

Worship and the virus in Hindu India

Contested innovation, polarization, uneven digital acceleration

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The religious responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Hindu India were manifold and, at times, publicly contested, which raises the question of which societal differences became visible and were augmented as the pandemic unfolded. Based on observations mainly from the first coronavirus wave in 2020, this article argues that the limited religious innovation that ensued gave rise to a lively public debate that revealed marked differences within the Hindu community, that the pandemic offered new possibilities for affirming Hindu identities while othering Muslims, and that it accelerated the transition to online religious services in prominent temples while pausing the activities in others, thus augmenting a marked digital divide that may well outlast the pandemic. Pandemic religious changes notwithstanding, the article concludes that most of the changes were ephemeral and produced minor jolts rather than major transformations.

GIVEN ITS HUGE POPULATION and religious complexity, India is an exceptionally fruitful ground for research on religious responses to a pandemic. One central question is how the religious fallout of the latest pandemic compares to those of earlier epidemics, a task that – as David Arnold (2020) notes – requires the same degree of attention to differences as to similarities in view of the obvious fact that societies change between each epidemic. Another question is how religious prac-

tices and beliefs are involved in augmenting contagion or can be a resource in curbing it (cf. Singh 2020; Wildman *et al.* 2020; Winiger 2020), prompting inquiries into local conceptualizations of disease causality as well as the will to limit religious gatherings, impose pandemic restrictions, and encourage vaccination. Such inquiries can in turn be historicized to address broader debates about secularization (cf. Osheim 2008; Phillips 2020) or used to hypothesize which changes will outlast the pandemic (as discussed by Frederick 2020). For anthropologists and other social scientists, an equally central question is how religious praxis feeds into the multi-layered pandemic ruptures, and vice versa, in ways that complicate catchy metaphorizations of pandemics as ‘game changers’, ‘equalizers’, or ‘magnifying glasses’. Making its primary point of departure in the latter question, but with occasional glances to the former two, this article asks which societal differences became more visible and were exacerbated as differently positioned Hindus across India responded to the COVID-19 pandemic at the same time as the government continued its long-term majoritarian project of affirming Hindu identities. Based on observations mainly from the first coronavirus wave of 2020, it argues that the

limited religious innovation that ensued gave rise to a lively public debate that revealed marked differences within the Hindu community, that the pandemic offered new possibilities for affirming Hindu identities while othering Muslims, and that it accelerated the transition to online religious services in prominent temples while pausing the activities in others, thus augmenting a marked digital divide that may well outlast the pandemic.

India's dramatic second coronavirus wave, in April–May 2021, may perhaps have pushed such questions into the background. In this period the contagion far exceeded what India's uneven healthcare system could handle, forcing people across the country to search frantically for oxygen cylinders, ICU beds, and firewood to cremate the hundreds of thousands who died over a time span of only a few weeks. Even so, not even these dramatic developments – which will undoubtedly become the subject of in-depth analysis in due course – reduce the significance of the first-wave developments. Nevertheless, it is useful to note that the anxieties generated by the second wave differed from those of the first, more of which were related to a lengthy lockdown so strict that the authorities named it a curfew.

On 24 March 2020, almost two months after the first coronavirus case had been detected in the country, the government of India, spearheaded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, imposed the most wide-reaching lockdown the world had ever seen. With a mere four hours of notice, the entire country shut down for 21 days, which were immediately followed by another two-week period until medical capacities had been sufficiently improved to enable a shift to more targeted restrictions. Trains, planes, and buses were halted. Shops, businesses, and production units closed. With few

exceptions, the country's 1.3 billion citizens were ordered to stay at home. Despite slowing contagion and giving time to expand testing, protection, and treatment, this had detrimental effects on millions of internal work migrants (Pandey 2020) as well as on the economy and employment rates. Most of the population complied as best it could, but anxieties over contagion, income, livelihood, and isolation actualized religious beliefs and identities in new ways, some of which generated lively debates.

Given the impossibility for foreign academics to be present in India as the pandemic unfolded, I rely on a combination of regular digital communication with friends and interlocutors in Kanpur (Uttar Pradesh), some of whom are protagonists of a Kālī temple I studied between 2013 and 2019, and news articles and early reports from other scholars. Given the location and demographics of my field site, I have richer material from Uttar Pradesh and Delhi than from other parts of India, and on non-Dalit working-class Hindus from the so-called Other Backward Classes (OBCs) than from other social segments, though I also draw on my former research amongst middle-class Hindus of upper-caste descent in Kanpur, Haridwar (Uttarakhand) and Delhi. My long-standing interest in religious complexity, and social inequality makes me particularly sensitized to how religious engagements with the pandemic articulated with social and religious differences, and I begin by looking into the fissures that were made glaringly visible by the ritual innovations of the early days of the pandemic.

