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Religious discrimination is hindering the covid-19 response

As covid-19 takes hold worldwide, fear is fuelling already entrenched religious hatred—and hindering public health, writes **Sonia Sarkar**

Sonia Sarkar *freelance journalist*

Mohammad Ibrahim, a resident of the lower middle class Mangolpuri area of New Delhi, has never contracted covid-19 but was forced to spend 41 days in quarantine.

Ibrahim is a member of the Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic missionary movement that has at times been eyed with suspicion by Indian authorities. On 31 March, Ibrahim voluntarily informed police about the arrival of seven Indonesians at his local mosque. “The police accused me of bringing in people from different countries to spread the infection in India,” he says.

Over 3000 members of the Tablighi Jamaat subsequently spent more than 40 days in quarantine with government authorities refusing to discharge them.¹ The Indian government levelled charges of culpable homicide at Tablighi Jamaat chief Muhammad Saad Kandhalvi when at least six of the group died of the infection after attending an event in March, before the countrywide lockdown.²

India’s 201 million Muslim citizens now find themselves blamed for the country’s covid-19 outbreak. In the southern Indian state of Karnataka, two Muslim men were reportedly beaten and made to kneel and apologise for “spreading the virus.”³ In the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, Muslim vegetable vendors were allegedly stopped from selling their goods by locals, who accused them of being members of the Tablighi Jamaat.⁴ In another northern state, Himachal Pradesh, a Muslim meat seller committed suicide after returning from quarantine to a social boycott by his neighbours. He had tested negative for coronavirus.⁵

In press briefings, Lav Agarwal, joint secretary of India’s Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, has highlighted the Tablighi Jamaat’s role in coronavirus spread,⁶ though a government spokesperson told *The BMJ* that India “doesn’t discriminate against anyone based on religion.”

Miles away, in Pakistan’s Balochistan province, Muhammad Aman’s community has also been labelled as a “carrier” of the infection. Aman is one of the 900 000 members of the Shia Hazaras tribe in Pakistan (most Pakistanis are of Sunni origin). He says they have been targeted by state authorities and individuals alike after some Shia Hazaras who returned from trips to Iran tested positive for covid-19.

In March, at least 1500 Hazaras returning from Iran were subsequently quarantined, while other citizens returning from Europe, the UK, and the US, as well as non-Hazara businessmen and tourists returning from Iran, were not. “In some cases, non-Hazaras who came in from other countries were allowed entry

without basic screening,” says Jaffer Mirza of the London based Centre for Academic Shia Studies.

Saqib Khan Kakar, additional deputy commissioner of Quetta, who was in charge of the quarantine centres, told *The BMJ*, “There was no discrimination based on ethnicity or religion.”

Discrimination without borders

In Cambodia, Buddhists are blaming Muslims. In Israel, Jews are blaming Arabs. Fear and misunderstanding are stoking hatred worldwide—and it’s harming the fight against the pandemic.

In South Korea, the members of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus—labelled “heretical” by fundamentalist Protestants—are facing a probe after a congregation became the centre of the country’s biggest outbreak in February.⁷ But what’s striking is how discrimination played a part before the outbreak.

“Members of the church refrained from being tested to avoid discrimination,” says Willy Fautre, executive director of Human Rights Without Frontiers International. “This was detrimental to them and public health as well.”

“When people with prejudices are worried and feel that they have no control over a scary threat like pandemic, they will turn to the tried and true tactic of scapegoating the usual suspects: religious minorities and other persecuted communities,” says Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia programme at the Wilson Centre, a US based think tank.

This is not new. Jews were blamed during Black Death epidemics in Europe in the 14th century. In 1545, religious dissidents in Geneva were blamed for an outbreak of plague.

In both India and Pakistan the pandemic has exacerbated and intensified longstanding cleavages, says Kugelman, hindering the response to covid-19.

“The initial cluster [Tablighi Jamaat] was unduly highlighted, leading to communalisation of the pandemic,” says Srinivas Rajkumar T, general secretary of the residents’ doctors association at All India Institute of Medical Sciences. An Indian doctor told *The BMJ* under anonymity that the government has emphasised contact tracing of people linked with the Tablighi Jamaat while tracing in other cases was not done with the same intensity.

Epidemiologist Jayaprakash Muliyil says that targeting a community in a pandemic “sets a bad precedent” for the public healthcare system. At least one government hospital in the western state of Gujarat has segregated Muslim patients with covid-19

from Hindus, claiming it is under local government orders and for both sides' safety.⁸ Abdullah Azmi, a doctor in a government hospital in India's northern city of Lucknow, told *The BMJ* about a social media campaign that targeted a Muslim doctor who had admitted an ailing Tablighi Jamaat patient to his hospital.

In Pakistan, residents opposed a quarantine centre the government had intended to build for Hazara patients set up in a non-Hazara area, according to Yasin Nadir, a Balochistan based activist who champions Shia Hazara rights. He told *The BMJ* that another quarantine centre for Hazaras was burnt to the ground by local residents.¹⁰

Amid catcalls of "Hey, corona," 275 Hazaras are known to have contracted the virus. Many government and private hospitals refuse to treat them. Quetta's civil hospital has asked Hazara employees, including doctors, not to come to work.⁹ Aman says that Hazara employees of some private and government hospitals and government banks were forced to take leave while their non-Hazara colleagues were allowed to work, adding that the police and water and sanitation departments have also asked their Hazara employees to go on leave.

Misinformation is a trigger

It is difficult to counter centuries of stigma, but government authorities, the media, and social media can help fuel or extinguish the fervour.

Fautre says that media stories debunking some of the myths around religious communities can help. "The other step could be raising awareness among human rights non-governmental organisations and scholars in religious studies, inside and outside the country, because they are non-partisan. Also, take those who demonise minorities with fake news to court," he said.

Debunking is more difficult to do on social media, however, where the hashtag #coronajihad and the term "Quran-e-virus" trend regularly among Indian Twitter users. WhatsApp groups are dominated by rumours and anti-Muslim rhetoric. In Pakistan, phrases such as "Shia virus" and "Shias bring viruses to Pakistan" circulate on WhatsApp.

In April, a south Asian community technology organisation, Equality Labs, wrote an open letter to the Indian prime minister, the director general of the World Health Organization, and the chief executives of Facebook and Twitter, asking them to help stop the spread of Islamophobic hate speech and disinformation related to covid-19.¹¹

There is evidence that such efforts could help. "Misinformation related to cures for covid-19 gradually started declining after mid-March," says Joyojeet Pal, associate professor of information at the University of Michigan, who has studied covid related misinformation in India.¹²

"Part of this can be attributed to the fact that key leaders—including prime minister Modi—publicly said that there is no real cure for covid-19," he says. "When such information comes from a trusted source, it holds weight." He urges public figures to do the same where it concerns religion.

But that may not be enough. On 19 April Modi tweeted, "Covid-19 does not see race, religion, colour, caste, creed, language, or border before striking. Our response and conduct thereafter should attach primacy to unity and brotherhood. We are in this together."

Fautre, however, says that such statements are useless for scapegoated religions. "He should have said that accusing the Tablighi Jamaat of being negligent about and responsible for the

fast spread of covid-19 is baseless. He failed to do it because it's not profitable from an electoral point of view and keeping an ambiguous position enables him to capitalise on existing anti-Muslim prejudices."

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