

# Coronavirus Pandemic and Construction of False Narratives: Politics of Health (Hate) and Religious Hatred/ Hate Crimes in India

## Pandemia de coronavirus y construcción de narrativas falsas: políticas de salud (odio) y odio religioso/crímenes de odio en la India

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to understand how Coronavirus as a pandemic is mis-utilized in constructing a false narrative, which has encouraged religious hatred and subsequent discrimination, as well as hate crimes against the minority community in India. More specifically, the paper looks into the role of various social media platforms and news agencies (in spreading half-baked information, false information, and misinformation) to unfold the root cause behind demonizing a particular community. The design is exploratory, and the data collected are from secondary sources. The approach is to understand the impact from a new point of view. The study's findings reveal that the false creation of a narrative has led Muslims to face severe hardships' thereby destroying the true meaning of secularism. The study shows that Muslims as a community were already discriminated and the pandemic has added voluminously to their woes. This paper tries to give a new perspective on the impact of the pandemic. Most of the research papers have tried to understand the impact of the pandemic on the social aspects;

**Resumen:** Este documento tiene como objetivo comprender cómo el coronavirus como pandemia se utiliza indebidamente para construir una narrativa falsa, que ha fomentado el odio religioso y la posterior discriminación, así como los crímenes de odio contra la comunidad minoritaria en la India. Más específicamente, el documento analiza el papel de varias plataformas de redes sociales y agencias de noticias (en la difusión de información a medias, información falsa y desinformación) para revelar la causa raíz detrás de demonizar a una comunidad en particular. El diseño es exploratorio y los datos recopilados provienen de fuentes secundarias. El enfoque es entender el impacto desde un nuevo punto de vista. Los hallazgos del estudio revelan que la creación falsa de una narrativa ha llevado a los musulmanes a enfrentar graves dificultades, destruyendo así el verdadero significado del secularismo. El estudio muestra que los musulmanes como comunidad ya fueron discriminados y la pandemia se ha sumado enormemente a sus problemas. Este artículo

however, no research paper has attempted to understand the social hatred due to COVID-19

**Keywords:** Social Hatred, Islamophobia, COVID-19, Pandemic, Social Media electronic

intenta dar una nueva perspectiva sobre el impacto de la pandemia. La mayoría de los trabajos de investigación han tratado de comprender el impacto de la pandemia en los aspectos sociales; sin embargo, ningún trabajo de investigación ha intentado comprender el odio social debido a COVID-19

**Palabras clave:** Odio social, islamofobia, COVID-19, pandemia, redes sociales ..

## 1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is causing widespread destruction and unprecedented global crises (Ahuja, Banerjee, Chaudhary & Gidwani, 2020). The pandemic has resulted in more significant problems (individual and social) for people and society. The shutting down of factories and industries has created tremendous pressure on every section of the society, and the same is manifested in severe economic, social, and psychological aspects on the citizens of every country, and India is a developing country, is no exception to it. The pandemic has resulted in the loss of employment, livelihood, and salary deductions, bringing about a massive degree of unforeseen consequences. This pandemic possesses the dangerous potential to pose a severe threat to human civilization in terms of fatality, infections, and discrimination. While fatality and infections are natural (of course can be minimized by proper measures being taken), speaking of discrimination, it is solely man-made. Speaking in the context of India, there was also discrimination witnessed due to the pandemic, where people tried to draw an unnecessary linkage between a religious community and the spread of the disease. The association thus developed resulted in segregating and marginalizing the already marginalized Muslim community and further resulting in hate against them.

