

ONLINE AND OFFLINE MANIFESTATION OF HINDUTVA IDEOLOGY IN INDIA DURING THE COVID-19 SPREAD

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Abstract

Towards the end of January 2020, COVID-19 made its headway into India. The irresponsible behaviour of the Modi government in containing the spread of Coronavirus forced it to opt for an ill-planned and hastily imposed lockdown. Meanwhile, the poor health infrastructure of the country collapsed. This outbreak also tested the socio-cultural robustness and religious tolerance in India. Pro-Hindutva media outlets and Hindu nationalists employed hate speech to securitize this outbreak as a Muslims-led controversy against India. Furthermore, pseudoscience-based remedies were portrayed as a potential cure for COVID-19. The online disinformation ecosystem of Hindutva extremist groups against minorities used trending campaigns, memes, and sharing of false content. They posted Islamophobic content so extensively that the impact of online disinformation contributed to offline harm to minorities in the form of violent attacks and social boycotts. This paper, therefore, analyses the online and offline activities of Hindu extremists and nationalists during the spread of COVID-19. It concludes with emphasis that the ongoing metamorphosis in the relationship between state, society, and religion in India is a pressing concern for the civilized world, especially the Indian political elite.

Keywords: COVID-19, Hindutva, Hate Speech, Islamophobia, Disinformation.

Introduction

In early 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak transpired into a global health emergency and simultaneously revealed the underlying social, economic, and infrastructural fault-lines of many countries. India stood as one of the most hardly-hit countries globally, and its societal fault-lines exacerbated by rising religious extremism, Hindu nationalism, and infrastructural shortfalls. Amid a deadly second wave of the disease, India recorded more than 30 million COVID-19 cases and more than four hundred thousand deaths, with a vaccinated population of less than 4% by the end of June 2021.¹ The rapid transmissibility of the Indian variant of COVID-19 (known as Delta Variant and its mutation called Delta Plus) across more than 90 countries had emerged as a new cause of concern for the global health scenario.

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In India, the first case of COVID-19 appeared towards the end of January 2020. On March 23, 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while responding to the rising numbers of COVID-19 positive cases, announced a 21-day-long nationwide lockdown on a four-hour notice.² However, it proved otherwise, and coronavirus spread was so rapid that the Indian Healthcare infrastructure floundered to respond adequately. Although the BJP government announced an ambitious assistance package, socio-economic susceptibilities were exacerbated due to an ill-planned country-wide shut down. Despite having the fact that it was due to poor management of Modi's government, a conspiracy was hatched against the Muslim community and blamed it for coronavirus spread in India. In February 2020, New Delhi caught up communal violence against Muslims (Delhi riots) that killed at least 50 citizens, and most were Muslims.³

The immediate effect of this hastily imposed lockdown was the migration of millions of people to their native areas, which was termed as India's largest exodus since the 1947-partition. Many of them lost their lives while walking long distances and several others met police brutality for not complying with the provisions of social distancing and lockdown.⁴ Daily wagers were rendered jobless, and their sources of income evaporated in Indian metropolitans. Small businesses were left struggling to sustain themselves. In hospitals, general wards, and intensive care units fell short of beds refusing emergency treatment of critically ill patients. In several cases, Indian healthcare workers faced assaults and attacks by the public over the fear of spreading disease.⁵ On the other hand, Hindutva inspired pseudoscience to tackle pandemic made headways into India's socio-political arena.

In February 2021, amid a health emergency, Modi's government passed a resolution unequivocally declaring the success of Indian leadership in handling the crisis.⁶ The government's ascription to optics rather than on-ground policy-making and implementation coupled with its mission accomplished mentality led to a sheer disregard of the prevailing and largely impending crisis.⁷ In April 2021, India halted the export of the Corona vaccine, which was previously appreciated by the UN Secretary General,⁸ owing to increasing domestic demand. With limited oxygen supplies and unprepared medical infrastructure, New Delhi became the epicentre of the pandemic. Apart from a dire crisis, the Delhi fiasco revealed weaknesses of centre-state cooperation and a lack of response preparedness.

Besides poor response and unpreparedness, the outbreak tested sociocultural robustness and religious tolerance in India. The health crisis was compounded by religious intolerance and social unrest. Hate speech against minorities, voiced via Indian mainstream and social media, emerged as a characteristic feature of the outbreak. Muslims faced the ire of Hindutva extremist ideologues, which was unleashed on the account of a three-day religious congregation by Tablighi Jamaat, a Muslim organization, in New Delhi. The congregation convened a few days before the Indian government had announced the lockdown. Thereafter, a large COVID-19 positive cluster was discovered among the people who had attended the congregation.

