuel to right-wing extremists, who took these videos as proof that Indian Muslims are intentionally driving the COVID-19 pandemic. Karen Rebelo, deputy editor at BoomLive, observed that

Figure 9 Screengrab showing a man licking currency notes

the narrative by the Indian right-wing is that, "Muslims will always follow Islamic laws over the rule of law, which means that they won't follow instructions for their own good or the good of the community….[and] that Islam wants to punish kaffirs [nonbelievers] and actively spreading the virus would get rid of them."[45]

Sinha, editor-in-chief of AltNews, also claimed in an interview that the creators of misinformation, doctored content, false claims, and rumours do so to set a larger anti-Islam narrative to which new content is constantly added to sustain it: "when certain narratives against a community or a group of people click, then there is an attempt to push that narrative harder. In India, along with the surge in online hate speech, there is an increase in the narrative that Muslims are enemies of this country."[46] Thus, the Hindu right-wing ecosystem latched onto the factual elements of the Jamaat case — that the congregation of Tablighi Jamaat members contributed to an outbreak of COVID-19 infections — to spread misinformation about a grand Islamic conspiracy where Indian Muslims were deliberately defying the government-imposed lockdown to spread the virus. Muslims were to be seen as enemies of Hindus and India, thus justifying arguments that Muslims do not deserve to exist in India.

Theme 3: Muslims are Deliberately Spreading Coronavirus

A five-minute video compilation heavily circulated on WhatsApp and Telegram groups starts with the questions, "Why are Muslims Spreading Coronavirus? Why Muslims of India are threatening to spread the virus." It is followed by a recorded voice that declares, "we Muslims of India have taken a vow and are united to bring coronavirus in India have decided to spread it around. Look at our ghettos, no one is following social distancing, we will not sit at home." Next, the disembodied voice claims that Muslims were incited to spread the virus, as the Tablighi Jamaat congregation did. It ends with more clips of Muslims licking fruits and currency notes and the message, "India right now stands at 3000 corona cases, with 647 linked to Muslims from Tablighi Jamaat. In just 2 days. Rise above this hatred for Hindus and Hindustan."

Another category of popular videos that used the tags #CoronaJihad and #BioJihad depicted alleged members of the Tablighi Jamaat physically attacking and throwing stones on health workers, sanitation workers,[47] and police.[48] One of these videos showed an altercation in Indore, Madhya Pradesh (see figure 10), between locals and a team of doctors (611k views),[49] that emerged after rumours circulated that health workers were picking up

Figure 10 Screengrab from video in Madhya Pradesh showing Muslims attacking health workers, as shared on Twitter

Figure 11 Caricature depicting Muslims pushing various forms of Jihad, and Hindus ignoring them under the facade of secularism

healthy Muslims and injecting them with the virus.[50] These doctors were seeking to trace patients who may had come in contact with coronavirus. However, these videos circulated on Twitter and Facebook out of context and were misappropriated to advance a narrative that Tablighi Jamaat members (and Indian Muslims by extension) are an existential threat to the Indian people and healthcare workers who are working to protect them. This incident thus became more 'evidence' of Jamaat members engaging in 'jihad,' despite the fact the locals portrayed had no confirmed link to the Tablighi

Jamaat. With this event and other similar reports, stoning became an image associated with the Tablighi Jamaat and Indian Muslims. Further, news media reports and social media commentary framed this event in light of other alleged altercations by the Tablighi Jamaat, where members were sneezing and spitting on others, licking utensils and spitting on food, or urinating, and defecating in public.[51] Ultimately, this incident became incorporated into a broader narrative that the Tablighi Jamaat (and by extension, Indian Muslims) were uncivilised and a threat to the wellbeing of the Indian people in their 'jihad,' their (supposed) violent attempts to destroy India clear.

As we have described, the narratives of Muslims as a threat to the Hindu majority are not new to the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram, have been flooded in the last five years with anti-Muslim propaganda, memes, fake or doctored videos, all portraying the Muslim community in India as anti-Hindu.[52] These include discourses that Muslims are (1) terrorists, anti-nationals, and cow-killers, (2) engaged in 'population jihad' by having multiple children in polygamous marriages with the intention of eventually becoming the majority population in India, (3) are engaged in 'love jihad' by luring Hindu women into marriage and forced conversion, and (4) are engaged in 'land jihad' as they are trying to take over Hindu neighbourhoods by buying up Hindu-owned property.[53] In each narrative, Hindu nationalists construe Muslims as a threat to the Hindu majority — biologically, socially, religiously, nationally, and economically.

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, commenting on the hostile anti-Muslim sentiments in India during the pandemic, writes, "one of the key features of anti-Muslim sentiment in India for quite a while has been the idea that Muslims themselves are a kind of infection in the body politic... so there's a kind of affinity between this long-standing image and the new anxieties surrounding coronavirus."[54] It seems that the charge of 'corona jihad' against the Tablighi Jamaat is the continuation of these anti-Muslim sentiments, a convergence of prevalent conceptions of other forms of 'jihad.'