The beginning of this narrative of hate can be traced back to the politics that evolved after the large-scale convention of several individuals from Tablighi Jamaat. Since the event happened in the capital city of India, it attracted a lot of media attention. Many COVID-19 cases reported from across India were linked with a Muslim congregation held in Delhi from March 10, 2020 to March 13, 2020 (Radhakrishnan, 2020) by an Islamic Sect called Tablighi Jamaat. Hence, it is pertinent to understand the total cases before the start of the event and after the end of the event in Delhi and in India as well. The total number of cases reported from India was 55 till March 10, 2020 and it increased to 85 till March 13, 2020. The number of cases reported from Delhi until 10th and 13th March 2020 were 6 and 7, respectively.

The virus does not 'discriminate between social classes, race, ethnicity or religion' (Ahuja and Banerjee, 2021); hence, it would be scandalous to associate any particular religion with the spread of the virus. However, the kind of hatemongering that started after the incident (congregation of individuals for Tablighi Jamaat) raises more significant questions about the sensationalism created by the mainstream media and the spread of fake news through various channels. Immediately after the event, several newspapers and news channels started a hate narrative and linked the positive cases to the event (Apoorvanand, 2020). Against this backdrop, people's fear over health combined with religion-based mistrust has led to more social stigmas and discrimination. Many people in the country started directly blaming the Muslim community for the spread of the disease. Considering the rate and extent of Islamophobia in India (Hussain et al., 2019), the subject of COVID-19 and Islamophobia is one of the important debates to focus on.

The present paper delves into the lives of the Muslim community to understand how various hate crimes were conducted against them during the pandemic and how systematically they have been made the scapegoat and falsely blamed for spreading the virus. This paper would help with policy and provide a greater understanding of how disease/pandemic is employed in problematising identities.

As per the 2011 census, the total number of Muslims in India constitutes 172 million, accounting for 14.2 percent of the Indian population (Census, 2011). Despite the fact that Muslims constitute a sizeable population in India and India is a secular state, there have been cases of discrimination, segregation, marginalization along with atrocities committed against the Muslim community, which happens to destroy the true nature of democracy and is a severe threat to the social harmony as well as the social fabric of the society.

India being a secular State, allows people to practice any religion of their choice, which is considered to be the beauty of democratic India. However, since independence, there have been incidents of discrimination, segregation, marginalization, and atrocities committed against Muslims just because they do not belong to the majority religion. A systematic attack has been launched, and the same is also witnessed during the pandemic as how they are made the scapegoats and blamed for spreading the virus. According to the Sachar Report, discrimination is the highest against the Muslim community, and perpetrators of discrimination are religiously and politically strong (Hussain et. al, 2019). Muslims are also facing low representation in the labor market as their participation is lower in professional and technical works (Brass, 2011).

The coronavirus pandemic has created this generation's grand challenge. The spread of the virus has not only created a health emergency in the country but also brought India on the verge of a new kind of polarization (Pasha, 2020). In these testing times, the need of the hour is to be united in the battle against the deadly virus, which threatens to affect a sizeable chunk of the population. On the contrary, certain anti-social elements are trying to take advantage of such a precarious situation and make things worse, which is essentially destroying the secular fabric of Indian society.

Biological disasters like this can generate immense prejudice, xenophobia, stigma, and othering, all of which have adverse consequences on health and well-being. In a country as diverse and populous as India, such a crisis can trigger communalism and mutual blame. Xenophobia, one of the common offshoots of pandemics, can also harm the overall well-being. Fear is the cradle for interpersonal hatred and social stigma. Xenophobic tendencies become all the more evident during the spread of infectious diseases. The bulk of misinformation, rumor-mongering, negative perceptions, and the role of the Media is essential to influence the prejudice and stigma during pandemics. At times when the world is facing an unprecedented threat, preventing any form of marginalization can improve positivism and resilience. The more COVID-

19 is stigmatized, the more divisive, inflammatory, and counterproductive it will be. 'Collective' connectedness can help humanity live and emerge through this pandemic, perhaps stronger and more hopeful than before. (Ahuja, Banerjee, Chaudhary and Gidwani, 2020).