As an immediate outcome, the outright vilification of Muslims led to a surge in disinformation and false news giving rise to physical assaults and vigilantism against them.⁹ Having deliberately denied the provision of healthcare facilities in hospitals, Muslims were also subjected to socioeconomic boycotts, under the instructions of BJP's local political leadership. The negative externalities of the rising tide of Hindutva forces encapsulated other religious minorities amid the outbreak as well. Communally marginalized groups like lower-caste Hindu Dalits and Adivasis entrenched deeper into economic and social vulnerabilities.¹⁰

Therefore, this article aims to understand the working of Hindutva groups and Hindu nationalists during the COVID-19 outbreak in India for the promotion of Hindutva ideology in both online and offline spaces. The article has been divided into six subsections. The first section deals with how Hindu nationalists use hate speech against Muslims and other religious minorities in online and offline spaces. The weaponization of social media by Hindutva groups and Hindu nationalists is covered in the second section. The role of pro-Hindutva media channels as enablers of hate speech and offline harms is talked about in the third section. The fourth section deals with the violent attacks perpetrated by Hindu nationalists against minorities. The promotion of Hindutva-inspired religionized pseudoscience as a potential remedy against COVID-19 is covered in the fifth section. The last section of the article deals with an evaluation of BJP's response towards the online and offline manifestation of Hindutva groups and pro-Hindu nationalists.

In this article, open-source information has been incorporated for understanding the online and offline activities of Hindutva groups and Hindu nationalists from January 2020 to June 2021.¹¹ While monitoring several social media platforms to analyse online activities, this article keeps the scope restricted to Twitter. Prominent Twitter trends in India have been examined from 30 January 2020 to 30 June 2021 through Trendinalia India, a website providing statistics about trending topics on Twitter. For this article, a prominent Twitter trend is defined as a trend that trended on India Twitter for at least 12 hours during the specific monitoring period.

Hate Speech

Hate speech emerged as a dominant feature of the COVID-19 outbreak in India. Incorporated into popular vernacular by inciting political commentaries and disinformation on mass and social media, hate speech resulted in several cases of mob violence and social unrest. Hate speech against Muslims primarily resulted from the Tablighi Jamaat congregation, however, it was also directed against the Chinese for spreading the virus, Indian healthcare workers, and even north-eastern Indians. Against Muslims, it resulted as an immediate outcome of the securitization of the outbreak and terms like 'super-spreaders' and 'Corona jihadists' were articulated. False news regarding Muslims' attempt of infecting otherwise healthy people was fanned.¹² Consequently, across different Indian states, Muslims were denied healthcare facilities as hospitals declined to treat Muslim patients. Moreover, on the call of dominant BJP

leaders, Muslims were made subject to social and economic boycotts in different states. In the same vein, mob violence and Islamophobic ferocity against Muslims were hiked specifically during the first wave of COVID-19 in India.¹³ Hindutva-inspired hate speech against Muslims surfaced in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as well, as Indian expatriates voiced hateful comments against Muslims on social media platforms. This, however, led to a meaningful response from the UAE government, resulting in the Indian Prime Minister Modi urging his people not to engage in hateful comments.¹⁴

Hindutva-inspired hate speech is not limited to Muslims as Sinophobia remains another contour of this aspect. With the outbreak, public opinion largely swayed against China on the premises of China's wildlife trade, its inability to contain the spread of the virus, and China's alleged disinformation about the virus.¹⁵ While Indians largely took to social media, vilifying the Chinese for the outbreak, BJP's political leadership also issued hateful commentaries against China. Therefore, cases of assaults against north-eastern Indians (who generally resemble Chinese in facial features) were registered during the COVID-19 outbreak in India.¹⁶

Social Media

During the pandemic, supporters of Hindutva groups and Hindu nationalists pursued at least four themes through their trend campaigns. These themes included propagation of Islamophobia, portraying Tablighi Jamaat as the epicentre of COVID-19, propagating Sinophobia rhetoric and highlighting alleged Hinduphobia in Arab countries.

