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Defying responsibility

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DEFYING RESPONSIBILITY

Modes of silence, religious symbolism, and biopolitics in the COVID-19 pandemic

Britta Ohm

It became a truism during the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 that its challenges magnified dominant characteristics of people as much as of leaderships around the world. For India, this certainly applied to a government that, since it came to power in 2014 under the towering figure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has set out to ‘make India Hindu’ (Ludden 1996) in an increasingly obvious manner.

Modi’s political pedigree—the para-military RSS,¹ the core organization of the expansive Hindu nationalist network (Sangh Parivar), and the post-1980 populist Hindutva² movement—has provoked extensive scholarship over the past decades. Research areas include Hindu nationalism’s upper-caste religious moorings and racial concept of supremacy (Bhatt 2001; Sharma 2011), the centrality of an enemy image and of anti-minority, especially anti-Muslim violence (Basu 2015; Brass 2003), its overall resonances with fascism in terms of ideology (Sarkar 1993), the organization as a mass movement (Banaji 2013) and permanent spectacular mobilization (Eckert 2000), its systematic relationship with electoral politics (Chatterji et al. 2019), and its discursive and symbolic entrenchment in everyday life (Berti et al. 2011; Ohm 2007). From 2014 onwards, an increasingly unfettered violent mob culture in the name of ‘cow protection’ (gauraksha) has resulted in the lynching of Muslims and Dalits (former ‘Untouchables’). While not officially instigated by the Modi government, perpetrators acted with obvious impunity. They were egged on with intensified hate speech by Hindutva supporters and cadres who operate social media and delegitimize criticism in key positions they have come to hold in popular news media.

Matters have only stepped up after the re-election of the Modi government in 2019, particularly with regard to legal intervention (i.e. the abrogation of the special status of the Muslim-majority state of Kashmir and the introduction of an anti-Muslim citizenship law) as well as police and judicial action against rights activists, critical scholars, and journalists. In the months before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, protests led by students, Muslims, and lower castes mounted against these developments in defence of the Indian Constitution, which owes much of its secular and democratic spirit to its chief architect, the Dalit jurist and reformer B.R. Ambedkar.

At the same time, it has remained remarkably difficult to directly relate Prime Minister Modi to the enforcement of an ideological agenda of Hindu nationalism. The larger reason for this is his government’s appropriation of, rather than open attack upon, the rule of law

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and democracy as ‘people’s power’ (see Canovan 1999). However, as the unfolding pandemic abruptly halted the mobilization in the country against the erosion of rights and rising socio-economic inequality, it exacerbated two central elements of Modi’s public politics: a pronounced silence vis-à-vis the violence, discrimination, and exclusion that his governance yields, and the employment of upper-caste religious symbolism in a direct appeal to ‘the nation.’ Not only did Modi leave uncommented upon fast swelling attacks against Muslims as the allegedly responsible for the spread of the virus. He also presented himself to the Hindu middle classes as a spiritual leader in the crisis, while copying, in a postcolonial competitive manner, the lockdown template from China and Europe. Implementing virtually overnight one of the strictest lockdowns on a global scale, he completely ignored local preconditions and requirements of the large poorer sections of society, notably the homeless and migrant daily wage labourers. While we know biopolitics as a ‘technology of power’ that governs the physical and political lives of populations (Foucault 1997), rather than outright agitating against them, Modi resorted to a neoliberal ‘biopolitics of disposability’ (Giroux 2008) that rendered Muslims, lower castes, and the poor superfluous.

