

Living as a Virus in Modi's India

Tuesday 2 June 2020, by [ZAHBI Shigraf](#) (Date first published: 25 May 2020).

From New Delhi, Shigraf Zahbi reports on how “the virus” became “the Muslim virus” in less than a week.

On Thursday, March 19, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered his first national address amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, in which, elegantly eschewing any talk of the government's mitigation strategy, he asked the people of the country to applaud healthcare workers from their balconies for five minutes on the following Sunday. As expected, his supporters—who are mostly rich, middle-class, and upper-caste voters, privileged enough to have a balcony in a country where two-thirds of the population lives in poverty—diligently followed his advice and chanted “go corona go” to the accompaniment of drums and utensils with an enthusiasm far exceeding the given time limit. At the appointed hour that day, as my social media feed flooded with videos of people ringing bells, blowing conch shells, and banging pots and pans, the Muslim ghetto where I live plunged into a deep and defiant silence.

Only last year in December, Modi's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government had successfully dismantled the Indian Constitution to give a “legal” makeover to its Hindu nationalist agenda of rendering millions of Muslims stateless. The lethal and discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), together with its associated proposal of a National Register of Citizens (NRC), had triggered widespread protests across the country, the epicenter of which was a region of the capital city of New Delhi loosely referred to as Jamia Nagar after the nearby public university, Jamia Millia Islamia—home to me and more than a million other Muslims.

Earlier this year in January, when the university had reopened nearly a month after the violent police crackdown on protesting students, I had managed to sneak into the library on the pretext of borrowing a book that I pretended I needed urgently. In reality, I had only been prompted by a desperate desire to see my beloved corner of the campus again, which had remained inaccessible to students even after the recommencement of academic activities and examinations. Shrouded in green scaffolding netting, the exterior of the building looked like a hospital ward in a war zone, which seemed more apt than hyperbolic when I went inside, as what met my eyes were blood-stained staircases, scattered books, broken glass and upturned tables. Overnight, the library had transformed into an evidence box of the terror unleashed by hundreds of vengeful policemen, who, under the supervision of Modi's home minister, had thrown tear gas canisters inside closed spaces, opened live fire at unarmed students, and had beaten them mercilessly, partially blinding one and grievously injuring many. It was from this wreckage that I had randomly picked up a copy of Stendahl's *The Red and the Black*, the classic French novel of thwarted ambition and class mobility, hoping to return it soon. But life was about to turn into a long series of interruptions, and the book stayed with me, mostly unread.

During the latter half of March, when the novel coronavirus was forcing the world indoors and when Modi was dramatically asking Indians to observe a one-day people's curfew, the residents of Jamia Nagar were looking at the unfolding of events with doubt and apprehension. The sit-in protests led by the women of Shaheen Bagh, another neighborhood in the ghetto, against the contentious laws

and the December 15 police attack on the students of Jamia Millia Islamia, had inspired similar protests in other parts of the country that were undeterred despite intimidation by Hindu supremacist terrorists. When even vilification by ministers and paid news media failed to hold back the protesters, a local politician with the ruling party—which had just lost an election in Delhi—helped foment a pogrom in the northeastern areas of the capital city in which fifty-three people—two-thirds of them Muslims—were killed. When mobs chanting “Hail Lord Ram” were assaulting Muslims on the streets and vandalizing their homes and businesses, Modi—who ironically calls himself “India’s watchman”—was serving the visiting United States President, Donald Trump, a much-touted “beef-free” meal. The results expected from the massacre were visible, but not complete—although their numbers had reduced considerably since the pogrom, women still showed up on the streets with posters demanding the abrogation of CAA and NRC. But then, in less than a month’s time, COVID-19 cases began to surge in the subcontinent, and the protesters had to contend with demonstrating symbolically by leaving their slippers at the protest site.

“When diseases come, worms thrive,” my middle-aged neighbor had said a day before the imposition of a nationwide lockdown, when the residents of our building were out on their balconies buying water, since Jamia Nagar—like many other localities in Delhi—does not have potable drinking water. She was hinting that the government would exploit the event of the pandemic to uproot the anti-CAA protests in their totality, a fear and mistrust echoed by the entire Muslim community in their silence during the five-minute pot-banging session. The government, for its part, did not leave any stone unturned to make her sarcastic prophecy come true. On March 24, security personnel demolished the protest site at Shaheen Bagh and scrupulously removed tents, posters, and every other mark of dissent, while also arresting nine people. Amidst a raging healthcare disaster and a migrant crisis which it had tragically failed to handle, the government also found it extremely important to spend time removing murals depicting such figures as Bhagat Singh, Malcolm X, Mirza Ghalib, and Bertolt Brecht. Since then, despite serious concerns being raised over the condition of the overcrowded prisons in the country, the Indian police have gone on a political witch-hunt, arresting students, activists, and journalists on charges ranging from flimsy to totally ridiculous.

