

India's BJP and its Hindu-right allies scapegoat Muslims for spread of pandemic

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As if he had suddenly woken from a weeks-long sleep, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi interjected via an April 19 tweet, “COVID-19 does not see race, religion, color, caste, creed, language or border before striking. Our response and conduct thereafter should attach primacy to unity and brotherhood. We are in this together.”

Modi is a notorious Hindu supremacist, whose Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government and Hindu-right allies have relentlessly whipped up animosity against India's Muslim minority. This has included a blatant attempt to scapegoat Muslims for the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In recent weeks, senior BJP leaders have vilified members of a Muslim religious group, the Tablighi Jamaat, many of whom became infected with COVID-19 while staying at the group's hostel in Delhi, as “human bombs” in “the guise of coronavirus patients.” Fellow Hindu communalists have used social media, including under the hashtags #CoronaJihad and #CoronaTerrorism, to accuse Muslims of deliberately infecting Hindus with the virus. This has included circulating fake and doctored videos that purport to show Muslim hawkers licking vegetables before selling them.

As a result of this vile campaign, poor Muslims enduring a weeks-long coronavirus shutdown without work or income have been denied food, while others engaged in distributing food to the poor have been physically assaulted.

A hospital in Uttar Pradesh recently placed an ad in a local newspaper that said Muslims would only be admitted if they, unlike all other prospective patients, had first been screened for COVID-19. Meanwhile, in Gujarat another hospital reportedly divided Hindu and Muslim patients into separate wards.

An April 22 article on The Wire news site observes, “Among the economically deprived sections of Muslims, those who are either daily wage workers, or petty traders, the impact of religious profiling has been the worst. There are innumerable stories of Muslim vegetable sellers being disallowed entry into gated colonies after instructions to security staff who now check identity papers to ascertain if the seller is Muslim or not.”

Modi's tweet was a transparent attempt to cover his political tracks. The attempt of the BJP and the Hindu communalist right to deflect mass anger over the government's criminally negligent response to the coronavirus onto the Muslim minority has provoked widespread opprobrium across India and internationally.

None of this, however, stopped India's corporate media from greeting Modi's deeply cynical appeal for “unity and

brotherhood” as the wise counsel of a great statesman. Needless to say, the media didn't recall Modi's role as Gujarat's chief minister in instigating and presiding over an anti-Muslim pogrom in 2002 in which more than 1,800 people died. Nor did they mention how in 2013 he had responded to those who had criticized him for never expressing any remorse over the 2002 events by comparing his feelings to those of a passenger in a vehicle that had run over a puppy dog. If “someone else is driving a car,” Modi told Reuters, “and we're sitting behind, even then if a puppy comes under the wheel, will it be painful or not? Of course it is.”

The BJP's anti-Muslim offensive

After winning re-election last May, Modi and his BJP intensified their drive to transform India into a Hindu *rashtra* or Hindu state in which Muslims will be tolerated only insofar as they accept Hindu supremacy. In August, the BJP illegally abrogated the semiautonomous constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, then placed it under effective central government trusteeship in perpetuity by transforming it into two Union territories.

With the Supreme Court's acquiescence, the BJP government is rushing to build a Hindu temple on the site of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, which in 1992 was razed by Hindu fundamentalist fanatics, at the instigation of the BJP leadership and in direct defiance of an order from India's highest court.

These steps were a calculated attempt to incite the BJP's fascist activist base and whip up communalism so as to split the working class, under conditions where India's economy is unravelling and there is mounting social opposition to the BJP's austerity measures, privatizations, promotion of precarious contract-labour jobs and other pro-investor policies.

But the BJP government was forced onto its back feet when mass protests erupted against the anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which it rushed through Parliament in mid-December.

Facing a tenacious India-wide protest movement against the CAA and the prospect of it intersecting with the mounting working class challenge to its rule, the BJP doubled down on its communalist offensive. In January and February, BJP leaders

publicly called for violence against the anti-CAA protests.

