

Responses to Covid–19: New Paradigms of Exclusion and Inclusion in Indian Society

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Abstract

This article will give a few examples of how the Covid–19 pandemic in India has sharpened pre-existing patterns. Religion was used for the purpose of a political argument during the course of the pandemic, and the resultant creation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ leaves a definite mark. The focus will be twofold: Firstly, I show how the government and the BJP are promoting themselves as the protectors of Hindu India against ‘intruders’ who are identified as the Muslims who live in the country. The popular viewpoint of Muslims being anti-national very quickly fed into the national narrative of Muslims being responsible for India’s first super-spreader events in early 2020. Secondly, I show how this point of view had repercussions on other aspects of social life and the very fabric of India. An interesting consequence of the religious angle is the creation of a new goddess or Shakti representation named Corona Devi (corona goddess), who some Hindus believe will be appeased by their worship.² Thus, the article will highlight how, in the light of Covid–19, social, religious and political divides gain centre-stage.

Keywords: Covid–19 and social divisions; political consequences; religious ‘solutions’

Introduction

The [Corona-pandemic] crisis seems to have thrown the dominant characteristics of each country’s politics into sharper relief. Countries have in effect become exaggerated versions of themselves. (Rodrik 2020)

Economist Dani Rodrik said this at a project syndicate meeting on 6 April 2020 and again at an international WHO meeting on 6 August the same year. He is referring to how countries have reacted economically during the corona pandemic, but his statement can

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2 A similar focus on goddess worship during the Corona-pandemic can be found in Frøystad 2021.

easily be applied to other spheres as well – not least when it comes to India. The same is also demonstrated by Alf G. Nilsen and Karl Von Holdt in an article from 2020, which concludes that the pandemic has provoked a more extreme version of politics in the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa).

It is observed that the years 2020 and 2021 were very busy for India's government: pushing through economic policies of various kinds; forcing through a new education policy even though almost all educational institutions were shut for at least the first 3–4 months; undertaking major construction projects like the Central Parliament Vista and the Ram Janmabhoomi Temple complex; merger of nationalised banks; disinvestment from national institutional assets (airports, railway stations, industries) that are almost as old or older than independent India; re-naming historical railway stations and towns; passing contentious farm laws; and turning a deaf ear to citizenship protests. The same applies when it comes to religion.

The government's underlying nationalistic rhetoric is acutely exclusive in nature and is being propagated and repeated through every possible channel. During the suddenly declared yet uncertain lockdown, very little effort was made to take care even of the bare necessities of forced participants in the largest migrant movement in the world, who were left entirely to their own resources. The readiness to find the Covid culprit in human assemblages of certain religious communities (the Tablighi Jamaat in New Delhi Feb–Mar 2020) and turning a blind eye to assemblages of Hindu communities (Khumb Mela gatherings; Durga Puja crowds etc.) have all been a part of the national response by an ostensibly secular government (42nd amendment 1976). As it happens, on the day Dani Rodrik made his statement, the first silver foundation bricks of a new Ram temple in Ayodhya were being laid as a government programme in contravention to the Constitution of India. The Ayodhya case exemplifies how an old conflict is given new life or strengthened in the corona pandemic's shadow. The event marked the last stage of a conflict that began on 6 December 1992, when big groups of Hindu nationalists destroyed part of a 16th-century mosque, the Babri Masjid, during a political rally. That also triggered violent riots against Muslims in several places in India. The temple's foundation is being built on exactly the same site as the demolished mosque.

Last year, the court allowed the temple's construction to continue, but it required more than 1,000 pages to justify this ruling, which is indicative of the gymnastics it had to

perform. Available evidence was subject to whitewashing and dressing to fit into the dominant narrative of the meaning of the 'desired nation'.

In the same week of laying the temple foundation, the Indian government also announced that it was suspending Article 370 of the constitution, which had till then granted limited autonomy to Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state. The article was aimed at protecting a special status for the Kashmiri state and its religious and ethnic identity, but one important consequence was the prevention of people from other places in India from settling there. The constitutional change of Kashmir was part of the campaign to create a 'New India.' It is another story that displaced Kashmiri Pandits (Hindu Brahmins) have not yet been brought back.