Table-1: List of Prominent Twitter Trends related to COVID-19 used by Hindu Nationalists (March 1 – June 30, 2021)

Date	Trends	Trending Time (minimum 12 hours)
March 21	China Lied and People Died	17:15
March 23	Chinese Virus Corona	14:35
March 26	Chinese Virus-19	23:35
March 27	Chinese Bioterrorism	14:25
April 16	Jahiljamati	16:55

(Source: Compiled by Authors)

Propagation of Islamophobia

After declaring the Tablighi Jamaat congregation as a major epicentre for the spread of COVID-19, Hindu nationalists began linking the outbreak of the virus with Muslims. Before the congregation in February 2020, pro-Hindutva comments raised prefabricated concerns that Muslims will spread the virus to Hindu temples or gatherings through 'Corona Jihad' and 'Kurana Virus Jihad' trends.¹⁷ Several trending campaigns, both in Hindi and English languages, were launched on Indian Twitter, like 'Markaz COVID Spread' and 'Jamaat Ka Corona Disaster'.¹⁸ 'Corona Jihad' was the

key trend during the first wave, which portrayed Muslims as weaponizing the virus against Hindus. The trend reached more than 170 million Twitter handles and had more than 250,000 interactions on Facebook.¹⁹ BJP IT cell acted as the nodal agency for coordinating social media campaigns against Muslims.²⁰ Apart from BJP, various other factions of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) family were also found to be prominently sharing Islamophobic hashtags.²¹ The favouritism on the part of Facebook towards BJP also helped parliamentarians and political leaders to post Islamophobic content with a sense of impunity.²²

Apart from trends, memes were also weaponized against Indian Muslims. In this regard, derogatory memes were circulated showing Muslims carrying the deadly virus in the form of suicide vests, besides depicting Muslims as the distributors and Chinese as the producers of the COVID-19.²³ Misinformation was another tool used to target Muslims by falsely accusing them of deliberately coughing on Hindus in an attempt to reduce their population.²⁴ Till mid of May 2020, about 100 documented viral fake Islamophobic news appeared across social media platforms.²⁵ Meanwhile, the thematic narrative building by some Indians that Muslims are immune from the pandemic or the deadly virus is some kind of divine punishment also woven into broader Hindu nationalist rhetoric.²⁶ During the pandemic, a new element was used by Islamophobes in their well-established pattern of disinformation, giving an anti-Muslim spin to genuine news reporting. Hindu nationalists were found sharing videos with false contexts on social media widely. A case in point is videos falsely showing members of Tablighi Jamaat spitting on people.

Portraying Tablighi Jamaat as Epicentre of COVID-19

Although Indian Muslims were generally targeted for the outbreak of COVID-19, Tablighi Jamaat members received the major brunt of the Islamophobic tirade. Its members were framed as uncivilized, deceptive, and anti-national jihadists or terrorists.²⁷ Apart from referring to the virus as ‘Tablighi Jamaat Virus’, they were labelled with derogative epithets. Targeted hashtag campaigns, such as ‘Jahiljamati’, ‘Markaz COVID Spread’, ‘Jamaat Ka Corona Disaster’, and ‘TablighiJamat Virus’, were also launched. These hashtag campaigns not only portrayed Tablighi Jamaat as the epicentre of COVID-19 but also terrorized Muslims in India.

Propagating Sinophobia Rhetoric

Apart from Islamophobia, a surge in Sinophobia rhetoric was also observed in Indian social media spaces. In early March 2020, hashtags ‘ChineseVirus’ and ‘WuhanVirus’ were trending on Indian Twitter, implying that China was responsible for the virus.²⁸ Chinese Bioterrorism also trended on Indian Twitter, projecting the spread of the virus as a form of bioterrorism by Beijing. However, the lifespan of Sinophobia rhetoric was short-lived as the focus of Hindu nationalists moved towards targeting Muslims in general and Tablighi Jamaat members in particular.

Highlighting Alleged Hinduphobia in Arab Countries

Following the mistreatment of Indian Muslims amidst COVID-19, Hindutva-inspired hate speech against Muslims surfaced in Arab countries as Indian expatriates voiced hateful comments against Muslims on social media platforms. However, prominent voices from Arab countries were also raised about rising Hindutva tendencies in India and scapegoating of Indian Muslims. Hindu nationalists responded by launching social media campaigns to highlight alleged Hinduphobia in Arab countries.²⁹

Pro-Hindutva Media

In any civilized democratic society, mainstream media play a pivotal role as a liaison between the state and the people. However, during recent years, several influential media outlets in India have been demonstrating right-leaning Hindutva-inspired tendencies. This factor became further evident during the COVID-19 outbreak. While most of the mainstream media tacitly complied with the central government's narrative regarding pandemic, false and manipulated news against Indian minorities, became a cliché. Moreover, journalists pursuing independent and unbiased journalism were harassed by the state agents systematically.

