

CORONAVIRUS AND INDIA'S ISLAMOPHOBIA; PLIGHT OF INDIAN MUSLIMS

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 Analysis

Life has stopped and the world is fighting a deadly virus. Coronavirus (COVID-19) has already claimed thousands of lives worldwide. The whole world is on a single page in the fight against coronavirus. Countries with political and ideological differences are helping each other during these difficult days. Meanwhile, the poor Muslim minority in India is not only fighting the pandemic but also battling another deadly threat – Muslim hate. Lately the social media has been flooded with calls for social and economic boycott of Muslims. Muslims in India are falsely and ignorantly being accused for spreading the virus deliberately. Discrimination against Indian Muslims has increased to its peak after the extremist right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) assumed power in 2019. The rising discrimination is a threat to India's Muslim-minority and inflames longstanding religious tensions in the Hindu-dominated nation of 1.3

billion people. Divisions had already begun to harden last year after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government passed a citizenship bill discriminating against Muslims, sparking nationwide protests that have left many dead.

Coronavirus has simply highlighted what Muslims have been facing in India since Modi's BJP government was first elected in 2014. Leaders of the ruling BJP party are constantly making Hindu nationalist and anti-Muslim remarks in their public speeches without any fact-checks beforehand. These speeches not only encouraged religious hatred among the masses but have, at times, incited violent attacks by party workers who believe they have political protection. Mobs affiliated with the BJP have, since 2015, killed and injured hundreds of religious minorities amid rumors that they traded or killed cows for consumption.



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This hatred is not only happening among the public, but even the government has also reflected the same hatred against Muslims. In August 2019, the special status of disputed Jammu and Kashmir was revoked. In December 2019, the Modi administration achieved a passage of the discriminatory Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which for the first time makes religion a basis for granting Indian citizenship. The law specifically fast-tracks asylum claims of non-Muslim irregular immigrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Contrary to this the government's plan for a nationwide citizenship verification process has led to fears that millions of Indian Muslims, including many families who have lived in the country for generations, could be stripped of their citizenship rights, disenfranchised, and detained. In India's northeastern state of Assam, such citizenship verification process has already excluded nearly two million people, both Hindus and Muslims. Non-Muslims who are considered doubtful citizens or illegal immigrants due to inadequate documentation would have an opportunity to obtain citizenship under the newly amended law, but Muslims with similarly inadequate documentation will be at risk of statelessness and many may be detained in the centers currently under construction in Assam and other states.

“Corona Jihad”

The outbreak of coronavirus has opened the gates of fresh attacks on the Muslim community. There is a systematic physical, verbal and psychological war being waged against Muslims, pushing them further towards the wall in Indian society.

This whole new drama started when news spread about the people who had attended a large gathering of Tableegi Jamat, a Muslim missionary movement, in New Delhi had tested positive for the novel coronavirus. People travelled from outside India to attend this event and it is suspected that they may have introduced the virus into the congregation. The Tableegi Jamat was blamed for organizing this event and ignoring the threat of the pandemic. Very

soon, reports started pouring in from different parts of India suggesting that the largest number of positive cases could be traced back to the Tableegi Jamat event.

This incident provided a justification for the extremist right wing government to generate even more hatred among the masses against the Muslim community. The government started a separate column of Tableegi Jamat-related cases in its daily press briefings. These daily briefings created an impression that the Muslim movement is the main cause for the spread of virus. Since it is difficult for many to differentiate between Tableegis and other Muslims, all Muslims are now seen as potential carriers of this virus and are therefore shunned and hated.

The government discriminatory approach in dealing with this issue gave an opportunity to extremist Hindu mobs to launch violent attacks on Muslims. It also paved the way for a malicious campaign against Muslims on social media. A sudden surge in Islamophobic hash tags and posts on different social media platforms accusing Muslims of purposefully spreading the virus started soon after the event. The Indian media also launched a high-decibel campaign about the gathering. One newspaper went as far as publishing a cartoon depicting coronavirus as a terrorist in Muslim attire.

BJP leaders called the Tableegi Jamat gathering as ‘Talibani crime’. Some of them even called it as ‘Corona Terrorism’. A new term, “Corona Jihad”, has been coined to describe this conspiracy. The term “Corona Jihad” was used by some mainstream media and the hash tag went viral on social media.

Deep Concern

The situation of Indian Muslims led the world to express an alarm. Many international forums cried for the human rights violations and the discrimination against Muslims in India. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom, which has in the past criticized India's treatment of its minorities, on 14 April 2020 raised concerns about the “continued

scapegoating and attacks on Muslims in India due to false rumors over the spread of coronavirus, often accompanied by dangerous rhetoric by politicians.”

The 57-member Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) expressed a deep concern over the rising anti-Muslim sentiments in India. On 19 April 2020, the OIC expressed that there is an “unrelenting vicious Islamophobic campaign in India maligning Muslims for the spread of COVID-19.”

The OIC’s concern prompted a frequent reaction. Less than an hour later, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke up for the first time and tweeted, “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.”

The situation aggravated so much that the World Health Organization came forward and cautioned that “It is very important that we do not profile the cases on the basis of racial, religious and ethnic lines.”

Medical experts throughout the world are worried that such stigmatization of any particular community would do great harm during a pandemic like COVID-19. It will make certain communities fearful, “leading to concealment of cases and delays in detection.”

Social media users in the Arab world have in recent weeks called out Indians for their anti-Muslim and anti-Arab comments. A United Arab Emirates (UAE) even warned that Indians working in the wealthy country would be “fined and made to leave” if they made racist and discriminatory comments.

Princess Hend Al Qassimi’s statement was made on Twitter on 16 April, accompanied by a screenshot of a tweet by an Indian emigrant threatening “death to radical Islamic Tablighi terrorists” – a reference to the Islamic missionary group Tableegi Jamat. Although Gulf States are condemning the anti-Muslim sentiment in India, falling oil prices and the downturn in the global economy will limit any deeper rift.

Tail Piece

Muslim minority in India is hardly present in the formal sector of the economy; similarly their number is insignificant in the state services. Muslims have been disenfranchised politically; now this anti-Muslim campaign under COVID-19 cover can break them economically and make their survival impossible.

Our concern is that the world is watching silently over this continuous persecution of the Indian Muslim minority. It would go down as yet another dark chapter in the making of neo-apartheid against Muslims in the so-called biggest democracy in the world.