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COMMUNALISATION OF COVID-19 IN INDIA



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Report on the misuse of pandemic to target minorities and the subversion of democratic values in India

While governments all over the world are fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic, Modi government is using the opportunity created by the lock-down for **continued systemic vilification of minorities** (especially Muslims), and for **targeting dissidents** [1] [2]. The pandemic has been used to demonise Muslims and scapegoat them for the calamity [3]. This has intensified the continued dehumanization of Muslims in India.

Another concern is the use of **UAPA** (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) [4] [5]), which was originally and ostensibly introduced to fight terrorism, but is now being used to divest citizens of their fundamental rights. People are being picked up and put in jails under flimsy presences and fictitious cases, and being held without trial for long periods of time using provisions of UAPA. Intellectuals, journalists and whistle-blowers who are leading the defence of pluralism and democracy are being systematically targeted. In this report we focus on the **ongoing persecution and its intensification during the pandemic** [6].

Timeline of hate: targetting minorities during the COVID 19 outbreak

- April 1 • Selective bias against India's Muslims intensified in the media after the **Central Government of India** said that the Muslim faith congregation meet (*Tablighi Jamat*) held on 13-15 March, 2020, was the **main reason for increased number of cases** because these Muslims had travelled across the country. [7] [8]
- April 2 • Barrage of fake news targeting Muslims. The government's religious profiling was followed by pro-government media outlets, (both print and digital) and social media, accusing those who attended the gathering, and **Indian Muslims in general**, of not just being responsible for the outbreak **but deliberately spreading it**. [9]
- April 1-29 • Several calls of boycott of Muslims. Racial profiling and violence against Muslims across the country [10] [11]
 - Tweets with the hashtag **#Coronajihad** appeared nearly 300,000 times and potentially seen by 165 million people on Twitter. [12]
 - Some of the members of the gathering beaten by Hindu Mobs when returning to their home towns. [13]
 - "Do not buy from Muslims" said a BJP MLA in Uttar Pradesh. Far right groups distribute saffron flags to vendors to identify them as Hindus and **call for boycott of Muslim vendors**. [14]
 - State administration in Uttar Pradesh announce a 10,000 Rupees award to anyone who gave info about any attendee of the Muslim faith congregation. [13]
 - Several BJP parliamentarians called for **execution** of the leaders of the faith congregation. Some **denounced them as terrorists** and used terms like **Corona Bombs** and **Corona Jihad**. [15] [13]

- BJP MP Ananth Kumar Hegde, an outspoken BJP MP, called this **bioterrorism** by Muslims. “We have identified the corona villains” said Arnab Goswami, a popular TV show host and BJP apologist. [16] [17]
 - Reports of local administration issuing dictats of **monetary fines on people who interact with Muslims**. [13]
 - Man slaughter charges filed by Delhi Police against the chief of the *Jamaat*. [18]
 - In Punjab Sikh temples – messages in loudspeakers told people **not to buy milk from Muslim sellers** [7]
 - Reports of Muslims being **denied access to drinking water** from community taps [15]
 - Hospitals in Gujarat **create separate wards for Muslims**. A hospital in Uttar Pradesh **refuses to accept any Muslims patients** unless the Muslim patient comes with a COVID negative test result. No police action against these hospitals were initiated. [19]
 - In Rajasthan **a muslim pregnant lady was denied treatment** and baby was still born [20]
 - Border Security Forces make claims that there is a plot for people from a particular community (read Muslim) to infiltrate the porous borders of India through Nepal with the aim of spreading the infection in India. [21]
- April 8 • Mike Ryan, the Emergency Program Director of the World health Organisation (WHO), expressed the organisation’s disapproval. Regardless, ruling party politicians continue [22]
- April 11 • The police continue arresting political activists under UAPA, notable among them was a **3 months pregnant Safoora Zargar**. [23]
- April 15-19 • Considerable diplomatic backlash from Gulf nations on the blatant Islamophobia witnessed during the outbreak in India. [24]
- April 19 • The human rights body of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on Saturday urged India to halt violence against Muslims in the country during the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic. [18]
- April 19 • Prime Minister Modi, after over three weeks of relentless targeting of Muslims, appeals for peace. The systemic targeting continues nevertheless. [24]

State Complicity

In India, the legal basis for a lock-down comes from an old Colonial law drafted to fight an epidemic outbreak a century ago [25]. The punitive lock-down imposed on 24 March 2020, brought enormous hardship to the poor. Facing criticism for the humanitarian crisis that ensued following the abrupt and unplanned lockdown, the propaganda machinery of the Modi government went on overdrive to divert attention from the disastrous lockdown policy. It concentrated (and continues to concentrate) on **expanding its agenda of dehumanization of Muslims** and other minorities. Additionally, since the pandemic gave governments the opportunity to suspend certain civil liberties, the Modi government used this opportunity to clamp down on all kinds of dissent.

The complicity of police in the anti-Muslim violence unleashed in Delhi in February 2020 is now well documented [26]. Whereas rampaging gangs were allowed to burn Muslim homes and to murder Muslims with impunity, police later started implicating ordinary Muslims and former anti-CAA protesters in the violence. Effectively, **victims are being presented as perpetrators**, and are being persecuted using state apparatus [27]. Meanwhile, Hindu activists and leaders of the ruling party, who openly gave hate-speeches and incited mobs, and some of who were initially booked, are free [28].