Following sensational reports that Tablighi Jamaat members have been sneezing, spitting, and urinating to spread the virus, several videos began circulating allegedly showing Indian Muslims spitting on other people or food to intentionally spread COVID-19. Unlike the videos described above, which were explicitly

attributed to the Tablighi Jamaat, these videos generally were not (though some commentators still made a link to Jamaat members). A video, actually depicting a situation in Thailand, went viral on Twitter on April 3rd, supposedly portraying an infected Indian Muslim spitting on a healthy man at a railway station.[55] In a since-deleted tweet, the account @ TheShaktiRoopa posted the video (with 65k views) with the caption "Is this not #CoronaJihad !!!?"[56] Another old video from 2019 showing a Muslim man at a fast-food stall[57] deliberately blowing in food containers before delivering them, which had already gone viral in UAE, Singapore, and Malaysia, was shared in Indian social media circles with claims that an Indian Muslim delivery man was spitting on the food.[58] Roop Darak, a BJP Youth leader and spokesperson from Telangana, posted the video (with 21.6k views) appealing to people to avoid purchasing from "such shops," that is, Muslim shops.[59] There are at least a dozen such videos with false claims. While these videos circulated in the wake of the Tablighi Jamaat gathering and were sometimes hashtagged with related phrases (e.g., #NizamuddinIdiots), many videos and posts circulated misinformation about Indian Muslims more generally.

Figure 12 Screengrab of an old video of a vendor licking fruits on his cart was shared as Muslims deliberately spreading the virus
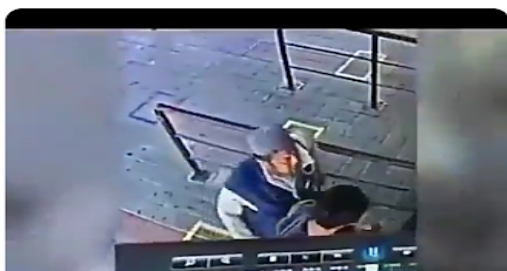

Figure 13 Screengrab of a video from Thailand of a Muslim man spitting on a commuter passed off as a scene in India.

While on balance, fact-checkers in India and law-enforcement agencies were able to disprove much of the false information spread in Hindu nationalist social media spheres for being incidents from before the pandemic or from foreign countries, the pernicious vilification of Indian Muslims had taken root.

It also appears that much of the content from Theme 1 and Theme 2, discussed above, could also be misinformation. Voyager Infosec, a Delhi-based cybersecurity and data analytics firm, investigated more than 30,000 clips on TikTok that were disseminated the week of April 3rd, finding a coordinated disinformation campaign aimed at the Indian Muslim community.[60] It appears that some of these videos, which recommend that Indian Muslims flout social distancing guidelines, are of foreign origin and are then dubbed in Hindi or Urdu. While Voyager Infosec rightly points out the consequences that such coordinated misinformation may spread misinformation amongst Muslims, there has heretofore been little attention paid to how these videos, as we have shown, then circulate in Hindu nationalist circles as evidence of 'corona jihad,' stoking anti-Muslim sentiments. Moreover, Voyager Infosec estimates that over 10 million users had watched the viral misinformation clips it surveyed, evidencing the importance of TikTok as a source of misinformation in India's social media ecosystem.

The Islamophobic commentary on the Tablighi Jamaat, has four, interconnected dimensions: 1) they are contaminated/contaminating, 2) they are 'uncivilised,' 3) they are deceptive, and 4) they are anti-national. The first derives, in part, from the simple fact of the COVID-19 outbreak at the Tabligh mid-March gathering.

Figure 14 Screenshot shared by factchecking news site AltNews of all the articles on old and doctored vidoes falsely claimed as those of Jamaat members.

However, it also seems particularly exacerbated by a popular sense of Muslims as a quasi-infection in the body of the Indian people, as Appadurai suggests. The sensational, mostly false reports, of Jamaat members spitting, licking, urinating, defecating, and sneezing seems to draw on the notion of Muslims as being of particular risk of contaminating India — widely shared cartoons of Tablighi Jamaat members with coronavirus particles as heads makes this discourse apparent visually. The second, that the Tablighi Jamaat are 'uncivilised' or 'Jaahil,' similarly emerges through stories of contaminating bodily functions, but also through viral stories of Jamaat members stoning health care workers, where Jamaat members are accused of violently attacking benevolent state employees. Images of the Tablighi Jamaat as venomous animals, often snakes, reinforces this discourse that their members are animal-like, not-human, wild and untamed, by virtue of their (supposed) flagrant and continued violation of social distancing. The third criticism levelled at the Tablighi Jamaat is that they are deceptive, covertly contaminating food or passing the virus to others on banknotes. The government's difficulty with tracing attendees of the Jamaat gathering also fostered these claims of deception, that members were concealing themselves from the authorities. Finally, these claims converge in the charge that Jamaat members are anti-national terrorists, secretly using COVID-19 to destroy Hindu India.

These four features of the anti-Tablighi Jamaat discourse became transposed onto broader Islamophobic discourse and discrimination. The Modi government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, to which we now turn our attention, has largely failed to dismantle such Islamophobic discourses. In fact, many government members themselves promulgated anti-Muslim narratives drawing on the same tropes.

Government Response to Anti-Muslim Sentiment Related to Coronavirus

It is not unusual for particular communities to experience stigmatisation when epidemics strike.[61] It becomes imperative, then, for governments to intervene early to neutralise stigma, build cross-community trust, and eradicate unjustifiable fears while they manage health emergencies. The World Health Organization argues that failure to address community stigmatization can result in harmful stereotypes

and present major barriers to seeking health care, thereby reducing early detection and treatment and exacerbating the spread of disease.[62] Immediately following the Tablighi Jamaat gathering, the Modi government did almost the exact opposite, promoting the idea that members were to blame for India's COVID-19 outbreak. After a rash of Islamophobic attacks in early April, the government then began to try to calm extreme communal tensions, albeit ineffectively.