Due to various factors like fear of terrorism, the political dispute over Kashmir, international unrest, and internal social dynamics, Islamophobia has emerged as a prominent xenophobic construct in India (Sanke et al., 2018). Further bigoted opinions, fake news by media, and viral videos have resulted in the stigmatization of COVID-19 in India (Ahuja, Banerjee, Chaudhary, and Gidwani, 2020). In this scenario, the Muslim group's gathering became a focus of India's coronavirus outbreak (Ganguly, 2020). Large-scale misinformation and fake news about Muslims purposefully spreading the virus were circulated by social media users as well as some media outlets. In this context, it is essential to understand the kind of propaganda that has been initiated to use the pandemic to further the discrimination against Muslims. The virus does not recognize religion, and the concern apart from containing the virus is the severe challenge posed by misinformation and the kind of hatred it creates. It has put health care systems under pressure and severely affected the economy. The Tablighi Jamaat event has created such a situation, making people believe in several conspiracy theories, thereby resulting in discrimination. Several individuals from the Muslim community are at the receiving end of attacks, verbal abuses, boycotts, and discrimination during the pandemic.

Considering the infectious and contagious nature of the pandemic Government was forced to initiate the lockdown process to reduce the contact among people (to contain the pandemic) and also get some time to prepare to fight against the pandemic, which had a significant impact on the minds of the people. The increased frustration also led people to believe that Muslims are spreaders of Corona, which is largely created by social media. This has resulted in escalating violence and increasing discrimination against the Muslim community.

Over the years, it has been witnessed that there has been an increase in anti-Muslim violence in India. The violence, apart from being physical in nature, is also seen in other forms and no-less dangerous ways, such as hate speech and demonization of Muslims in their daily lives (Ramasubramanyam, 2020). Despite India being a secular country time and again, these hate speeches and hate crimes are observed against the Muslim community, which has raised serious questions about the Government's existing policies.

Green, McFalls, and Smith (2011) have highlighted that hate crimes are a systematic bias against a particular group or community based on specific pre-determined characteristics, including caste, gender, ethnicity, language, and religion. The present research paper talks about the creation of false narratives as Muslims are responsible for spreading the virus. These false narratives are largely responsible for creating a dangerous atmosphere of fear among the Muslims and hate against them.

Even though there is no clear evidence to substantiate the claims that Muslims are responsible for the spread of the virus, a single incident of Tablighi Jamaat is deliberately used by some anti-social elements to portray a dark picture of the Muslim community.

Hussain et al. (2019) highlighted various hate crimes against Muslims in India, called Islamophobia. He has advocated that since India gained independence in 1947, the hostility is ever increasing against Muslims and is repeatedly given fuel for pursuing political interests. The extensive increase in hate crimes is attributed to various economic, social, political, and religious factors. Moreover, he has also documented various issues and challenges Muslims face, including discrimination, assault, and murder.

Guha (2017) has also documented how after partition, an entirely unique form of conflict has begun between Hindus and Muslims in India and is only getting worse with time. Despite the claims that India is a secular state, the repeated violence against a particular community destroys the true social fabric and the secular nature of the Indian Constitution.

Prasad (2020), in his article, speaks of three stages; how in the first stage, a validation is done by legitimate institutional actors confirming preconceived ideas about a constructed enemy. In the second stage, inflammatory rhetoric is deployed by populist leaders, which scapegoat that constructed enemy. These two stages culminate to create widespread moral panic in society. With moral panic firmly established, in the third stage, an environment of fear and paranoia becomes susceptible to the enactment of symbolic and physical violence against the constructed enemy.