With the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020, Indian Prime Minister Modi called a video conference meeting with editors and heads of around 20 media houses.³⁰ During the meeting, media houses were guided to maintain a positive image of the government's response to the outbreak. In a further attempt at information control, the Indian central government also urged Supreme Court to issue a ruling for mainstream media to publish information about COVID-19 with prior approval from the government apparatus.³¹ As a consequence, information of public interest regarding the impending health crisis was withheld by India's leading Hindutva-inspired corporate-owned media.³²

The pro-Hindutva media houses chose to maintain a hush over the government's ill-designed responses and sheer mismanagement of the outbreak. They rather dwelled on Islamophobic narratives. Right-leaning media houses seemingly orchestrated an organized campaign against Indian Muslims denouncing them as conspirators of the outbreak in the country. This organized hate speech against Muslims was built on the premise of the Tablighi Jamaat congregation. Journalists at popular news channels, such as ABP News, Zee News, Times Now, and the Republic TV, bluntly blamed the Tablighi Jamaat congregation and Muslims for spreading the virus.³³ The Indian media vilified Muslims as 'super-spreaders', 'human bombs', and 'coronavirus terrorists'. They were deliberately blamed for waging a 'bio-jihad' against India. As an obvious outcome of the media's hate mobilization, hate crimes against Muslims tremendously hiked during the COVID-19 outbreak.

On the other hand, journalists that refused to toe the government line and opted to expose its ill-planning and poor preparation for the outbreak faced the

government onslaught. Between March 25 and May 31, 2020, 55 journalists faced different forms of state-led harassment for conducting an impartial reportage of the outbreak.³⁴ As a consequence, the actual COVID-related statistics had largely remained underreported. Journalists who were pursuing independent and unbiased reporting had their security and lives at risk.³⁵

Violent Attacks

The weaponization of social media and the negative portrayal of Indian Muslims by mainstream media resulted in offline harm for the religious minority. The poor segments of the Muslim community faced hateful discernment. In Uttar Pradesh, several Muslim vendors were targeted by falsely accusing them of spreading COVID-19.³⁶ BJP parliamentarians were pointed out for instigating communal violence in West Bengal by falsely accusing Muslims of attempting to infect Hindus with Coronavirus.³⁷ In some other states, posters barring Muslims from entering several neighbourhoods were observed.³⁸ Hindu nationalists disturbed saffron flags to grocery stores so that to allow consumers to identify them as Hindu sellers.³⁹ On the other hand, Muslim vendors were barred from selling goods in non-Muslim localities.⁴⁰ In Karnataka, pro-Hindutva individuals allegedly assaulted Muslims who were distributing food among needy people.⁴¹ Additionally, many other incidents of mob violence against Muslim families and places of worship were reported.⁴²

Religionized Pseudoscience

The Indian government's response to the outbreak of Coronavirus was largely characterized by its predisposition of spiritually-inspired religionized pseudoscience. The ascription to pseudo-scientific beliefs that entail a mix of scientific facts and myths is emerging as a dominant nationalist practice by Hindutva ideologues in India. Making progress into Indian scientific, political, and societal domains, this practice primarily aims at reconceiving ancient India as a technologically and scientifically thriving society. This aspect of Hindutva came to the fore, particularly during the BJP government. However, the COVID-19 outbreak in India gave more traction to this.

The BJP government officially recommended traditional ayurvedic and homeopathic medications for preventive measures against Coronavirus. In January 2020, the Indian government issued an advisory titled "Homeopathy for Prevention of Coronavirus Infections: Unani Medicines Useful in Symptomatic Management of Coronavirus Infection."⁴³ It recommended certain homeopathic and several traditional remedies against COVID-19. This advisory lacked empirical credibility and led to the dissemination of false news and misinformation regarding the disease and its treatment. Once again, pseudoscience was deliberately peddled when BJP political leadership falsely claimed that Prince Charles of the UK had recovered from COVID-19 after consuming Ayurvedic medicines for remedial purposes. Although the UK government categorically rejected this claim, BJP political leadership did not shy away from asserting false claims.⁴⁴ A Hindu religious leader claimed that only those who ate

meat were prone to contracting COVID-19.⁴⁵ On the other hand, BJP political leadership confidently laid claims regarding the health benefits of cow urine amid a national-level health crisis. BJP member of Parliament, Dilip Ghosh, suggested cow urine as a means of boosting immunity against COVID-19.⁴⁶ Certainly, this claim was not backed by any scientific evidence. In another incident, the *Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha* (All India Hindu Union), a Hindutva political group, organized a cow urine drinking party. Believing that the cow urine held remedial properties against COVID-19, the group organized a congregation of 200 people in New Delhi.⁴⁷

Assessing BJP Outlook

BJP response to the COVID-19 outbreak can be assessed across two folds: first, government-level preparedness to curb the negative externalities of the outbreak; and second, the Hindutva aspect of the Coronavirus outbreak. In terms of its response preparedness, the BJP government performance was fairly debated for lacking foresightedness and crisis management. The Hindutva aspect, on the other hand, revealed how the central government led by the Indian far-right swayed complaisance to extremist narratives and actions against Indian minorities. Moreover, the BJP government's sheer neglect of several Hindu religious congregations flouting restrictions of physical distancing manifested the state duplicity towards different religious groups in the country.