Stoking Islamophobia: The BJP's Anti-Muslim Social Media Posts

The misinformation campaign and the vilification of the Indian Muslim community on social media over the Jamaat gathering has been duly aided and amplified from the top levels of the Indian government, starting from the union government, its state arms and other official agencies, elected representatives of the ruling BJP party, down to its 'IT Cell' and radical right-wing supporters.

As the stigmatising narrative that Muslims are carriers of COVID-19 spread following the Tablighi Jamaat incident, both central and Delhi government began to highlight the positive cases tied to the congregation in its press conferences and releases, instead of issuing statements to reduce anti-Muslim sentiment.[63] Health journalist Vidya Krishnan noted that since late March, the Tablighi Jamaat gathering altered the nature of India's COVID-19 briefings, with discussions of the gathering receiving more time in briefings than any other topic raised by reporters, such as questions about personal protective equipment, testing strategies, and community transmission.[64]

The daily briefings by the Health Ministry, which represent the only source of official data related to COVID-19 for news media, featured detailed statistics on "cases whose epidemiological linkage can be traced to the Tablighi Jamaat cluster."[65] Officials laid the blame for the surge in the number of positive cases on the congregation and their travel across the country. Lav Agarwal, joint secretary in India's Ministry of Health, noted that "our doubling rate is 4.1 days at present. But if additional cases reported due to the Tablighi Jamaat had not happened, then the doubling rate would have been 7.4 days," emphasising firmly the better position the country would have been had the gathering not occurred. [66] The government also pointed out that nearly a third[67] of the total cases in India are linked to the Tablighi Jamaat congregation, "one particular place where we could not sort of understand it and manage it."[68]

The incendiary hashtags on social media circulating after the Jamaat gathering (e.g., #CoronaJihad,

Figure 15 BJP Delhi leader Kapil Mishra's tweet on April 1st, reads ``Tablighi Jamaat people have started to spit on workers and doctors in quarantine centers. It is clear, their intention is to kill maximum people. They should be treated like terrorists
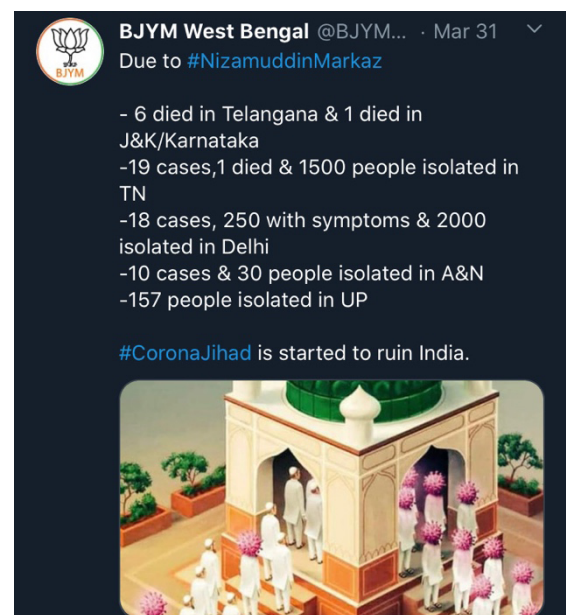
Figure 16 Twitter post shared by BJP's West Bengal Youth Wing with #CoronaJihad

#NizamuddinTerrorists, #NizamuddinIdiots, #MarkazTerrorists) also mirrors the language used by the top rung of the ruling BJP. A report in Time magazine claimed that between March 28th, and April 3rd, tweets with #CoronaJihad appeared almost 300,000 times and were seen by approximately 165 million people on Twitter.[69] In this period and the days following, BJP officials and social media accounts propagated similar rhetoric online that linked Indian Muslims to terrorism or 'corona jihad.' On April 1st, BJP legislator Sangeet Singh Som, popular for his hardline anti-beef stance and tacit support for the lynching of Muslims over allegations of beef eating,[70] told a national Hindi news channel that the Tablighi Jamaat gathering was akin to terrorism: "you will call it corona terrorism."[71] This interview was also posted to Som's Facebook page.[72] Another BJP leader from Delhi, Kapil Mishra (see figure 15), responding to reports of Tablighi Jamaat leaders spitting on healthcare workers, wrote, "these are terrorists and they should be treated like terrorists."[73] In the same vein, Mukthar Abbas Naqvi, Minister of Minority Affairs and the party's only Muslim minister, described the meeting held by Jamaat as a "Talibani crime."[74] And perhaps most disturbingly, the youth wing of the BJP in West Bengal tweeted an image showing two Muslims, whose heads had been drawn as coronavirus particles, entering a mosque from one door. All the people exiting from the other door were drawn with coronavirus heads, visually reproducing a narrative that Indian Muslims, by their very constitution, are a contamination threat. The tweet begins "Due to #NizamuddinMarkaz," followed by a regional tally of COVID-19 cases and deaths, and the claim that "#CoronaJihad is started (sic) to ruin India."[75] Finally, BJP legislator from Karnataka, Anant Kumar Hegde, posted a long rant in Kannada on Facebook titled, "The secret organisation for disinfecting nationwide — Inside Tablighi Jamaat,' explicitly floating the notion that the Islamic reformist organisation was spreading the pandemic as a part of its strategy to Islamise the world.[76]

Besides linking the Jamaat members with terrorism, BJP members also propagated false claims on social media that Jamaat members refused to cooperate in quarantine and assaulted hospital staff, adding to contested social media reports that Jamaat members defecated openly and threw bottles of urine around the isolation wards.[77] In this vein, Shobha Karandlaje, a BJP legislator from Karnataka, tweeted a video supposedly showing quarantined Tablighi Jamaat members misbehaving with health workers, dancing and spitting everywhere.[78] Moreover, the head of BJP's IT Cell, Amit Malviya, tweeted on April 5th a graph showing a steep rise in the cases due to Tablighi Jamaat and claimed, "instead of spitting and stoning our frontline health workers, they [the Tablighi Jamaat] need to apologise and off (sic) course start behaving responsibly."[79] Here, Malviya reproduced rumours of Tablighi Jamaat members intentionally spreading COVID-19 by spitting, reinforced the claim that their actions were a key driver of the national pandemic, and invoked reports of 'stoning' to imply their actions have been both violent and 'uncivilised.'