Prasad (2020) has rightly pointed out this phenomenon to be the politicization of the health crisis in India. Moreover, he has pointed out how the populist leaders have strategically crafted a set of discourses, shrouded in the veneer of COVID-19 concerns, to promote anti-Muslim ideology and have tried to establish an environment of fear and paranoia necessary to encourage the enactment of symbolic and physical violence against Muslims in India. Largely the movies and novels could be held responsible for creating such an obnoxious situation which often portrays Muslims being the militants or criminals in their fictional works. Most Bollywood movies depict terrorists being Muslims, and we need to bring that consciousness to society that terrorism has no religion. Moreover, the movies must be put under a scanner that tends to depict Muslims as terrorists, thereby creating a false impression in the minds of individuals. There is a need to understand that terrorism cannot be attributed to any religion, and there needs to be a change in the mindset of society.

Hu and Tian (2015) have pointed out that despite having secularism as the basis of State sectarian contradictions and conflicts, India has been a regular occurrence. These conflicts have resulted in profoundly affected the developmental processes in India. Moreover, he has stated that the sectarian conflicts mainly occurred in northern India during earlier times but have now extended to the South of India.

Tambiah (1996) is anxious due to the excessive ethnic-nationalist outpour that has badly affected various geographical territories. Taking instances from the South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka), the author has tried to explore the larger economic, religious and political backdrop in which these conflicts occur. He has also tried to understand the cultural dynamics of the specific geographical territory to discover the causes behind the conflict.

Tatsuni (2009) reported multiple hate crimes in the last decade. There are numerous reasons for hate crimes against Muslims; however, the 1947 partition of the subcontinent is one of the fundamental reasons. Furthermore, the anti-Muslim sentiments are ignited by political parties in electoral campaigns to gain political mileage. As discussed earlier, contemporary socio-political and religious factors contribute to Islamophobia in India.

The existing body of literature confirms the existing Islamophobia and hate against Muslims. Since independence, Muslims have been subjected to degrees of violence and discrimination. In this context, it is essential to understand how the pandemic was used to further the anti-Muslim agenda.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The data and information compiled for this research paper are secondary. Considering the situation during the pandemic, it was not feasible for the researcher to collect primary information for which secondary data sources were utilized for the research. The secondary sources included newspapers, journals, research articles, the internet, blogs, news channels, and debates. To search for relevant articles in newspapers, the keywords used were; Tablighi, Jamaat, Islamophobia, Hate crimes, Pandemic, and Discrimination. Several research papers were also reviewed to understand the Hindu-Muslim relationship in India and look into the conditions of Muslims and the extent of Islamophobia in India. Moreover, several videos were circulated showing the Muslim community in a bad light and also analyzed. A systematic content analysis was done to arrive at a conclusion.

### **2.1. Research Questions**

The research Questions of this paper are the following:  
How has COVID-19 significantly increased the social hate against Muslims?  
What is the role of the Media in creating a false narrative?

The primary objective of this paper is to understand how the pandemic is used to marginalize the Muslim community and how they are used as the scapegoats in the pandemic. Moreover, the paper also tries to look into the role of social media in facilitating the creation of a false narrative.

### 3. STUDY AND ANALYSIS

The findings are primarily compiled from the information and data collected from newspapers, and systematic analysis is made. Several incidents reported from across India regarding hate crimes, discrimination, and marginalization are systematically collected, and generalizations are drawn from them. Globally voluminous studies have been conducted centering around issues and challenges relating to COVID-19, but limited studies have focused on the growing hatred towards Muslim communities during the pandemic, which is adding to the already existing woes of the marginalized community.

#### 3.1. Selective Testing

The incident of Tablighi Jamaat was criticized vociferously on the false pretexts that they were the ones responsible for the large-scale spread of the virus. However, at a similar time, several other religious congregations were held, about which no one spoke. Moreover, there are also pieces of evidence that suggest that several political communities also took place after the lockdown measures initiated by the Government of India, thereby restricting any kind of mass gatherings. Very conveniently, the lockdown norms were flouted, and nobody spoke a word about it.