Contested innovations: goddesses, demons and cow urine parties

As Duane J. Osheim (2008) suggests, the transition from religious to secular explanations is neither linear nor uniform, to

the extent that ‘transition’ is an appropriate term at all. In the Indian case, the pandemic revealed a marked gap between those who adhered to a purely biomedical worldview about the origin and control of the virus, and those who attributed it to a non-human entity that needed to be pacified, chased away, or destroyed, whether as an alternative or addition to biomedical notions of causality. Within the latter category, another gap emerged between those who conceptualized the coronavirus as a deity or as a demon, and as female or male. Given the long tradition of attributing new goddesses to new diseases in Hindu India, many scholars and journalists actively looked for signs of a new Corona goddess that would join the ranks of the North Indian smallpox goddess Śītalā, or her southern counterpart Mariamman, as well as the other disease goddesses noted by Stanley A. Freed and Ruth S. Freed (1998: 123–5), Tulasi Srinivas (2020) and others. Their search bore fruit: a Corona goddess did indeed emerge, which attracted far more public attention than the more widespread tendency to relocate worship to home temples or, as I discuss later, computer or smart phone screens.

In early June 2020, the news media carried reports about female-driven Coronā Māi (mother) worship in rural areas of Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar that had been severely affected by the lengthy lockdown. Television reports highlighted how the women had walked to the outskirts of their village with elaborate offerings.¹ There

1 The offerings consisted of flowers, sweets, vermilion powder, jaggery, incense sticks, cardamom seeds, and cloves. Though Śītalā/Mariamman traditionally required blood sacrifice, the women’s preference for Brahmanically pure (*sattvik*) offerings indicates that they were either partially Sanskritized

they crouched down to dig holes 10–20 cm deep in which they placed their offerings while chanting (see e.g. India Today Live 2020). In an interview, some explained the Corona goddess as a formless creation of Śītalā Mātā, whom they had decided to worship ‘every Monday and Friday till she becomes satisfied’ (Samanta 2020). However, Corona worship was largely limited to these rural regions. Granted, in June 2020 a Hindu priest in Kerala installed a virus-shaped Coronā Devī (goddess) in his home temple to help protect frontline workers, but his was apparently all there was until the lethal second wave in April–May 2021 popularized Coronā Devī worship further. In the latter period, which was acutely anxiety-ridden, at least three small Coronā Devī temples were erected in rural Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, and even the Kālī temple I had formerly studied in Kanpur began to show signs of Coronā Devī worship once people in its vicinity began to die with no ambulance in sight: when its consecrated stone image of Bhairav, whose nose had been broken at least since 2013, was eventually replaced, the new image was not of Bhairav, but of a beautiful female deity that some explained as Coronā Devī but others insisted was Durgā. While this ambiguity may reflect the tendency of Sanskrit Hinduism to appropriate local goddesses as ‘forms’ of pan-Indian goddesses, it also hints at the backwardness attributed to Coronā Devī worship among those who considered themselves above such ‘superstition’. For the educated middle class, Coronā Devī worship was blatant superstition, and despite the extensive religious freedom granted by India’s constitution, the Coronā Devī temple in Uttar Pradesh

or conscious of appearing on public television.



Did the new image to the left represent Durga or Corona Devi? Devotees of the goddess Kali (right) were not sure.

was razed by the police for similar reasons shortly after the news media had alerted them to its existence.

For middle-class city-dwellers, it was more common to attribute coronavirus protection to Bhārat Mātā (Mother India), a Durgā-like protector of India who emerged during the Independence Movement. Several artists used the lengthy curfew to draw or paint images of Bhārat Mātā depicted as a doctor or nurse with a stethoscope, syringe, and face mask, images that spread like wildfire on social media. Reflecting on Corona deification, Srinivas (2020) argues that, beyond giving rise to a new goddess, the COVID-19 pandemic re-conscripted familiar goddesses by giving them new tasks. Yet as Ravinder Kaur and Sumathi Ramaswamy note, such re-conscriptions were mainly artistic, as no signs had so far been seen of actual worship of Bhārat Mātā in this form (2020: 78). Interestingly, the deification of Corona thus took fairly divergent forms, one being worship among hard-hit and mainly rural

communities, the other being middle-class artistic re-conscription.