Similar to this, as is often argued, is the so-called Citizenship Amendment Act, passed in the parliament in December 2019, just before the corona pandemic struck. The Act provides a pathway to citizenship for any Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Christian or Parsi immigrant who came to India from Pakistan, Bangladesh or Afghanistan before 2015. It was presented by way of simply expanding the 1951 National Register of Citizens, which had until recently been limited to the state of Assam. Unsurprisingly, the only major religion that this expansion left out was Islam.

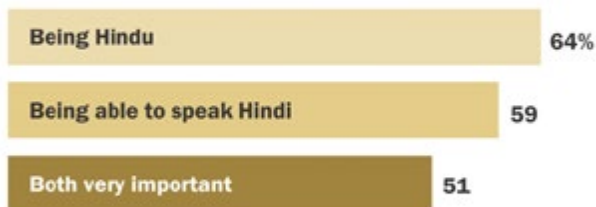
The government justified this by claiming that, under humanitarian considerations, India aims to assist people who face religious persecution by allowing them to remain or apply for refuge in India. Since Muslims are the majority population in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, they cannot be facing religious persecution at home. As a result of the policy change, Indian Home Minister Amit Shah declared, 'Not one refugee will have to leave. And we will not allow even one infiltrator to stay back' (Hindustan Times 2020). The scene was set for an increase in the level and nature of discrimination against Muslims that fed the agenda of dominant Hindutva, ideas, which became stronger during the corona pandemic.

If we look at a Pew Research Centre survey about religion across India,³ conducted just before the Covid-19 pandemic, we can conclude that the soil was already fertilised with a Hindu nationalistic awareness or attitude.

3 The survey was conducted in 17 languages between late 2019 and early 2020 and is based on nearly 30,000 face-to-face interviews with adults.

Most Hindus in India say being Hindu, being able to speak Hindi are very important to be 'truly' Indian

% of Indian Hindus who say ____ is very important to be truly Indian



Source: Survey conducted Nov. 17, 2019-March 23, 2020, among adults in India. See Methodology for details.
"Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation"

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Not only do these survey results support the above-quoted statement by Dani Rodrik, but they also explain why the Hindu nationalistic explanation for the Covid-19 pandemic became the preferred narrative. This is in line with the way Deepa Reddy conceptualises Hindutva ('Hindu-ness')⁴ as 'not merely a political ideology, but a (troubling) way of thinking through and addressing social problems and community concerns' (Reddy 2011: 412). In my view, this is exactly what we have seen during the Covid-19 pandemic in India. I will give examples of how religion is understood as both the provider of and the solution to the pandemic (Fibiger 2020), i.e., Muslims brought the pandemic to India, and a Hindu framework can purge the country of it. But also, this more exclusive Hindu religious framework includes references to the corona goddess, especially among lay people – the non-religious elite. She is understood to be the one who provided the coronavirus, but also the one who can make it disappear. This is also the case with other goddesses in

4 Hindutva (most often translated as Hindu-ness) is the predominant form of Hindu nationalism in India. The term was introduced by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in 1923 in a small pamphlet called 'Hindutva'. It was mainly articulated as a political ideology and is today advocated by Hindu nationalist organisations and parties collectively known as the Sangh Parivar. The most prominent groups are the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and, not least, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

India, such as Shitala Mata (the goddess of and for smallpox), who needs to be worshipped in order to change from being a malevolent goddess into a benign one (see also Frøystad 2021). The nationalistic idea of Bharata Mata ('Mother India') also was linked to the corona goddess. This shows how an embedded understanding of the goddess as both the cause and the solution of an illness or a pandemic was transferred to a new contemporary situation.

Under the Covid-19 pandemic in India, two interpretations or narratives are intertwined: the political/ethnic/religious with the Muslims as the scapegoats, and the exclusive Hindu-religious with the goddess worship as the pivot. When it comes to the stigmatisation of Muslims as a particular religious group, they were blamed for bringing the virus to India – according to some conspiracy theories – in cooperation with the Chinese. In other words, religion in India is not only a powerful argument for legitimising social and political acts, but also a vital reference point for including and excluding groups of Indians.

These patterns became enlarged during the corona pandemic. On one hand, we see a scaled-up picture of the kind of tensions that are prevalent in India; on the other, the solidarity measures and movements that emerged during the pandemic bear testimony to the idea of India as a welcoming heart to all humanity, regardless of caste and creed. The following examples are just a few out of many, and they focus mostly on the underlying tensions in Indian society, which have increased since the BJP came to power in 2014. There have been many solidarity movements and ecumenical activities aiming to mobilise all Indians across religious affiliations. This is also part of the equation, which is important to bear in mind while reading the rest of the article.