Although the BJP's national president, Jagat Prakash Nadda, tried to rein in party leaders, calling on them to avoid communalising the pandemic, the narrative that Tablighi Jamaat members (and by extension, other Indian
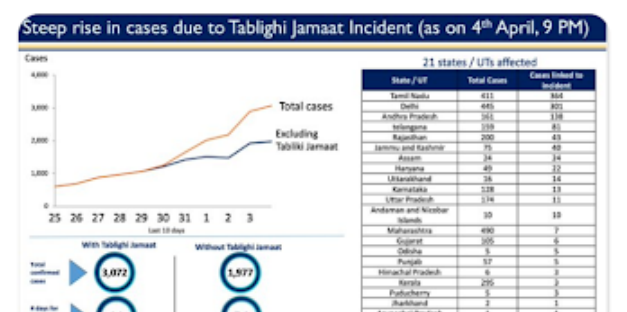

Figure 17 Twitter post shared by BJP chief of Information Cell Amit Malviya accompanied by a graph showing upward trend in cases due to Jamaat members

Muslims) were deliberately spreading the infection had already escalated out of control.[80] On March 31, #CoronaJihad was trending on Twitter after news broke that 24 members of Tablighi Jamaat had tested positive for COVID-19. In the days following, as we have shown, BJP leadership actively participated in sharing the hashtag and its sentiments.[81] After March 31, there emerged a flood of fake videos, memes and posts began flooding Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram (described above) supposedly portraying Muslim men trying to infect others with coronavirus by dropping currency notes on the ground, contaminating vegetables at a market, spitting on food at restaurants, spitting at police officers, and licking plates and utensils, and intentionally sneezing at a mosque.[82]
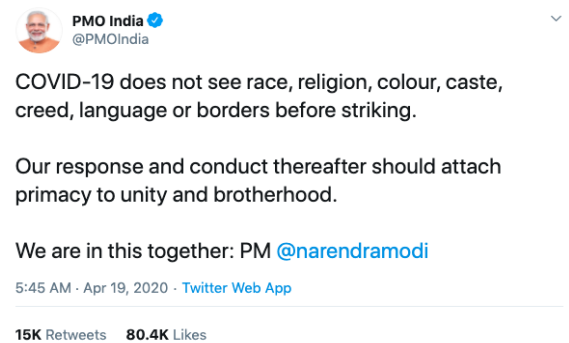
A Muslim researcher in India told us that the hatred spewed on news channels and social media is so vile that Muslims across the spectrum — elites, writers, journalists, movie stars, artists, teachers, doctors, service personnel, poor and the common man — feel targeted. "The Jamaat is orthodox and like all people of faith don't care about death. They definitely acted stupidly, and it is a grave mistake, but accusing them and the entire community of terrorism and of plotting to spread the infection is taking it too far."[83] Their assessment of the sentiment towards Indian Muslims reflects the palpable fear experienced by the minority community due to growing resentment and polarisation emerging out of the Tablighi Jamaat gathering.

Warning Against Community Polarisation

Governments at the state and national levels have been somewhat slow to respond to the increase in Islamophobic rhetoric. In Delhi, where the Jamaat congregation took place, the local government's daily health bulletin on COVID-19 initially marked a select category of infections: 'positive cases — Markazz Masjid.'[84] Khalid Rasheed, the chairman of the Islamic Center of India, characterized the government's handling of the crisis as playing a "blame game" with Muslims, adding that "if you present the cases based on somebody's religion in your media briefings... it creates a big divide."[85] This was eventually changed to positive cases 'under special operation' in mid-May,[86] after the Delhi Minorities Commission reportedly objected to it because it could stoke anti-Muslim sentiments.[87]

PMO India ✔
@PMOIndia

COVID-19 does not see race, religion, colour, caste, creed, language or borders before striking.

Our response and conduct thereafter should attach primacy to unity and brotherhood.

We are in this together: PM @narendramodi

5:45 AM · Apr 19, 2020 · Twitter Web App

15K Retweets   **80.4K** Likes

Figure 18 PM Modi's tweet urging Indians to maintain unity and brotherhood, in the aftermath of the controversy

In Prime Minister Modi's home state of Gujarat, authorities at the Ahmedabad Civil Hospital decided to segregate COVID-19 Hindu patients in different wards from Muslim patients for "the comfort of both communities," no doubt contributing to further polarisation.[88] In comparison, the response in states not governed by the BJP, like Maharashtra, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh, was almost the opposite. Chief ministers advised citizens to avoid communalising the crisis and to stay vigilant for rumours and misinformation blaming the Muslim community. When referring to infections related to the Jamaat gathering in press briefs, officials referred to the congregation as a 'single source event.' These states adopted a more empathetic tone and sought to build trust with residents, working with Jamaat leaders to trace the attendees of the congregation instead of condemning them.[89]

