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*Global Health Security:  
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

## **Rising Islamophobia in India: Exploiting the Pandemic?**

*By Nazneen Mohsina and Joseph Franco*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Communal tensions in India have heightened as right-wing Hindu nationalists exploited the Hindu-Muslim divide to hype up threats from COVID-19 and foment hatred against the country's sizable Muslim minority. The vilification of Muslims could further hamper India's response to COVID-19 while institutionalised Islamophobia could damage the country's pluralistic heritage.*

### **COMMENTARY**

THE ASPERSION of Muslims in light of the COVID-19 pandemic plays into the [majoritarian politics](#) and anti-Muslim narrative that has been on the rise since the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) accession to power in 2014 and re-election in 2019.

The 'othering' of Muslims — portraying them as different — is an integral part of the BJP's strategy to stay in power and push its agenda of creating a unitarian nation based on a religio-cultural identity. The current hate-campaign against Muslims could also be a tactic to deflect public anger from the government's failings in managing the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Worsening Muslim Marginalisation**

The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has [pursued Hindu primacy](#) and [ultra-nationalism](#), shifting the country away from its founding ideals of secularism and equality. Since the re-emergence of Hindu nationalism, right-wing hardliners have

become increasingly emboldened in promoting Hindu dominance and the marginalisation of Indian Muslims.

Prior to the pandemic, communal tensions were already [intense](#) due to the recently enacted Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 that discriminated against Muslims, generating nationwide protests. In February, India witnessed its [worst violence](#) between Hindus and Muslims in decades.

Indian Muslims now appear to face an additional layer of marginalisation since government officials and various media outlets accredited an Islamic seminary by Tablighi Jamaat as the main transmitter of the coronavirus.

This, along with multiple other [fake news](#) and [conspiracy theories](#) accusing Muslims of deliberately conducting a malevolent campaign to spread COVID-19 to the Hindu majority, has resulted in [demonisation](#), [denial of medical care](#), [boycotts](#), and [attacks](#) on Muslims in the country.

### **Tablighi Jamaat Congregation and its Effect**

The Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic missionary group, held its annual meeting at its Delhi headquarters in early March before India declared a health emergency and called for a national lockdown. The event was attended by over 2,000 people, including foreign nationals from countries with active COVID-19 cases.

There have been reports linking participants to [over 1,000 coronavirus](#) cases across India. While the meeting admittedly was ill-timed owing to the pandemic, anti-Muslim critics exploited the event for their own narrative.

Muslims were painted as the [sole culprits](#) responsible for transmitting the coronavirus in India even though other political and religious functions were taking place with no restrictions imposed by the government until late March. Critics also pointed that Tablighi-linked positive cases were high because attendees were [selectively tested](#).

The subsequent dissemination of explicit content portraying Muslims as the key vector of the COVID-19 virus on television channels, social media and from members of the BJP, worsened Muslim demonisation and Islamophobia. Television debates created [“us-vs-them” narratives](#), and [called](#) them “corona villains”, “enemies of the nation” and “human bombs”, among other prejudicial terms. [Hashtags](#) like #CoronaJihad, #BioJihad, #Coronaterrorism, #MuslimsSpreadingCorona began circulating online.

The anti-Muslim drive was also endorsed by members of the BJP. The union minority affairs minister in Modi’s cabinet took up the [“Corona jihad”](#) phrase, calling the gathering by the Tablighi Jamaat a [“Talibani crime”](#). Numerous fake videos linking Indian Muslims with the spread of COVID-19, accusing them of purposely [spitting](#), [licking](#) or [sneezing](#) on food, went viral on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok.

### **Islamophobia as a Tactic**

Crises can bring out new expressions of old prejudices. The spread of COVID-19-related hate speech has amplified existing biases, exacerbated Islamophobia and

contributed to an upsurge in anti-Muslim hate crimes. For some governments, channelling public anger towards internal or external enemies is a way of diverting attention from their own failures.

As it had not considered the virus a threat to India until much later, the government did not prepare any contingency plan to cope with it. Additionally, the sudden way in which it declared a nationwide lockdown added to the host of unanticipated problems, including the exodus of migrant labour.

Human Rights Watch has expressed concern over [rising Islamophobia](#) in India. Correspondingly, India has also been attracting international criticism. Most recently, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom urged the State Department to [designate](#) India as a "country of particular concern" over "severe violations" of religious freedom – the worst India has fared since 2004.

Similarly, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Kuwait government, a royal princess of the United Arab Emirates, as well as a number of Arab activists, many of whom are India's strategic and trade partners, have expressed deep concern over Islamophobic hate speech by Indians that accused the country's Muslims of spreading the coronavirus.

Numerous Indian expats in the [Gulf region](#), [Canada](#) and [New Zealand](#) have consequently lost their jobs or have been charged for their Islamophobic social media posts.

### **Implications of Vilification**

The vilification of Muslims propelled by media coverage and tacitly or directly endorsed by members of the ruling party could have far-reaching consequences. Firstly, it will threaten India's fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. If unchecked, it will also intensify religious discrimination and alienation of Muslim communities.

That in turn will be problematic for India's national security as it will strengthen narratives of Islamist terrorist groups who may exploit sectarian and communal fault lines. Indeed, both [Al-Qaeda](#) and [ISIS](#) have intensified their propaganda campaign vis-à-vis India lately.

Additionally, such vilification of Muslims will call into question India's vibrant, pluralistic heritage bound together by a Constitution that accords equal rights to all individuals and group – which has been the hallmark of the largest democracy in the world since independence. India cannot become a great power if its ruling party is an active participant in communal conflict within its borders.

If India is to uphold its reputation, it is necessary to assure both its citizens and the international community that it is not retreating from its constitutional moorings by ensuring harmony and effective action against anyone who disturb it, irrespective of their political affiliations.

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