Several news agencies put forward the argument that Muslims are the carriers of the virus because of the proper but selective testing of the members who attended the Tablighi Jamaat event. Most of the individuals who participated in the Tablighi Jamaat event (from India and even foreign countries) were tracked and quarantined, but that was not the case with other mass gatherings. Between March 9 to March 19, 2020, various festivals were held in at least eight temples, and the various religious congregation also were seen taking place. However, no such aggressive approach was adopted to track and test populations who have attended those religious congregations. The overall testing remained abysmally low (Akbar, 2020). Indeed this can be termed a fantastic initiative to test people who participated in the Tablighi Jamaat event. However, looking at the overall testing figure (which stood at abysmally low), it is tough to believe the nobleness of the intensity of the testing. Moreover, the idea of not testing people from other mass gatherings poses more essential questions about the authorities' intent.

#### 3.2. Role of Social Media Platforms:

Most Hindi news channels and some English channels have been spreading misconceptions about Muslims. The COVID-19 spread in India was due to the Tablighi Jamaat program organized by the Muslim community in New Delhi.



Inappropriate information went viral on social media by collecting false news as well as news analysis. Media being the fourth pillar of democracy, ideally should cater to the responsibility of providing information based on facts and delivering truth to the readers. However, the media has been compromised (Sinha, 2020). Hasan (2020) has pointed out that Journalism has become hatemongering in nature.

Despite the World Health Organisations' (WHO) guidelines regarding the proper depiction and spread of real news, several news agencies have tried to run their own propaganda by blaming Muslims for being the carriers of the virus. A large section of mainstream media, including social media platforms, has been attempting to demonise Muslims by holding them responsible for the pandemic in India (Pathak, 2020; Bisht and Naqvi, 2020). In times of distress, when there is a requirement for crisis management, the need of the hour is to stay in solidarity with each other, but the large sections of Indian media chose to perform otherwise. It has been pointed out that the spread of ambiguous and conspiracy theories during these troubled times has enhanced the intolerance and discrimination against Muslim communities. In the past few months, since the first case of COVID-19 was reported in India, a broad range of misinformation and fake news has been spreading like wildfire on social media, where various users were found using and spreading unsubstantiated information to blame Muslims as the 'super spreaders' of the virus.

### **3.3. Fake, Old, manipulated, Irrelevant Videos:**

Several old and irrelevant videos were circulated depicting Muslims in poor light. One video showed Muslims licking utensils and was circulated on the false pretext that Muslims are deliberately trying to spread the virus. There were also several similar videos that attempted to create a false narrative that Muslims were involved in spreading the virus. This false impression created in the society resulted in hate against the Muslims and largely contributed to threatening social harmony.

### **3.4. Twitter Hashtags and Cyber Racism:**

Among various social media, Twitter happens to be one medium that is used for the dissemination of information. Approximately 330 million individuals are using Twitter globally, among which 17 million are from India. However, there is a need to understand the proper use of Twitter in general and this type of social media in times of crisis. The use of social media should be rightfully ensured to propagate correct information, but that was not the case in India. Instances were reported from across the country of misuse of Twitter, facilitating the perpetuation of hate crimes. Khaira (2020) has pointed out that hate crimes against Muslims were linked to posts on Twitter. Saha (2020) has also highlighted

that Twitter is being used to promote discord among countries and communities. The impact of cyber-racism on the daily lives of Muslims is also profound. Instances are reported from India where people cancel their rides because the taxi driver is a Muslim (Saha, 2020). Muslim vendors are not allowed to run their businesses in Hindu-dominated societies, and hate is spewed against them. These are examples of some incidents of hatemongering that can be attributed the cyber-racism.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

In this unprecedented crisis created by the Coronavirus, many thought that our social and political discourses would rise above religious lines and build a robust national unity to combat the pandemic. However, it is unfortunate that religion-based hatred refuses to retreat from our society even when agreement across religions and castes is needed the most. Religious violence has been a recurring feature throughout India's history. In what was already an atmosphere of open Islamophobia, blaming India's Muslim community for the spread of the virus has only increased their persecution (Mohta, 2020). The lines between germophobia and xenophobia have often been blurred at the behest of politics (Rawat, 2020). The pandemic has provided fresh and ample opportunities for Hindu nationalists to beat down an already disadvantaged Muslim group. Harlankar (2020) has pointed out that the current pandemic is a platform facilitating the marginalization and segregation of Muslims in India.