It was only after the WHO[90] and UN representative in India raised concerns and emphasized the need to fight "stigmatisation of certain sects of people" on April 7th that the Central government began to act against the targeting of the Muslim community.[91] The next day, the Health Ministry issued an advisory warning about the potential of social stigmatisation in pandemics and the hostility and social disruptions

it may produce, though it did not explicitly address the stigmatisation of Tablighi Jamaat or Muslims more broadly.[92] The central government also wrote to all the state governments expressing serious concern over the "polarising public opinion on religious lines" and the perception among non-Muslims that a "particular community" was not taking the pandemic seriously. They also advised states to take "strict action against fake/provocative posts."[93] However, India's representative to the UNESCO Executive Board later rejected the UN's comments as "highly objectionable" and characterized them as undue "interference," claiming "such matters are being looked after by the government, enlightened citizens, and the civil society in the country."[94]

While the BJP has reprimanded some legislators who have made Islamophobic comments on social media related to COVID-19, it has apparently not provided a strong enough disincentive, as such comments have continued throughout April. More recently, Delhi Chief Minister, Arvind Kejriwal, has also broken rank with his BJP counterparts from other states, explicitly arguing that it is unfair to blame the COVID-19 crisis on the Tablighi Jamaat.[95] This is relatively exceptional for the party, rather than the norm.

On April 19th, within an hour after the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation[96] (OIC), a collective of 57 Muslim countries, posted tweets criticising the "unrelenting vicious #Islamophobic campaign in #India maligning Muslims," Prime Minister Modi finally broke his silence (see figure 18) on the widespread anti-Muslim sentiment exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, taking to Twitter to call for "unity and brotherhood" as "COVID-19 does not see race, religion, colour, caste, creed, language or borders."[97] However, he has not clearly condemned the specifically anti-Muslim vitriol circulating throughout India. Without a coordinated, centralized response to this deeply entrenched Islamophobia, it does not appear as if the situation will improve, though state and local governments also play a role in shaping public perception of the crisis on the ground. We next turn to an analysis of news media coverage during the crisis that also contributed significantly to public perception of the Tablighi Jamaat gathering and circulating social media narratives.

News Media's Dog-Whistle Coverage

News media organisations, through TV broadcasts, social media posts, and newspapers, have also played a significant role in promoting anti-Muslim sentiment during the pandemic. For example, some stations represented official government statements and data without context to project that the Tablighi Jamaat gathering is the chief source of infections in India.[98] Some reports made dubious claims that as many as 60 percent of the new cases are attributed to the Jamaat gathering, and the editor-in-chief of Zee News tweeted that the gathering had "singlehandedly derailed India's containment effort."[99] A graphic posted by India Today, of government COVID-19 statistics around a floating head with a skull cap, represents a similar line of thinking. The graphic claims that nearly 60% of COVID-19 cases are linked to the Tablighi Jamaat, though it was later removed for erroneous representation of the data.[100]

Unsurprisingly, it was later reported that sampling bias resulted in the disproportionate numbers of coronavirus cases being attributed to the Tablighi Jamaat gathering. As testing elsewhere in the country is infrequent, many cases go unrecorded.[101]
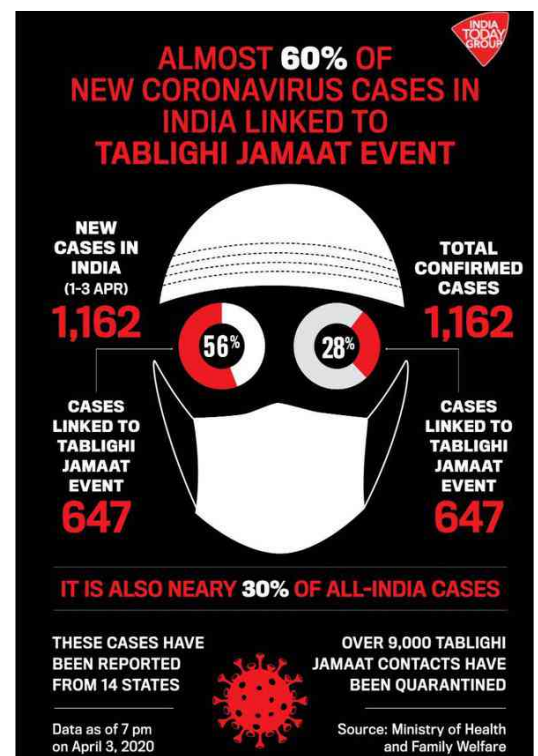

Figure 19 Graphic released by India Today news channel showing a skull capped and masked figure, was called out for being Islamophobic

Figure 20 Noida police calling out misinformation by ANI news agency which mentioned quarantining of people who came in contact with Jamaat members

As such, the government's aggressive testing of Tablighi attendees gave the impression that the gathering was somehow responsible for a higher percentage of the total cases in India[102] A coalition of Indian scientists who organized to provide accurate information and challenge misinformation, The Indian Scientists' Response to Covid-19 (ISRC), dismissed government and media speculation that the Jamaat convention is primarily responsible for the continued growth of positive cases. Similar to the report pointing out the issue of sampling bias, the ISRC claimed that the government had not released data on how many tests were conducted among the attendees of this event and their contacts, and as such, "we do not know how the fraction of tests that were found to be positive in this case compares to testing on the general population." Consequently, they called on the government to release updated COVID-19 data and rejected "any attempt to communalise the pandemic."[103]

Not only did some news media organizations encourage speculation about Jamaat-linked cases by taking government data out of context, but they also circulated sensationalised or fabricated reports of inappropriate behaviour by Jamaat members, reinforcing the notion that most cases are linked to the gathering. On April 4th, the Hindi paper Amar Ujala published a report from Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, under the headline 'Jamaatis admitted in the quarantine ward ask for non-vegetarian food, throw the food, defecate in the open,' giving credit to social media misinformation.[104] The Saharanpur police debunked the report, but the article