China as the Producer of the Coronavirus, Muslims as the Provider

As mentioned in the introduction, the soil was already fertilised for the BJP and their supporters around India and abroad to expound and build upon the anti-Muslim rhetoric with an eye towards the important 2021 state elections. Despite a plethora of other religious issues that could be used to manipulate the electorate,⁵ the BJP chose to focus on

5 Wikipedia offers a good overview of the 2021 electoral scene here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_elections_in_India#Andhra_Pradesh_2, accessed 28 September 2021.

the Corona virus; Chinese belligerence at the Ladakh border and Muslims who reportedly played an active role in the initial spread of the virus.

In the following we will focus on the sharp contrast between the response to the Tablighi Jamaat and that to the Maha Kumbh Mela, which is held every 12 years in rotation between Haridwar, Prayag (Varanasi), Nashik and Ujjain. The 2022 congregation was brought forward to 2021 due to religious considerations and took place in Haridwar during 1–27 April 2021. It is possible to read the decision to allow the event to proceed as a quick-fix solution to revive the moribund economy and keep the national election year undisturbed. In fact, this congregation probably was a super spreader event, but it was never abolished.

Instead, on 17 April (ten days before the festival should have ended), the prime minister requested that the festival be turned into a symbolic event rather than a physical one as a token gesture. In a tweet, he wrote that he had urged Swami Avadeshnand Giri, the leader of one of the 13 Hindu sadhu groups or brotherhoods that had planned the great pilgrimage, ‘to keep the Kumbh a symbolic event due to the coronavirus pandemic, now that two ‘Shahi Snaan’ [Holy dips in the river Ganges] are completed [that is, two of the three dates around which a significant majority of pilgrims converge, with the last one scheduled for 27 April]’(Sharma 2021).⁶

Thus, we see that instead of learning from the dangers of human assemblage, the Government turned a blind eye to the Kumbh crowds and the dominant Hindu population tacitly acquiesced. Critics say the prime minister was reluctant to cancel the gathering due to fears of a possible backlash from Hindu religious leaders, who are among the party’s biggest supporters and play an important role in mobilising Hindu votes during elections.

India reported its first case of Covid–19 on 30 January 2020. The patient was a student who had returned from Wuhan to the southern Indian state of Kerala (Nilsen 2021). Soon Muslims were publicly blamed for bringing the coronavirus into the country. Part of one conspiracy theory depicted the Chinese as ‘producers’ and the Muslims as motivated ‘providers’. This was founded on the meeting of the Tablighi Jamaat, a global non-political

6 Here is one report: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-modi-says-he-has-ap-pealed-for-kumbh-mela-to-now-be-only-symbolic-due-to-covid-crisis-adding-that-it-will-strengthen-fight-2415586>.

Islamic organisation, held in Nizamuddin, New Delhi, in early March 2020. The event was decried as a super-spreader event, with more than 4,000 confirmed cases and at least 27 deaths linked to the event reported across the country. Over 9,000 missionaries may have attended the congregation, with some 90 per cent being from various states of India and the rest from 40 foreign countries.

The Tablighi Jamaat later received widespread criticism from the Muslim community for holding the congregation, but many Hindu nationalists were quick to denounce the organisation. This rapidly spread to include Muslims in India more generally and, already the week after the meeting in Nizamuddin, Muslims were being beaten on the street, accused of being linked to Tablighi Jamaat.

It is also from here that the hashtags *CoronaJihad* and *TablighiVirus* originate, used by Hindu nationalists in most of the country to mark the fight against Muslims, who are accused of having spread the coronavirus to the rest of India's population. The hashtags are spread mostly on Twitter, together with cartoons that speak for themselves showing a recognisable Muslim with an explosive belt before Covid-19 to be changed with a belt of Covid-19 vira after Covid-19.

The event in Nizamuddin triggered a critique of Muslims that already was latently present in Indian society; this became even clearer when the 70-year-old Sikh guru Baldev Singh's preaching tour in Punjab after his visit to Italy and Germany, which most likely contributed to spreading the virus in Punjab (Sethi 2020), was not politicised in a similar way.