Modi’s silence I: the Muslim poisoning of the Hindu body

When news of the pandemic hardened, it was only a question of time until Muslims would be accused of carrying and, even worse, of purposefully spreading the virus. In mid-March, before the imposition of the countrywide lockdown (25 March 2020), the Tablighi Jamaat, an internationally active Islamic revivalist organization, held a large meeting at its headquarters (markaz) in New Delhi’s Nizamuddin district. Thousands of delegates attended, with a substantial number coming from over forty countries. Representatives of the Jamaat would later concede that they were ill-advised to hold the meeting at that point, even though the government had not yet closed entry to the country then, nor had it prohibited large gatherings. Nevertheless, rumours of the event as a viral ‘super-spreader’ fast made the rounds on social media, often under the hashtag #CoronaJihad. The term resonated with ‘LoveJihad,’ the name of a vilifying campaign by Hindutva groups, which began in 2015 and which suggests the targeted and violent ‘conquering’ of ‘Hindu girls’ by Muslim men. In a similar way, it was now insinuated that the Tablighis had gathered to consciously disseminate the virus in advancing the Muslims’ clandestinely organized ‘conquest’ of ‘Hindu society.’ The Union Minister for Minority Affairs, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, called the congregation ‘a Talibani crime by Tablighi Jamaat.’ Most of the mainstream media, especially increasingly sensationalist TV channels, strengthened this narrative through their one-sided emphasis of this event against similar meetings and pilgrimages of Hindus and Sikhs that took place even later and supposedly involved even larger numbers. Thus vindicated, vigilante justice by Hindutva activists and also common Hindus, often in collusion with police, led to boycotting, threatening, and physically attacking Muslim vendors (e.g. vegetable deliveries to housing units) in various parts of India, under the allegation that they had spread saliva over their produce before selling it. A previously made video that showed licking cutlery as a symbolic appeal to not waste food, a practice of a particular Muslim sect, was also widely shared, claiming to document intentional spreading of the virus through utensils.

If ‘LoveJihad’ reinvoked the old theme of Muslim demographic warfare, the Tablighis’ event served to accuse Muslims of biological warfare whose defeat justified all means. A BJP MLA advocate in the state of Karnataka openly said that in order to stop the virus from spreading, ‘even shooting [Tablighi Jamaat members] is not wrong.’ However suggestive at first sight, this accusation of biological warfare significantly differed from the classic anti-Semitic
motif of the Jew poisoning the well arising during the bubonic plague (or the Black Death) in medieval Europe. The Jew then was portrayed as the shrewd plotter who brings death and ruin merely to others. The current framing of Muslims, by contrast, alleged using their own living bodies as agents of pollution and contagion. It thereby denied them their own suffering from the virus, while deducing the entitlement to eliminate or to at least strictly segregate them. The parallel with another historical narrative thus appears more apt, namely with that of typhoid as a ‘Jewish disease,’ which informed the politics of rigorous ghettoization in Nazi-occupied Poland. The ghettoization of Muslims in India has been a long, ongoing process that occurs under different political preconditions. However, installing separate COVID-19 wards for Hindus and Muslims in some hospitals, as for example, the Ahmedabad Civil Hospital, and the refusal of one cancer clinic to admit Muslim patients unless they had tested negative for the virus clearly carried this new dimension of a ‘Muslim disease.’

As with earlier discrimination and violence taking place under his governance, there was not a word of condemnation or reassurance from the prime minister’s office. Among Muslims, Modi’s rejection to take governmental responsibility for such actions or to even hear their concerns had already broadly sunk in. Yet appeals and comments such as the following, made by a Muslim colleague on his Facebook page, regarding Modi’s speech on 14 April (announcing the first extension of the lockdown until 3 May), were still fairly common. Rather than naive belief, they expressed an ostentatious, even ironic pointer to the fundamental expectation of constitutional conduct: ‘Humble request to India’s #PrimeMinister: in your speech tomorrow, please appeal [to] citizens not to boycott and harass Muslims. We wait for your strong message.’ And the next day: ‘So I heard the speech. Thank you for all the good measures. But you didn’t speak one word about the communal hatred being spread. You didn’t appeal to the people to not boycott and harass the minorities. Disappointed.’