The Coronavirus outbreak was declared as a global health emergency by the World Health Organization on January 30, 2020, the same day when India registered its first COVID-19 case. However, it was not until March 23, Modi government declared a nationwide lockdown. The lockdown was ill-planned and as late as it might be for a densely populated country like India. The imposition of lockdown came as a disregard to the economic vulnerabilities of the Indian poor class, which comprises the largest proportion of the world population. It delineated how the Indian government had chosen not to allocate adequate faculties to the cause of devising a crisis management mechanism tailored for the socioeconomic landscape of India. The 'Namaste Trump' event organized by the Modi government comprising around 125,000 people amid a global health emergency speaks volumes of government seriousness towards the crisis.⁴⁸

In terms of practical performance, the effectiveness of BJP's response to the crisis quickly faltered as economic graphs went down due to a nationwide lockdown. The lockdown was aimed at buying time for the Indian healthcare system while slowing down the transmission rate. However, it proved otherwise as hospitals ran out of treatment facilities for patients and personal protective gear. Initially, the testing rate in India remained abysmally low, whereas testing of the visitors of Tablighi Jamaat took place heavily, scapegoating them for mounting COVID-19 cases. Nevertheless, such arrangements had not factored in for several Hindu congregations that took place during the course. For instance, in February 2020, Kapil Mishra, a BJP leader, held a rally of around 12 hundred people against so-called 'Jihadi violence' in Rajasthan.⁴⁹ In

March 2020, thousands of Hindu devotees visited temples across the state of Gujarat ahead of the Tablighi Jamaat congregation.⁵⁰ In April 2021, millions of Hindu pilgrims of *Kumbh Mela* became super-spreaders leading to a devastating second wave of the pandemic in the country which preyed on millions of Indian people.⁵¹

Moreover, as healthcare workers faced the onslaught of Hindu extremist ideologues over the fear of carrying Coronavirus, the BJP government initiated a nationwide campaign to pay tribute to the healthcare workers. This tribute entailed people taking to the streets, chanting slogans 'Go Corona Go', clapping, and ringing bells. This tribute once came as outright defiance of the need for physical distancing. However, voices critical of BJP's pandemic handling, uttered on mainstream and social media, were systematically silenced by the Indian government on the pretext of spreading misinformation.

Conclusion

By and large, the BJP's response to the COVID-19 outbreak was led by immediately floating-in political optics for larger audiences internationally, however, lacking policy-oriented foresightedness for managing the crisis domestically. As the numbers of COVID-19 positive cases rose across South Asia, Prime Minister Modi was quick to propose an emergency meeting of SAARC, aiming to formulate a joint strategy seeking containment of the pandemic.⁵² During the session conducted in March 2020, Prime Minister Modi went to the length of offering \$10 million to the Covid-19 emergency fund.⁵³ Ironically, the economic and socio-political fronts within India presented challenging sights to the government. While the Indian government struggled to meet its publicly declared goals to curb the negative externalities of the COVID-19 outbreak, socio-political degeneration emerged as a strong indicator of a divisive Indian polity and society in the offing.

The COVID-19 outbreak in India manifested the government's lack of preparedness in the face of an impending health crisis. The Hindutva aspect of COVID-19 remains one of the most defining takeaways from the first wave of COVID-19. As Muslims became targets of the pro-Hindu extremist onslaught, the Coronavirus outbreak highlighted the future of Indian minorities as a subject calling for immediate attention. In India, the ongoing metamorphosis in the relationship between state, society, and religion is harvesting a pressing concern for its political future. A deliberate complaisance with unlawful Hindutva violent extremism against minorities shows a compromising role of the state. In the longer run, such a development is bound to alter the intricacies of the social contract between the state and society in India, whose formative basis remained the employment of secularism as a binding force for the people. The mounting trends of Hindutva extremist activities making headways into India's mainstream political and social culture shall bear far-reaching implications for the state, society, and all other relevant apparatus attached.

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