Figure 21 Republic TV panel discussion demanding authorities to crackdown on unruly Jamaat members in quarantine

remains on the Amar Ujala Facebook page, where it has been shared over 5,000 times.[105] Four days later, a leading news wire agency, ANI, quoted local officials claiming that residents in Noida believed to have been in contact with Tablighi Jamaat members have been quarantined. Local officials responded that residents in contact with positive COVID-19 cases had been quarantined, rather than just those in contact with Jamaat members, and accused ANI of "misquoting and spreading fake news." The agency subsequently corrected its report.[106]

An analysis of India's most-read Hindi daily paper, Dainik Jagran, also evinces a pattern of Islamophobic coverage of the Tablighi Jamaat incident. Between March 28th and April 11th, the Indian Journalism Review found that 171 stories, editorials, opinion columns had headlines that contained the keywords Tablighi Jamaat, Jamaat, Jamaati, Markaz, and Nizamuddin. As they incisively note, this is "more than 10 reminders a day, on average, of the six key words. A sample of these headlines also belies the unfavourable framing of

the group by the paper: 'Call for Jamaat patients to be housed in jails,' 'Jamaatis distributed sweets on bus,' 'Jamaat's mistake costs the society,' 'Tablighi Jamaat had made Varanasi its `base camp,' 'Big negligence,' 'Anti-national negligence.'[107]

On Hindi and English language television channels, special investigation reports, panel discussions, and debates during primetime further reproduced the vilification of the

Figure 22 Times Now discussion labelling Jamaat members as timebomb

Jamaat and Muslims. On April 7th, Republic TV held a panel discussion titled '#CrackdownOnTablighis,' demanding action against Jamaat members for allegedly spitting, urinating, and defecating in quarantine centers, despite these reports being found false. One panelist went so far to opine, "I don't think they [Tablighi Jamaat members] are part of civil society. I don't think they are human beings. No human being will behaving in this uncivil manner."[108] In another debate titled '#TablighGoesOffGrid,' hosted by TimesNow on April 8th in its Newshour program, anchor Navika Kumar informed viewers that "India is not just fighting coronavirus, it is also racing against a ticking Tablighi timebomb... thanks to the Tabligh, 2 lakh [200,000] people could be at risk of getting coronavirus for no fault of theirs." She also floated the idea of filing murder charges against some 500 Tablighs who are 'hiding like criminals.'[109] News18India also ran a similar discussion on its show, AarPaar, called *Dharm ke naam pan Jaanleva Adharm* ('threatening life in the name of religion'), and ABP News aired a segment called 'Nizamuddin increases the risk of coronavirus. Who is the villain?'[110]

Figure 23 India Today's news coverage on Madrasa hotspots

Other special reports took aim at Muslims generally, rather than the Tablighi Jamaat in particular. In its evening show DNA Analysis, on April 10th, Zee News ran a program in Hindi investigating people violating lockdown orders in the 'name of religion,' showing only examples of Muslims attending namaz prayers in large numbers in mosques in West Bengal's Murshidabad district and Madhya Pradesh's Chhindwara.[111] The report, drawing on the language of war, polemically claims "this is the 17th day of the lockdown, but even today, there is a big section [of the country] which is not ready to abide by the lockdown. These people want India to lose the battle against coronavirus. We therefore prefer to call such people enemies of lockdown."[112] Anchor Sudhir Chaudhary also invited viewers to tweet and comment under the hashtag #LockdownKeDushman, or 'enemies of lockdown.' The hashtag subsequently went viral with over 22,000 tweets.[113]

On the same day, India Today aired a special investigation in English on its primetime show Newstrack,

exposing "Madrasa Hotspots." The sting operation on three madrasas in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh claimed that teachers were underreporting the number of kids in each class and cramming them into small rooms, thus defying social distancing guidelines.[114] However, many of these kids belonged to low-income families from outside Delhi and were sheltered in the school premises, as they were unable to travel home under the lockdown condition, a fact concealed in the investigation. Delhi police officials also confirmed that the reports of two madrasas 'hiding' children was incorrect. These madrasas also had no link to the Tablighi Jamaat, contrary to the initial report in the Newstrack special.[115] The investigation was quickly called out for inciting anti-Muslim sentiments and for inappropriately applying a religious lens to the victims of coronavirus, thus diverting attention from pressing issues such as rampant unemployment and a nationwide shortage of personal protective equipment.[116]

Taken together, the various news programs, reports, and debates aired during the pandemic repeated unverified claims and misinformation circulated on social media, reinforcing narratives that Jamaat members were spitting, defecating radicals who, after defying government orders to hold religious congregations, went into hiding, abused health workers in quarantine centers, and are now putting the rest of the country at risk with their unruly behaviour. Continuous coverage like this certainly contributed to the communalisation of the public health emergency, diffracting threats of the coronavirus through an Islamophobic lens that construed the Tablighi Jamaat, and Indian Muslims more broadly, as contaminated/contaminating, 'uncivilised,' deceptive, and anti-national. The government, social media narratives, and news media organisations thus constituted a dynamic ecosystem of information where such constructions became entrenched and carried over into in-person interactions.