In the early days of the pandemic, a more common incorporation of the coronavirus into the Hindu pantheon had been to envision it as a demon. As early as the Holi festival in March 2020, a large ‘Coronāsūr’ (*asur* means demon) effigy was burned on a Holi pyre in Mumbai. Such residential pyres do not always have effigies on top, but if they do, the effigy would normally depict an attractive demoness named Holikā. In Mumbai’s Worli neighbourhood, Holikā was replaced with a cartoon-like blue Coronāsūr demon with horns, fangs and a stuck-out tongue, which was such a creative, and humorous act that the photos immediately hit the news.

Later visualizations of the coronavirus as a demon typically appeared in connection with Durgā worship, which was unsurprising given Durgā’s fame as a demon-slayer. According to the *Devī Māhātmyā* section of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* text, Durgā was created to defeat a demon so powerful that he could not be killed by any man, and many images of Durgā depict her in the act of slaying the demon king Mahishāsūr (McDaniel, forthcoming). In the Durgā Pūjā tableaus produced for the annual Durgā Pūjā festival, Mahishāsūr is frequently substituted by representations of societal problems such as pollution, garbage, terrorism, bondage, and corruption. Incorporating the coronavirus as ‘this year’s demon’ in 2020 was business as usual.

In addition to deification, re-conscription and demonization, there were also some urban middle-class ritual inventions that merit attention in view of the ridicule they attracted. These occurred at the peak of the anxiety caused by the first wave, before anyone knew which steps, if any, the government would take to handle the pandemic. The earliest example was a group

of women in Madhya Pradesh who sang a song in which the refrain was ‘Coronā bhāg jāo’ (go away, Coronā) in what appears to have been an addition to the Holi songs commonly sung by certain communities during this festival. It is difficult to ascertain who they imagined Coronā to be, but it could well have been the same Coronā demon that had just been anthropomorphized for the first time in Mumbai. A widely disseminated video recording soon hit the news, whereupon it inspired additional singing sessions and parodies in equal measure. A few days later, a group of men gathered to chant ‘go, Coronā, go’ in English. Yet when this became known, it was unanimously ridiculed since it was led by a minister of state, whom critics opined ought to be helping the government devise more scientific ways to handle the pandemic. Before long his chanting session was so heavily parodied and remixed that it put an abrupt end to the efforts to chase the virus away by singing and chanting, though such activities may well have amplified the emergent imagination of the coronavirus as a demon.

Yet another contested ritual innovation was the cow-urine parties invented by the All India Hindu Mahasabha, an organization founded in 1915 to protect the rights of Hindus in British India and which is now a radical Hindu nationalist organization that backs the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). On 14 March, before any lockdown had been announced, it arranged a cow-urine party in New Delhi that aimed to neutralize the coronavirus rather than to chase it away. To understand the rationale, one needs to know that many pious Hindus consider the indigenous hump-necked Zebu cows to be divine mothers and their urine to have powerful medical qualities. It is also useful to know that many of India’s BJP-ruled states had recently reinforced

their proscription of cow slaughter, which protected elderly cows from being sent to slaughterhouses for meat and hides. When the pandemic struck, considerable efforts had just been made to manufacture profitable products from dung and urine instead. Condensed cow urine was already marketed for a whole range of ailments,² Hindu Mahasabha’s innovations consisted of promoting this bovine elixir as strengthening the body’s ability to fight the coronavirus while popularizing its consumption by arranging a party.

A few hundred people attended. Video recordings show the organizers sitting cross-legged in a circle, shouting ‘jay gau mātā’ (hail mother cow) and drinking cow urine from earthen cups, after which the remaining attendees were served. The chief organizer, Swami Chakrapaniji Maharaj, argued that, to keep India safe, cow urine should also be served to incoming flight passengers and replace alcohol in the tax-free shops. A poster in the background showed a ghoulish figure with a tongue of flames across which the name ‘Coronā’ was typed in Latin letters. Clearly, Maharaj shared the conceptualization of Coronā as a demon, but in his version, the demon had been sent to punish meat eaters, beginning in China (Indiatimes 2020).

