

Communalism and Coronavirus: India's New Strain of Virus

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The recent outbreak of coronavirus has already entrenched approximately 74,281 confirmed positive cases, with 2,415 deaths in India. It is not the aggressive virus that is haunting the nation alone, but an artificially inserted strain of communalism within it, that is bedevilling and importuning the Muslim community in India. From initially blaming China as the “creator of coronavirus”, the right-wing BJP narrative has moved conveniently over the last two months. Now, they are blaming and labelling Indian Muslims as the “super-spreaders of corona”. I have always maintained that the politics of Muslim identity in India goes beyond the deconstructed rationalization of religiously prescriptive and legislative Islamic discourse. It is, by its normative birth, focus on the knotty issue of electoral manifestation. For this reason alone, instead of interviewing in the formulations of riots against the ‘majoritarianism and minoritarianism congregation’, BJP government is fortifying and reinforcing the separationist tensions in India; and communalization of COVID-19, is BJP’s recent attempt.

Inserting a communal strain in coronavirus

Under **Narendra Modi** led Bhartiya Janta Party(BJP), communal carnage against Muslims has increased by 28% alone in the first three years of his position in central power. 10,399 communal incidents were reported between 2014 to 2017, wherein 1,605 people were killed, and 30,723 were injured, according to the home ministry [data](#). A quick glance at the communal statistics, and one can easily extrapolate and deduce that the homogenization and methodization of carnage against Muslims in India has been normalized. Recently, the centre has attacked Islamic evangelical organization – The Tablighi Jamaat; the headquarter of which is situated in Nizamuddin, New Delhi, as the coronavirus hotspot, and Muslims who attended the annual meeting as the “super-spreaders of coronavirus”. **Karnataka BJP MLA M.P. Renukacharya**, who is serving as a political secretary to chief minister **B.S. Yeddiurappa**, said,

“... those who attended the congregation and have not come out for treatment and escaped, the government should not protect them. It is not wrong to shoot them with a bullet.”

According to [Deccan Herald](#), he further added, “all those who are spreading the virus are traitors and should be shot dead”. Soon after the release of his communal venom, a Hindu mob mercilessly attacked Ali, a 22-year-old Muslim man, who had recently returned home to his village – Harewali in Delhi, from a religious gathering. He was dragged, tortured and beaten until he bled his nose and ears. His attackers were heard accusing him of carrying

the “corona jihad” against India. The madness doesn’t stop here. A week back, one of the largest electoral state in India – Uttar Pradesh, which is under the right-wing saffron leadership of Yogi Adityanath, declared hotspots in Lucknow and named it after mosques. Lucknow’s Sadar Bazar hotspot is called ‘Masjid Ali Jaan (mosque) and nearby areas’. Similarly, other hotspots are named as ‘Mohammadiya Masjid(mosque) and nearby areas’ in Wazirganj’, and ‘Phool Bagh/Nazarbagh Masjid(mosque) and adjoining areas’.

India’s population of 1.37 billion has been under strict national lockdown since 25 March 2020. The national shutdown has left 122 million people out of employment, of which 75% of them are small traders and daily wage-laborers, according to Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy. Amid the economic disaster being experienced by the poor and migrant workers in India, BJP MP, Anant Kumar Hedge, denounced Tablighi Jamaat as “terrorist” and urged people to not allow ‘Muslim fruits and vegetable’ vendors (daily-wage workers) in their areas, claiming that they were intentionally spreading the virus through their produce. Soon after the release of his statement, several incidents were reported where Muslim vegetable vendors were disallowed from entering several neighbourhood on the suspicion that they are carrying and spreading the virus. Social media and mainstream media buzzed with news that Muslim vendors spit on the vegetables and fruits they sell, in order to infect and spread the virus. Five vegetable sellers were seen reporting the incident of being abused and barred from entering Hindu majority neighbourhood in Mahoba district, Uttar Pradesh.

What must be understood is how communal compartmentalization of national health crisis has mobilized a momentum to isolate, alienate, besmirched and smeared the identity of Muslims in India. It particularly becomes daunting for women, as their body becomes a semiotic territory for violent communication from opposing forces in power. For this reason alone, I believe that sexualized violence during communal riots is neither incidental, nor a matter of sex. It is about establishing hegemony. For example, a 2015 tweet from BJP MP Tejasvi Surya was dug out by prominent Arab voices. It read, “95% Arab women have never had an orgasm in the last few hundred years. Every mother has produced kids as act of sex and not love”. The sexualization of Muslim women has become a ritual and methodized narrative of many BJP leaders, and their followers. Post the abrogation of Article 370 on 5th August 2019, Google search on ‘Kashmir girl pictures’ had abnormally increased. With social media flooding with conversations on buying property and women in Kashmir, one could see the heightened sense of entitlement among right-wing ideologues– privatization of Kashmiri land and the body of its women. The conditions were already worse before the pandemic, with stupendous rise in mob lynching and riots against Muslims in India. One could only imagine the plight of them now, amid the pandemic, for being accused as a “super-spreads” of COVID-19.

Final verdict

What must be understood is that when preservation of political power dribbles and works in self-interest of a political entity, communalism often ends up essentialising the very religious resources that it purportedly aims to understand, resolve and combat. Communal compartmentalization has become one of the gnawing and lingering problems in India, and BJP’s divisive and percolating policy is fuelling, aggravating and antagonizing the exasperated state of Muslim in India. The singular and redefined ‘nationalism’ , which includes the formation of a Hindu majority nation, has led to nothing but – a divided nation, rival religious communities and the predicamental state of the Muslim quandary.

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