The Fallout from Anti-Muslim Sentiment

The demonisation of the Muslim community through the widespread circulation of misinformation, fake or sensational videos, and the implication of Muslims as human bombs, national enemies, or terrorists in the coverage of the COVID-19 health emergency has had two critical consequences. First, this noxious anti-Muslim rhetoric has spilled over into discrimination against Muslims. For example, a spree of anti-Muslim attacks broke out across the country in early April, with many of the aggressors justifying their actions with reference to 'corona jihad.'[117] In addition to anti-Muslim violence, there has been a general escalation of discrimination against Muslims in the form of economic boycotts and social ostracization. Further, the widespread anti-Muslim rhetoric has heightened fear and anxiety amongst Muslims of the government, and frontline workers doctors, nurses, police, and health workers on the ground have experienced physical attacks as a result. Such attacks, in turn, led to widespread anger amongst the majority community, who took the attacks as evidence that Muslims were undeserving of medical treatment, and the stigmatisation of Muslims has deterred individuals with potential COVID-19 infections from coming forward.

Physical Violence against Muslims

The rumours that Muslims are deliberately spreading COVID-19 has been associated with an increased number of violent attacks on Muslims. In Central India's Jharkhand district, rumours circulating on WhatsApp among villagers that a group of Muslim men travelling between villages and spitting on others led to clashes that resulted in the death of one youth and injuries to two others.[118] In the capital city of Delhi, a youth who returned from a Tablighi Jamaat congregation in another state was attacked by a mob who accused him of trying to spread COVID-19 like the Jamaat attendees at Nizamuddin. In the city of Gurgaon, a Muslim family was attacked after filming videos of the national candlelight event, 'diya jalao,' which was supposed to be an expression of solidarity in the health crisis. A group of men fired shots at

a mosque after hearing there might be infected individuals hiding inside. All three incidents took place around April 7th.[119]

Two days earlier, several Muslim truck-drivers carrying essential food supplies were assaulted in Arunachal Pradesh, allegedly by members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Hindutva paramilitary organisation.[120] Multiple incidents across the state of Karnataka were also reported, with mobs attacking Muslims or mosques for allegedly spreading COVID-19.[121] On April 4th and 6th, Muslim volunteers of the NGO Swaraj Abhiyan were assaulted by local BJP members while distributing food packets among stranded migrant workers in Bangalore. One volunteer recalls the aggressors saying, "you are not allowed to give out rations — you are Muslims, so you all are terrorists spreading the disease. We know you are spitting in the rations and have come from Tablighi Jamaat to spread the virus."[122] From a survey of these attacks, it becomes clear that several of the images of Muslims circulated by governmental officials, news media, and social media — Muslims as contaminating and 'uncivilised' spitters, as deceptive terrorists hiding infected people in mosques, as waging an anti-Hindu 'corona jihad' led by the Tablighi Jamaat — had penetrated the consciousness of many Indians and motivated physical violence.[123]

Figure 24 Poster outside a village in Madhya Pradesh prohibiting entry to Muslims

Calls for Economic and Social Boycott of Muslims

While the prejudice directed around Muslims during the pandemic has erupted into physical violence, it has also manifested on the ground in the form of economic and social ostracisation. Such calls have persisted on social media for some time. However, during the pandemic, several cases have come to light where Muslims have been discriminated against and barred from running their business out of fears they might pass along COVID-19. In Punjab's Jalandhar district, the Muslim Gujjar community, involved in rearing cattle and supplying milk, complained that they were not allowed to supply milk or buy groceries in the village due to a rumour that they were linked with the Tablighi Jamaat.[124] A village in Madhya Pradesh put up a poster (see figure 20) in Hindi at the entry point stating, "vyapar ke liye is gaon me Musalmano ka aana pratibandhit hai" (the entry of Muslims for business purpose is prohibited in this village), though it appears the poster was dated from earlier in the pandemic.[125] Similar posters in Kannada have been found on telephone poles in many parts of the Kolya neighbourhood in Mangalore, Karnataka, reading "in the interest of 2nd Kolya residents, no Muslim trader is allowed in our village till the Coronavirus issue settles down completely."[126]

Several videos have also emerged on social media, bearing witness to altercations between Hindu vigilantes and Muslim vendors. At least three videos on social media show men asking for IDs of fruits and vegetable vendors in Uttarakhand, threatening to report and shut down Muslim shops following coverage of more positive Jamaati cases.[127] Another viral video from Shastri Nagar, Delhi, appears to show residents claiming that Muslims will not be allowed entry to sell any goods, as "these people have spread filth."[128] While the video has not been verified, some residents affirmed support for a ban on Muslim entry into the neighbourhood. A third video from Badarpur, Delhi, shows a man asking a masked vegetable vendor for his

ID card. When he responds that he did not have one, and he did not know he was supposed to carry one, the man angrily asks for the vendor's name. Upon hearing his reply, 'Mohammad Saleem,' he takes up a baton and starts beating him, yelling, "Motherfucker, Mohammed, are you watching TV every day. Leave from here, don't enter again without an ID. You fuckers have caused a jihad."[129]

NDTV News reported that in Uttar Pradesh's Mahoba district, vegetable vendors were abused and stopped from selling their goods by a group of locals who accused them of being a part of the Tablighi Jamaat. In their complaint to the police, the vendors recalled how some men came and told shoppers that "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."[130] More recently, a video of a BJP legislator, Suresh Tiwari, went viral on Twitter on April 28th depicting him advising against buying vegetables from Muslim vendors, later justifying his remarks by pointing out a surge of COVID-19 cases after the Tablighi Jamaat gathering.[131] Despite the BJP formally censuring Tiwari for his comments, another BJP legislator, Brijbushan Rajput, was recorded in a video that went viral the next day harassing a Muslim vegetable vendor, as he allegedly believed there was a high incidence of COVID-19 among vegetable vendors in the area.[132]

With many Muslims in India employed in the informal sector, such as selling vegetables, Islamophobic news coverage and social media rumours of the Tablighi Jamaat gathering, and Muslims more generally, has not only produced physical violence but also challenges for working and earning a living. Economic and social isolation of Muslims seems to be a response to a fear that Muslims are especially contagious, and that they seek to wage 'corona jihad' against India in marketplaces. The emphasis on identifying Muslims in these stories (asking for government ID, asking for a name) points to the construction of Muslims as deceptive, as 'the enemy within' that must be actively identified to protect other unsuspecting Hindus.