Furthermore, another cartoon named 'Coronavirus Deal' was distributed among Hindutva supporters on WhatsApp and Twitter. In the following, I am inspired by how Manan Ahmed Asif interpreted the cartoon in his 2020 article, 'The Violence of Hindutva'.

One can see two cartoon characters who are shaking hands. The 'producer' has a red coronavirus head with the stars from the Chinese flag on it and a bag of money in his free hand, and the 'distributor' has a green coronavirus head (the general colour of Islam in India) with a typical Muslim kufi cap and a shoulder bag with a travel tag that says 'Tablighi Jamaat'. A small man is trapped between their shaking hands. He represents India, which is also what the small sign in his one hand says. This cartoon is open to

various interpretations and conjectures that range from the country's foreign policy to the readiness of the Muslims to undermine the nation as it has also been stressed by other studies (e.g. Asif 2020, Ganguly 2020, Nilsen 2022): (a) Religiously: Hindutva supporters understand Islam as a religion that is too narrow, goes against the Vedic tradition, and has Mecca as its centre and Arabic as its holy language. As such, Islam and Muslims are and will always be outside of the domain of India, it is perceived that they will never contribute to the country. (b) Socially: Muslims are seen as clustering in areas where only Muslim rules apply (halal meat, women in niqab). They practise usury, they evangelise, and if a Hindu woman is to be married to a Muslim man, she must convert, after which she is not allowed to see her family. This means that their children will be raised in the Muslim faith, which will slowly make them focus primarily on the globally defined Islamic community or Umma and not the Indian society. (c) Culturally: India belongs to Hindus. This is a historical fact, as is the idea that Hinduism, beyond religion, is a cultural heritage. (d) Historically: Hindutva supporters know how we can learn from history – not least from when the Muslims came to the northern part of India and oppressed the Hindu tradition there. They even made Delhi a Sultanate from 1206 to 1526 and, from there, they ruled over most of the northern part of India. (e) Geopolitically: Today, India is surrounded by countries that are under Muslim rule or have a Muslim majority: Pakistan (where important Indian cultural heritage sites such as Mohenjo Daro and Harappa are) and Bangladesh, which became independent in 1971. Also, one state within the Indian border, Kashmir, has a Muslim majority and uses that majority to pursue independence. Another state, Assam, in the northeastern part of the country, has for decades been the destination of illegal Muslim migrants from Bangladesh and Myanmar.

These Hindu nationalistic, scapegoating perspectives were strengthened during the corona pandemic.⁷ Probably, Narendra Modi and the BJP believe there are votes to be won in the way the pandemic is handled and that synchronising pandemic management with overall politics could work even better to their advantage. And here, religion – or the idea of an Indian nation built on the Vedic/Hindu tradition and values used and referred to in different ways – comes into play.

7 This is not exclusively an Indian phenomenon. For a delicate treatment of similar Corona pandemic issues around the world, see Manderson, et al., 2021, especially part II, titled 'Blame and exclusion'.

The Corona Goddess

Shortly after the first wave of Covid-19, people from all over India started worshipping divine female forms of the coronavirus. This was popularised further during the second wave, in April–May 2021 (Frøystadt 2021: 7). The goddess has various names such as ‘corona Devi’ (corona Goddess), ‘corona Mata’ or ‘corona Mai.’ (corona Mother). Idols of the goddess and rituals conducted to worship these new female manifestations of Shakti have been reported from the southernmost states from Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu to Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar and Assam (Dore 2021). As stated by many of the devotees, the spread of this worship relates directly to the failure of medical care and the state. News18 (2021) quotes two women from Uttar Pradesh who were part of a group of women who worshipped corona Mai. They had made a small pit in the field and filled it with water, into which each one put nine cloves and nine ‘laddoos’ as offerings to appease the goddess:

We have taken shelter under goddess coronavirus. She will be pacified with worship. The doctors have failed to treat patients and scientists have also failed to develop a vaccine to cure coronavirus. We worship coronavirus goddess so that our family members will remain safe from it. (Naina Devi)

The country has witnessed two natural calamities in West Bengal and Maharashtra in the form of cyclones due to the goddess coronavirus. Nothing has been done to pacify the goddess. She is taking a big shape. We have worshipped to calm down the goddess’s coronavirus anger. (Kabita Mahto)