But these apparent and relatively accountable strategies present only a partial picture of the kind of warfare that is being waged against Muslims in India. Anybody who lives in a ghetto in the city like me knows how difficult it is to procure a ride to these areas. Taxi-drivers, who often call Jamia Nagar “mini-Pakistan,” accelerate when they hear someone say its name. People from posh localities in Delhi grimace at the mere mention of what they call “bad-gentry neighborhoods.” Even high-ranking schools discriminate against students on the basis of their addresses. This brand of Islamophobia, which treats Muslims as the members of a treacherous, dirty, and dangerous community, penetrated deeper into the social fabric of the country after the anti-CAA stir, the credit of which goes in equal parts to the politicians with the ruling party who demonized Muslims as “traitors” worthy of being “shot” and the national media who ran episodes on Modi’s sleep schedule side by side with panel discussions on how Muslims were trying to seize power in the country. For them, the pandemic became only another opportunity which could be exploited—in the words of the prominent novelist and essayist Arundhati Roy—to ghettoize and stigmatize the Muslims further.

The conspiracy theories blaming Muslims for the spread of the coronavirus began floating when several people who had attended a large gathering of Tablighi Jamaat, a Muslim missionary movement, in New Delhi, tested positive for the virus. Soon, the Indian government created a separate column of Tablighi Jamaat-related cases in its daily briefings. One newspaper—often hailed for its “respectability”—published a cartoon of the coronavirus personified, dressed in a Muslim outfit. The #CoronaJihad hashtag went viral on social media platforms like Twitter. In less than a week, “the virus” became the “Muslim virus.”

In her groundbreaking work on the rise of the Nazi and Soviet regimes, *The Origins of*

Totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt wrote how antisemitic canards about a “Jewish world conspiracy” served the “most efficient function of Nazi propaganda.” Today, in a country which is steadily growing authoritarian in character, the presence of a similar pattern is ominous and worrying. Even before the rise of Hindu nationalists as a dominant political force in India, Muslims were accused of practicing “love-jihad”—a supposed conspiracy among Muslim men to woo Hindu girls and forcibly convert them to Islam. The coming to power of the BJP in 2014 only exacerbated the attack on Muslims, which has worsened since, to the point where Muslims have moved from being labeled as seducers, manipulators and tyrants to, now, the subhuman epithets of pests, termites, and viruses.

The constant dehumanization of Muslims has paid the peddlers of Hindutva ideology very well. In a country where Muslims are scared to utter the word “beef” aloud on the street, and where cow vigilante violence has become as common as the rising of the sun, this new wave of religious hatred has rendered the use of pretexts like cow-slaughter for the persecution of Muslims unnecessary and obsolete: a beard, a veil, a skull-cap and a name have become the identifying characteristics of a virus, which, by the mere virtue of its abundant and harmful nature, *must be* and *should be* gotten rid of. Muslim men and women are being assaulted by violent mobs wielding rods and sticks; in some areas, calls to boycott Muslim businesses are delivered through loudspeakers, while in others, barricades are erected to keep the “traitors” away. Doctors are foregoing their professional oaths by refusing to admit Muslim patients. And all this when millions of migrant workers are battling hunger and destitution on their long and arduous walk home from the cities where there is no longer any employment.

I remember that a few months back, a professor had remarked, while lecturing us on D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, that it was “high time” the Muslims got rid of their “ghetto mentality.” Even a cursory glance at the situation of Muslims in India since the rise of militant Hindu nationalism reveals the inherent fallacy of such a sweeping assumption: it not only overlooks the obvious fact that a community huddles together in cramped, fly-infested spaces only when its members feel threatened, marginalized, and discriminated against, but also fails to note a critical truth: Ghettoization begins not within the ghettoized community, but outside it, in spaces where the rich, the powerful, and the dominant hold sway, and from where they dictate, with a fabricated self-righteousness, the destruction of what they fear.

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