This impunity has become more pronounced during the lock-down. A couple of weeks into the lock-down, a cluster of covid-19 cases were traced back to a Mosque, providing a pretext for vilification of the entire

Muslim community [29] (see timeline above), starting with the coining of the absurd term “corona-jihad”. Politicians of the ruling party, exemplified by the ultra-right chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, have repeatedly spread this propaganda [30]. Not only has the media repeated the rhetoric without any intervention from state actors, petitions to courts for redress have been subverted [31]. Such instances of state complicity has been **documented by international bodies like Amnesty International [32], Human Right’s Watch [33] and the United States Commission of International Religious Freedoms [34]**.

Accelerated arrests

At a time when countries across the globe are releasing non-violent offenders from jails to protect them from the ongoing pandemic, in India the harassment of Muslims and human-right defenders was intensified. This was done under the cover of the pandemic, helped by the draconian UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act). This Act was modified by the current national government in 2019, now allowing it to name an individual as a terrorist on the basis of "belief" without the customary burden of proof. It is based on **presumption of guilt** - rather than of innocence - and allows **incarceration without trial** for 6 months. The following cases exemplify a general trend:

1. **Arbitrary arrests** on the pretext of solving cases associated with the Feb 2020 anti-Muslim pogrom: The Delhi police have made **800 arrests** in this regard. However, majority of them are **poor Muslim youth** (according to local activists and media). Many in the area are unaware of whereabouts of family members and legal redress is not possible due to lock-down. [35] [36]
2. Deliberately **conflating anti-Muslim pogrom in Delhi and anti-CAA protests**: Students and alumni of Jamia Milia University, Safoora Zargar (currently 3 months **pregnant**), Shifa-Ur-Rehman, and Meeran Haider are currently being held under UAPA. Additionally Khalid Saifi and Ishrat Jahan were arrested in February (and possibly **tortured** in jail). Former Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) student, Umar Khalid, has been booked under UAPA; and the residential premises of AISA (All India Student Association) activist Kawalpreet Kaur was raided. All these individuals were active in the anti-CAA movement.
3. **Use of anti-terrorism UAPA to book and arrest journalists, dissenters and human-rights defenders**: Kashmiri journalists Masrat Zahra and Gowhar Geelani, and the chairman of the Delhi Minorities Commission Zafarul Islam Khan were booked under UAPA for social media posts. Human rights and dalit activists Prof. Anand Teltumbde and Gautam Navlakha were arrested under UAPA on an earlier case of caste related violence. Such blatant misuse of UAPA may have given rise to mass protests in normal times, but under the distraction of the lock-down, and associated distress, has passed almost unopposed.

Other post-COVID prominent police/court cases/notice (non-UAPA) include - dissenting journalist Sidharth Varadarajan, dissenting administrative officer Mohammed Mohsin, human rights activist Harsh Mander, and whistle blower Kannan Gopinathan (please refer to attached table for further details and references). **A recent Amnesty international report has highlighted many of the above cases [32]**.

Crisis of Human Dignity

India ordered its 21 day lock-down (now extended by 5 more weeks) with a four hour notice. This left millions of labourers stranded in their city of work - with no form of employment and very little money. These labourers often live thousands of kilometres away from their place of origin. As their places of employment shut down, they were left to fend on their own. While thousands of volunteers (civil society) took to helping them during this crisis, the Government declared an inadequate package of less than 1% of the GDP. An **estimated 100 million labourers** started walking to their native villages, creating a state of **exodus** beyond imagination [37]. While the police do have the right to arrest lock-down violators, the blatant disregard to human rights and to human dignity was shocking. The police have become notorious for physically targeting and abusing individuals who violate the lockdown. A few examples below:



Figure 1 (A)



Figure 1 (B)

Figure 1: (A) Instance of Police brutality^[40]. (B) Migrants being hozed with disinfectant solution not meant for human application^[38]

- Reports have come in of the police demeaning lockdown by making them squat, do push-ups, and frog-hop. There were several instances of the **police beating people up** - including two instances where such action have **lead to deaths**. One report claims that an ambulance driver was beaten to death by the police in Pune.
- “The police will beat me. I’m afraid they’ll beat me,” Raju, a migrant worker, said. “They aren’t even allowing us to sit anywhere.”
- In the southern state of Karnataka, the police **waited outside a Mosque to beat up the worshippers** when they came out after their prayers.
- In the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), workers who managed to return to their place of origin were made to sit down together and were **sprayed with disinfectant not meant for human use** ^[38].
- In Delhi vegetable vendors have been attacked by the police. “I was hit so hard that even today I am struggling to sit. But what hurts even more is that it was a huge loss for me as I only make around 300 rupees every day in profit” a vendor reported. They also claim that they are ‘used to’ such harassment from the police ^[38]. It is important to keep in mind that such vendors are daily wage earners - a section of the society hugely affected by the lock-down.
- Several instances of **vigilantes taking law into their own hands** have also come up. This has lead to people getting beaten up when they left the house to buy essentials. (see references ^[39, 40, 41, 42, 43]).

Clearly then, the world’s largest democracy is failing its people, especially the most marginalised. instead, it is being led towards a monolithic authoritarian model, devoid of religious freedom and civil liberties. The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated this process.

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