Just as with the chanting sessions and Coronā Devī worship, this cow-urine party attracted a significant media coverage and was largely ridiculed by the Anglophone middle class. Even so, it did inspire a few similar events, but when an attendee at a cow-urine party in Kolkata fell ill and sued the organizer, such parties fell into further disrepute, and following the draconian

2 A quick search for *gaumūtra* or *gomūtra* on <amazon.in> illustrates the varieties of bottled cow urine that have become available.

curfew imposed on 24 March, they would have had to stop anyway. Interestingly, however, the demand for bottled cow urine reportedly rose sharply afterwards (Bhattacharya and ET Bureau 2020), so despite their ephemerality, cow-urine parties eventually followed other short-lived innovations in popularizing ideas that outlasted the events themselves.

Before closing the section on ritual innovations, let me reiterate that pandemic-engendered ritual innovations were exceptional, class-dependent, contested, and, with the possible exception for scattered Coronā Devī worship, short-lived. Moreover, all invoked familiar mythological universes and ritual forms, which in Claude Lévi-Strauss's classic perspective (1966) exemplifies *bricolage*-like creations of something new from the elements one happens to have at hand rather than pioneering ritual engineering. Finally, their ephemerality must also be understood in light of the lockdowns that paused collective gatherings. In the next section I turn to some of the opportunities the pandemic offered to affirm hegemonic Hindu identities and vilify the Muslim Other.

Polarization: affirming Hindu identities, vilifying the Muslim other

Scapegoating of ethnic and religious others is common during epidemics, as epitomized in medieval Europe (cf. Osheim 2020: 37; Naphy 2002). That India showed similar tendencies is unsurprising given its sheer size and internal frictions. What the Indian case may add is the processual dimension of scapegoating as well as its flip side: explicit appraisals of the alleged disease-preventative practices of one's own community. During the coronavirus pandemic, such boundary work was heavily mediatized as people under lockdown remained in close touch with the outer

world by means of newspapers, television and social media. One of the most popular social media platforms was WhatsApp. As early as 11 March 2020, when the authorities were still striving to impress the importance of physical distancing but without enforcing it, an acquaintance from Kanpur sent me an intriguing WhatsApp video that was later uploaded to YouTube (see Raj 2020). It shows a woman declaiming a poem in Hindi. Her appearance, and that of her living room, suggest a middle-class but non-elite background. Smiling confidently, she states that Coronā had appeared in a dream and told her not to fear. The verb forms she uses reveal that she is conceptualizing Coronā as female, but whether as a fierce goddess or demones is not clear. The poem quotes Coronā praising all the traditional everyday practices that will protect those engaging in them. These practices included greeting others by joining one's palms in *namaskār* rather than touching or hugging, cleansing the air with sunlight, using oil lamps, incense sticks, and camphor (the three latter common in Hindu worship) rather than room and body sprays, washing one's hands and feet when returning from the outside, sticking to traditional food rather than fast food, and rearing animals but never eating them. Each verse ended with the Hindi play on words, 'vahī karo nā, mujhse ḍaro nā' (do that, don't fear), the initial words punning on the term Coronā, often pronounced as *karonā* in Hindi. This poem clearly struck a chord. Encryption prevents me from assessing how widely it circulated on WhatsApp, but additional versions and renderings soon made their way onto Facebook, YouTube, and the poems section of a newspaper (cf. Verma, M. 2020). In some, Coronā had become masculine, and a line about avoiding bottled soft drinks and alcohol had been added. This collec-

tive poetry-making clearly reflected the yet to be established incorporation of Corona into the Hindu pantheon.

The reason why this poem intrigued me was its explicit appraisal of everyday habits that, besides being 'Hindu', were firmly upper-caste, and rather conservative at that. As a foreign social anthropologist, who has stayed with a conservative Brahman joint family for two half-year periods, in 1992 and 1997, I recognized the behaviour I had to *learn* as a member of a Brahman household: never touch others assumed to be different caste and class; keep your body and clothes clean at all times (in contrast to how 'dirty' low-caste people, Muslims, and foreigners were believed to behave), beware of the dangers and defilement of the 'outside' (in contrast to the pure 'inside' of the house); stick to a pure vegetarian diet and never kill living beings (in contrast to repulsive meat-eaters); and, of course, shun cigarettes and alcohol if you are a woman. In short, conservative upper-caste Hindus were already masters of social distancing, and, employing a Bourdieu-inspired perspective on the implications of habituated practices, I have argued that this was central to how they communicated – and thereby reproduced – their superior status (cf. Frøystad 2003, 2005, 2011).