Modi’s silence II: symbolizing the upper-caste Hindu nation

With his pronounced silence on pressing problems, Modi redefined the outward task of the prime minister as being ‘neutral,’ rather than as being responsible. He kept his silence not only vis-à-vis the Muslims’ plight, but remained equally unmoved by spectacles and discourses of Hindutva organizations and politicians, such as the public ‘gaumutra parties’ (cow urine drinking-parties) and cow dung-baths, organized by the Hindu Mahasabha. As they claimed purifying powers of Hinduism’s holy animal against COVID-19, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, asserted the practice of yoga as effective both against COVID-19 and mental illness (as early as 2019, he accused the Muslim League of being ‘a virus that will infect the whole country’). Inevitably, Modi’s ‘neutral’ silence powerfully signalled impunity to those engaging in violence and an indifference towards their victims, and hence acceptance, if not valorization, of Hindutva activism.

Inadvertently, however, Modi also expressed little interest or trust in the suggested Hindutva prevention methods (e.g. drinking cow urine) nor other local ideas or requirements for dealing with the virus. Instead, as he declared, on 24 March, the lockdown of the country, he strengthened the appeal of religious symbolism. In his lockdown announcement, Modi emphatically related the new key terms of the global pandemic’s vocabulary, ‘social distancing’ and ‘discipline,’ to the Lakshman Rekha, a circle of containment, the overstepping of which spells (moral) danger and (cultural) decay. Instead of detailing medical schemes and logistical procedures, he was thus alluding to a motif from the Indian epic Ramayana and equating the Lashman Rekha with the lockdown itself. He thereby also indicated that the population—by not stepping out of the house—carried the moral and cultural obligation for
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India’s wellbeing rather than the government taking responsibility. It was unlikely a coincidence that only a few days later, on 28 March, the state broadcaster Doordarshan started a re-run (from 1987–1991) of the extremely successful televised epics Mahabharata and Ramayana. This move augmented Modi’s appeal with the framework of nationalized popular culture. The televised rendition of the Ramayana in particular, previously aimed at the upwardly mobile middle classes, normalized a hegemonic Hindu reading that excluded oral, folk, and lower-caste versions as well as critical interpretations of the epic and was ‘replete with the demonization of cultural others’ (Mankekar 2002: 144). While thus appearing culturally inclusive, the context revealed Modi’s main addressees as middle-class Hindus who could afford and potentially valued ‘social distancing’ and ‘discipline’ as entrenched Brahminical practices of safeguarding purity and averting contagion—by a virus, by Muslims, or by the traditionally inherent pollution through Dalits (Kesavan 2020).

Only on 3 April was Modi publicly visible again with a morning video message. As could have been foreseen, by that time, millions of mostly lower-caste, Dalit, and Muslim migrant daily wage labourers were stranded across the country under hazardous hygienic conditions, without income, and exposed to violent police enforcement of the lockdown. There was a desperate hope for some announcement of concrete measures regarding their transport and relief. Instead, Modi called on his viewers to ‘awaken the superpower of 130 crore (1.3 billion) Indians’ and to ‘take those of us most affected, our poor brothers and sisters, from disappointment to hope’ by engaging with him ‘at their doorstep or balconies’ in the ceremony of lighting the diya (auspicious lamp). While also admitting candles, torches, and mobile phone lights for the occasion, he himself appeared that evening in what was shown across TV channels as ‘his own home.’ Emerging in a simple lungi (sarong) and kurta (shirt) from a vast unlit background, approaching a huge, finely crafted brass lamp, he appeared as the bearer of light in the darkness of the COVID-19 crisis, thereby mastering the paradox of a silent spectacle that at the same time left itself open to the utmost variety of resonances and interpretations.