There have been several cases from all over India where individuals belonging to other communities blatantly violated the lockdown, whereas only the Muslim community was targeted (Roy, 2020). Numerous cases have been cited as how medical staff is discriminated against and humiliated, Muslim women are denied access to a hospital (Akbar, 2020; Pandey, 2020), (Naqvi & Trivedi, 2020), and social boycott of Muslims (Slater and Masih, 2020), Muslims being discriminated (Sinha, 2020), Muslim vegetable vendors being discriminated (Akbar, 2020; Ali, 2020; Apoorvanda, 2020; Ganguly, 2020; Roy, 2020). Moreover, racism, xenophobia, and spreading false rumors have become integral to responding to pandemics (Slater and Masih, 2020). Racism and discrimination against racial, ethnic and religious minorities are increasing during the COVID-19 crisis. The same phenomena can also be attributed to the Indian context as well. Hence, the need of the hour is to evaluate the root causes behind the increased discrimination during the pandemic. The primary question is how and why the Government ignored the first Coronavirus death reported from Tablighi on March 15, 2020. Understanding the political motive behind not acting immediately on this is essential. Further suspicion also arises on how the administration gave the required permission to hold such an event, given the circumstances of the extremely contagious nature of the disease.

It is pertinent that the Tablighi Jamaat case cannot be understood in isolation. The recent citizenship issues also play a prominent and significant role in demonizing a particular community. There is no way to justify the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat (in terms of conducting the congregation); however, blaming the community as a whole and creating hatemongering is just not acceptable.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Muslims are the most vulnerable ethnoreligious group in India who have been encountering hate crimes since 1947. Islamophobia against Muslims in India escalated through physical and religious assaults such as murders and riots (Hussain et al., 2019). The Muslim community is facing both educational and economic discrimination in India mainly because of Islamophobia (Robinson, 2007). The mainstream media and social media predominantly use these extreme emotions to fuel the hatred targeted against Muslims. This leads to polarization and discrimination against minorities. The Muslim community has faced voluminous degrees of abuse, threats, and physical assaults and has also encountered issues while trying to access various public services. Instances are also reported where people belonging to the Muslim community are being denied healthcare services.

In times of pandemic, when the need of the hour is to stand in solidarity with each other to fight the pandemic, certain sections of the society are channeling their anti-Muslim agenda under the garb of the pandemic. The effects of COVID-19 are far-reaching and have impacted all the countries in the world. India, also being badly affected, needs people to stand with each other rather than stand against each other. The false narrative created to post the Tablighi Jamaat event that Muslims deliberately spread the virus was nothing but hatemongering by a few societal elements. This propaganda created more significant problems for Muslims in India, with instances reported from all over the country as how badly the Muslims were treated and humiliated in some cases also.

There have been pieces of evidence that exhibit the fact that there has been intense vilification of the Muslim communities backed and unchecked by the Government' which has the potential of displaying far-reaching consequences (Slater and Maish, 2020). The damage that has been done requires substantial efforts to rebuild the same. State and the Central Governments must take necessary steps to oversee the fact that the measures initiated for COVID-19 are not deformed for political returns, and neither should they try to curb the natural rights of Muslims through various forms of hate speech or hate crimes and discrimination. The role of multiple agencies, including the State, is crucial in this aspect. There has to be a systematic attempt by the political leadership to deal with hate speech going viral on several social media platforms. This kind of hate speech is mainly responsible for stigmatizing the Muslim community, and an atmosphere of fear is created for a particular community.

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