Impacts on India's Public Health Response

The religious profiling and stigmatisation of the Indian Muslim community has created an atmosphere of fear, deterring self-reporting and making contact tracing of infected individuals difficult.[133] The hounding of Tablighi Jamaat attendees, exacerbated by the actions of the government, police, news media, and social media commentators is, in fact, posing a barrier against detection and treatment, thereby increasing the susceptibility of those in the immediate contact and surroundings. According to an NDTV report, police are tracing the attendees of the Jamaat gathering through cellphone location data, following up with all those whose GPS location in March signalled presence near the Nizamuddin Markaz Mosque for several days.[134] In the communally-sensitive state of Uttar Pradesh, police declared a reward of 5,000 rupees for informing the police about Jamaat members in hiding. While police claimed no actions would be taken against Jamaat members if they came forward voluntarily, they noted, "if the information about them comes to us through another source, strict action will be initiated against them."[135] The threat of legal action for failing to self-report, negligence, non-cooperation, or deliberate flouting of lockdown guidelines, has created an impediment for Jamaat members to come forward and disclose their identities.[136] The fear of being labelled as a terrorist or criminal has overshadowed genuine appeals to the attendees to come forward and report themselves, and law enforcement agencies have launched search operations in mosques to locate more attendees.[137] Authorities fear delay in identifying and treating positive cases of Jamaat members could further spread the virus in the vicinity and infect others in their contact. As of April 13th, more than 27,000 Jamaat members and their contacts across 15 states had been quarantined, but some remain untraced.[138] It is presently unclear how efforts to trace Tablighi Jamaat attendees are progressing.

Fear amongst Indian Muslims over the National Population Register (NPR) exercise, which would provide a database of all usual residents of the country, has taken a new shape in the COVID-19 crisis. The population census survey and NPR, conducted once every ten years, involves enumerators visiting every household in the country collecting data on multiple parameters. Considered to be the precursor for the NRC that could potentially disenfranchise millions of Muslims and land them in detention centers, fear of the NPR has merged with the fear generated from the anti-Muslim tenor of the response to COVID-19. While the Modi government reiterated several times this year that it would carry out the NPR exercise, slated to being April 1st despite opposition from several states, it has since been postponed indefinitely in light of a now-extended lockdown.[139] But the fear that the government is covertly collecting data under the pretense of COVID-19 tracing is so prevalent among Muslims in places like Delhi and Maharashtra that health workers sent for door-to-door surveys to identify symptomatic cases have been harassed and attacked.[140] Residents said they feared that surveyors were gathering demographic-related data that would eventually be used in the NPR to detain and disenfranchise them. These videos of locals throwing stones at healthcare workers then circulated on social media as supposed evidence of Tablighi Jamaat's or Muslims' backwardness and proclivity for violence against the state and its representatives.

Conclusion

Anti-Muslim propaganda in India continues to be relentlessly shared by BJP members and affiliated right-wing networks, both on television and through social media channels. In recent months, starting from the top of the government with Prime Minister Modi, his right-hand Amit Shah, and close ally Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Adityanath Yogi, to state legislators, and down to individual party supporters, have injected tremendous amounts of vitriol into public discourse against the Tablighi Jamaat, fostering a hostile environment where violent outbursts and overt discrimination against Muslims becomes normalized and justified. With the Tablighi Jamaat acting as a high profile symbol of Muslims in India, the Indian Muslim community has been singled out, vilified, and accused of being contaminating/contaminated, 'uncivilised, deceptive, and anti-national terrorists seeking to violently convert Hindu India to a Muslim nation. Particularly concerning are the calls by government officials and supporters to commit acts of violence against Muslims, and the claim that Tablighi Jamaat or Muslims are not-human and outside of civil society, which seem to lay the foundation for violation of human rights and large-scale violence.

At a 2018 party rally, Shah remarked that BJP supporters are so powerful that they can make any message go viral on social media, regardless of its truthfulness. "They can send any message among the masses that we want, be it sweet or bitter, real or fake. This is possible because we made a WhatsApp group of 32 lakh [3.2 million] subscribers."[141] Here, then, is the party's acknowledgment of the tremendous power of the BJP's WhatsApp groups and social media volunteers to alter India's information landscape. In this crisis, however, WhatsApp and other social media channels have also been firmly implicated in an organised misinformation campaign to stoke Islamophobia. The BJP and Hindu nationals are also supported by pro-government news channels and alt-right digital media in sensationalising these claims, producing a veritable ecosystem of anti-Muslim propaganda. The extreme communalisation of COVID-19, initiated with the symbolic case of the Tablighi Jamaat, has polarised India's social fabric and will likely have serious implications for the internal security of India. Without a drastic reversal of course, it appears that this pernicious anti-Muslim rhetoric will only develop further, perhaps justifying larger-scale violence against Muslims in the future. Even if India wins the 'battle' against the coronavirus, presently, it seems impossible for it to overcome its Islamophobia problem.

Endnotes

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