Most immediately, to the many caste Hindus who light a diya as part of their daily pujas (prayers), the ceremony likely spoke of purifying the air, banishing ignorance (darkness), and attaining knowledge through interacting with a chosen deity. Charged with the momentous significance, it could also be seen as linking India with similar Western traditions and concepts of candle-lighting in religious, memorial, vigil, and philosophical contexts. Beyond that, the solemnity of the exercise pandered to the persistent perception in the West of India and of Hinduism as peaceful and tolerant, which also informs the self-image of vast sections of the upper-caste middle classes, that is those groups who were most likely to safely sit in their homes and to have a ‘balcony’ on which to partake in the diya lighting. For them, as the main TV consumers, the melodramatic aspect of Modi’s (televised) performance also held sentimental resonances not only with the rescreened Mahabharata and Ramayana, but equally with the many TV soap operas, modelled upon the two epics and revolving around life in wealthy Hindu family homes, that over years had displayed a tight selection (and invention) of upper-caste religious rituals as the central domestic activity, particularly of women. Moreover, Modi had explicitly called for the lighting ceremony on the ninth day of the lockdown, at 9 pm for the duration of nine minutes. While the number nine holds no particular significance in Hinduism, Modi’s alluding to it seemed to suggest some higher knowledge and the internet began to buzz with theories of the auspicious power of the number and of Modi’s genius in identifying the precise time for defeating the virus.

Modi clearly presented himself as one of his audience, that is as a victim to the pandemic and its unavoidable consequences, isolated at home, and finding solace and strength in
religious practice. At the same time, he claimed a new spiritual leadership in the crisis, setting an example in following the Lakshman Rekha and suggesting meaning and direction. Those who felt addressed by the performance and eagerly joined in large numbers could comfortably claim that the prime minister had obviously included ‘all Indians’ and was even specifically caring for the poor. They thus asserted a dominant reading of the situation that immanently disqualified counter-interpretations more accommodating of a Dalit or Muslim viewpoint, which would have seen an entirely different scenario. To them, it would not merely have been quite obvious that the symbolic array of ‘hope’ included them only if they unquestioningly submitted to the displayed dominance of Hindu upper-caste definitions. More than that, as the many stranded migrant workers among them had no home to go to (even if temporarily), let alone a ‘balcony,’ it was precisely Modi’s silence, his sparse rhetoric, and his symbolic politics, which at the risk of their death excluded them from what was demanded of them through the lockdown: to be part of the self-isolated nation that proved its worth to remain alive and healthy through discipline, faith, and unity under a ‘world-class leader.’

Conclusion

Under the acute conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic in India, a new dimension of a ‘biopolitics of disposability’ became evident in Prime Minister Modi’s governance. Effectively, whole societal groups—Muslims, Dalits, lower castes, the working poor—were exposed to redundancy through a ‘management of the politics of life and death’ (Giroux 2008: 9) that defied political and administrative responsibilities in an existential situation. After the widespread protests by these groups against the erosion of democratic rights and deepening inequalities became the first victim of the corona virus, Modi exacerbated his long rehearsed modes of silence vis-à-vis Hindutva violence and a politics of symbolism. Withdrawing into a mediated realm of interpretation, he encouraged rather than demanded attributions of goodwill, national integration, social sensitivity, religious strength, and personal far-sightedness (if not ‘genius’) among his supporters, while obscuring existential dependencies and lacking medical, organizational, and financial provisions. As he readily employed the global idiom of the pandemic, disregarding social and economic preconditions and nurturing imaginations of a middle-class norm, he suggested the eager imposition and violent enforcement of lockdown to be requirements posed by the virus itself. Modi’s diya lighting ceremony, on the other hand, equally diverted responsibility to its obvious addressees, that is the ‘nation’ of the class- and caste-privileged. The symbolic act implied that it was their adherence to Hindu culture and rituals that would keep them safe and healthy, rather than their government’s care. Those immediately at the risk of dying, finally, whether through violence, starvation, or the virus, were not only rendered disposable, but effectively made responsible for their own deaths and that of others.

Notes

1 Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Voluntary Corps), founded 1925.
2 Hindutva (Hindu-ness) is the ideology of the Hindu nationalist movement.
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6 BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People’s party), the governing Hindu nationalist party; MLA: Member of the Legislative Assembly.


9 Posted on 12 and 13 April, when Modi announced the extension of India’s lockdown until 3 May.


Bibliography