To confirm Dani Rodrik’s proclamation once again, what was already there became intensified during the corona pandemic; in this case, the worship of a goddess who can be either malevolent and ambiguous or benign and gentle, which O’Flaherty (1980: 90–1) describes as the goddess of tooth and the goddess of breast. With regard to the corona goddess, the same higher authority is understood as being the reason for the coronavirus and the solution to it. This is expressed well by Anilan Namboothiri, a journalist in Kerala, who has set up a new idol in his home shrine, which he honours alongside established Hindu deities such as Krishna and Shiva: ‘In ancient times, contagions were attributed to the wrath of goddesses... that needed to be propitiated. The message I wanted to send people is that you can stay at home and worship god. God exists everywhere’ (quoted in Dore 2021). In the last sentence, he refers to the goddess as an omnipotent power that exists everywhere, an intellectual, monistic point of view that fits well with the

understanding of India as Bharata Mata ('Mother India'), a reference used by Narendra Modi in many of his speeches and by his venerating supporters (ANI 2021).

Bharata Mata, the Hindu nationalistic veneration of India as a goddess, also was very actively used during the corona pandemic. This can be seen in the following picture:



Image by artist Sandhya Kumari, located in a gallery in Kolkata, reproduced on posters and also used as a template for goddess figures and statuettes in the form of murtis all over the country.

In the picture, the corona goddess is presented as Bharata Mata, dancing on the Earth. She wears a facemask and clothes with the colours of the Indian flag, leaving no doubt that she is Bharata Mata. In her hands – in addition to a coronavirus – she has recognisable medical equipment that can be used to fight it. With her left foot and her well-known chaos-fighting trident (trishula),⁸ she keeps an external coronavirus away by chaining it – and thereby taming or fighting it. Her dancing on the Earth also shows that it is through worship of her that the Earth can be saved from the pandemic (Kaur and Ramaswamy 2020).

The image is a symbol with several layers of meaning. Firstly, it shows how the goddess is omnipotent and is the one to lean on in order to overcome the corona pandemic. Secondly, she is inscribed in a modern context having corona-fighting weapons in her hands, even though it is her well-known trident with which she fights the external coronavirus. Thirdly, associating India with a Hindu goddess is a clear symbol of Hindu nationalism. Fourthly, she is a goddess that the whole world relies on.

Conclusion

It is obvious that Narendra Modi and his BJP are promoting a kind of ‘intruder ideology’ with different ‘enemies’ they consider to be threats: an Asian superpower (China) threatens the Indian state, and the Muslims threaten the Hindu nation. Linking these enemies not only to the coronavirus but also to Indian history, to the Hindu understanding of India as Bharata Mata (Mother India) and to goddess worship in general among laypeople contributed to a mixed cocktail that, as expected, appeals to many Hindus in India. I have with a few examples shown how tensions or in- and out-group tendencies already present in India – primarily orchestrated by Hindu nationalists and secondarily by the BJP and its supporters – have been intensified during the corona pandemic. Here, religion is used as a strong reference and either implicitly or explicitly legitimises the political, cultural, or social exclusion or inclusion of certain groups.

On the surface, the government is trying to tone down rhetoric that stigmatises Muslims; as seen in one of the prime minister’s most-quoted statements, posted for the first time on 22 April 2020 on LinkedIn: ‘Covid-19 does not see race, religion, colour, caste, creed,

8 Bharata Mata is most often understood as a form of the omnipotent goddess Durga. One of Durga’s well-known emblems is the trishula, or trident.

language or border before striking. Our response and conduct thereafter should attach primacy to unity and brotherhood' (quoted in Yasir 2020). However, this unfortunately does not percolate into the common response of the general population. History and time will testify if the coronavirus crisis in India has dented the prime minister's image, as some experts have remarked. This could be why the nationalist party and its leadership changed rhetoric, engaged in course correction, and undertook proactive measures to reduce the distance between communities. Building the narrative of national self-sufficiency in combating Covid-19 through the development of vaccines and providing medical care at the grassroots level would go a long way toward strengthening the nation as a whole. And such an opening seems visible. While celebrating India's Independence Day in August 2021, the same Prime Minister Modi said: 'The coronavirus pandemic came as a big challenge for India. The people of India fought the pandemic with patience and courage. It's a result of the strength of our industrialists & scientists, that today India doesn't need to depend on any other nation for vaccines' (quoted in India Today 2021).

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