This hate campaign culminated in the violence unleashed against the Muslim minority in northeast Delhi in late February. For three days starting Feb. 23, Hindu fascist thugs, incited by local BJP leaders and with the complicity of the police and security forces, went on a rampage, attacking Muslims, their homes and businesses. More than fifty people, most of them Muslim, died in the Feb. 2020 Delhi riots.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the scapegoating of Muslims

India reported its first coronavirus case on January 30. Although Indian and international medical experts have long warned that the country is especially vulnerable to a pandemic because of its poverty, dilapidated health care system and high-density population, the BJP government did next to nothing to counteract the spread of COVID-19 over the next seven weeks. It performed minimal testing and failed to mobilize state resources or the wealth of India's 120-strong cohort of billionaires to obtain Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and otherwise prepare the medical system. Its "fight" against COVID-19 was entirely reliant on travel bans and the cursory screening of arriving passengers.

Then on the evening of March 24 the government dramatically shifted gear. Without any serious preparation or forethought, it imposed a draconian three-week nationwide lockdown starting at midnight. It callously failed to provide India's hundreds of millions of impoverished day labourers who were suddenly rendered jobless with any means of procuring food or money. The lockdown has proven calamitous for India's workers and toilers. Moreover, due to the lockdown's improvised character and the continued rationing of testing, the pandemic has continued to spread, forcing the government to extend the lockdown for a further 19 days to May 3.

The visible failure of the Modi government and the Indian ruling class to protect the population from the ravages of the pandemic and its economic fallout and the consequent growing mass anger and anxiety have led the BJP to once again ratchet up its communal slurs against Muslims, with the aim of scapegoating them for the health and socioeconomic catastrophe.

Front and center in their campaign has been the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ), an Islamic missionary group. Aided and abetted by the corporate media, the government have pushed the narrative that Muslims who travelled to Delhi in March to attend an annual TJ convention, and/or receive missionary training, and stayed at its hostel, have played a major role in the spread of the pandemic across India. While the press designated TJ members as "super spreaders" of the virus, the Health Ministry in its daily briefings went out of its way to highlight new COVID-19 cases related to the TJ.

One reason that proportionately TJ members have constituted such a large percentage of India's COVID-19 cases is, as the Indian Scientists' Response to COVID-19 group notes, because the government has ordered that all those who visited its Delhi

headquarters be tested, while otherwise severely rationing testing.

On March 31, police filed a criminal case against TJ leaders for "defying a series of government directives." Subsequently, according to press reports, police added charges of "culpable homicide" (manslaughter) against TJ leader Maulana Saad.

The BJP and their allies have used the TJ COVID-19 victims as a convenient means to blame the Muslim population as a whole for the pandemic. BJP leaders like Kapil Mishra, who played the lead role in inciting the February Delhi riots, have accused the TJ of carrying out a "Talibani crime." M.P. Renukacharya, the political secretary to Karnataka's BJP chief minister, has declared TJ members who fail to report to authorities for COVID-19 testing should be shot dead. "All those who are spreading the virus are traitors," said Renukacharya. "... [I]t is not wrong to shoot them with a bullet."

There have been claims that the TJ violated lockdown orders issued by the Delhi government by holding a religious gathering, but this is at best selective reporting. It also ignores the fact that the TJ convention was held with government approval before the March 16 Delhi lockdown order. The Wire has noted that the Yogi Adityanath, the BJP Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, attended a large religious gathering at which social distancing was not practiced, and unlike the TJ's this occurred after Modi had ordered the nationwide shutdown and admonished the population that their very survival was at stake.

Adityanath has responded to this exposure by getting charges of disseminating "fake news" laid against The Wire's editor, Siddharth Varadarajan.

As the BJP whips up communalism and presides over a ruinous response to the COVID-19 pandemic dictated by its insistence that working people's lives must be subordinated to the needs of big business and investor profit, the opposition parties, led by the Stalinist CPM and CPI-supported Congress Party, are blowing hot and cold. One day the opposition criticizes Modi and the next day it urges unity with his government in the name of fighting the pandemic.

This is because their own implacable defence of Indian capitalism is causing them to perform a high-wire act. The opposition parties dare not identify with the BJP too closely for fear of losing any remaining shred of political credibility in the eyes of the masses; but they fear still more that their criticisms of the government could inadvertently act as a stimulant to an eruption of the working class that could quickly escape their control.



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