This and other distancing appraisals that appeared at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic extensively conflated caste-based distancing with that required to reduce coronavirus contagion. Several journalists observed that the pandemic was about to re-legitimize untouchability, one even quoting a social-media user claiming that the pandemic proved untouchability to be 'scientific' and that the coronavirus was a revenge against modernizing communists who had 'turned their backs on Hindu heritage' (Harikrishan 2020). During the migration crisis, the gap between those

who could transfer their work home and those who neither had the right kind of work, nor any savings to live on, was highlighted as never before. In this period, many upper-caste Hindus reportedly began to shun working-class people as potential virus carriers, though these fears subsided once it turned out that India's first COVID-19 wave was driven by international travel rather than by work migrants struggling to reach their home villages.

Let me now consider how the strict curfew afforded new opportunities for top-down affirmation of Hindu identities. The first sign was a screenshot of a detailed timetable I received from a male, middle-aged Brahman interlocutor on 22 March, when the government had imposed a 14-hour curfew, known as a Janata (people's) Curfew, to test the waters before imposing a longer lockdown. Typed in Hindi, it suggested how people could structure their day during the curfew:

- 06.00 Yoga and *prāṇāyām* [yogic breathing exercises]
- 06.30 Take a bath
- 07.00 *Pūjā* [Hindu worship ceremony], group prayer, reading religious stories
- 08.00 Have tea and breakfast together
- 09.00 Family get-together, telling old family stories, looking at photographs
- 10.00 Programme of recreation, television, motivation, character building
- 11.00 Prepare and eat lunch together
- 13.00 Wash dishes together
- 14.00 Relax and watch television serials
- 16.00 Write something nice
- 17.00 Clap, hit still plates and ring bells as greeting [typed in bold]
- 17.05 Teatime chat focusing on gratitude, forgiveness, and the merits of the house

- 18.00 Play indoor games
- 19.00 Perform *ārati* [Hindu worship using fire]
- 19.30 Prepare and eat dinner together
- 21.00–22.00 Discuss the experiences of the day

(Translated from Hindi by the author, explanations added)

The timetable is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it included no less than three Hindu religious activities: the early morning yoga and *prāṇāyāma*, the *pūjā*, group prayer or religious stories session following the morning bath, and finally the *ārati* ceremony at sunset. Though religious story-reading and group prayer may sound generic, their placement in between the morning bath and the first meal was modelled on a pious Hindu routine. The timetable thus advocated Hindu worship and lifestyle as ideal curfew behaviour, but remained silent about, say, Muslim or Christian habits. Interestingly, none of the social-media users who followed my Brahman acquaintance in sharing this timetable added any sardonic comments. Most appeared to find it inspirational and, for what it is worth, data from a fitness app later showed meditation activities to have risen by 2.3 per cent, and physical yoga by a whopping 241 per cent during the curfew (HT Tech 2020).

Secondly, the timetable was progressive in terms of gender and caste, being in the latter respect in sharp contrast to the social distancing poem. By emphasizing that *all* family members should take part in cooking and dishwashing, it encouraged a gender parity that remains rare beyond the liberal urban middle class and challenged deep-seated upper-caste inhibitions against dishwashing.³ During a curfew,

3 Conservative upper-caste Hindus hold

everyone without live-in servants would have to make do without maids. The solution offered by the timetable resembles the routine of old-style Hindu residential religious centres (*āśrams*), where everyone who uses the canteen must wash their own utensils.⁴ Despite advocating pious Hindu activities, the timetable encouraged more gender equality and domestic self-dependence than most upper-caste Hindus are used to.

The third feature that makes the timetable interesting was its indeterminable origin and addressees. No sender was specified, no logo or signature was visible, and no such timetable found its way to the news media. Nor were there any other online versions than this screenshot. Nevertheless, there were several indications that it had been produced by either the central government, one of the BJP-led state governments, or a source close to one of them. To specify the collective responsibility for dishwashing would, for instance, have been unnecessary for a mere 14-hour curfew, since many families simply let their dishes pile up when their maids are away for a day or two. Its authors must have known that the curfew would last far longer than the government had announced publicly by then. Moreover, its professional layout, pure Hindi, and the inclusion of bell-ringing and plate-banging in support of the health workers, later emphasized by Modi, strongly suggest government authorship. My hypothesis – which I will happily reject

dishwashing to be so undignified that all families that can afford it hire maids to do this task (cf. Frøystad 2003; Barua *et al.* 2017).

4 An exception must be made for the up-market *āśrams* that began to emerge in the 1990s to attract wealthy spiritual seekers reluctant to make do without five-star facilities.

if contradictory evidence emerges – is that the government was concerned about how India’s 1.3 billion people would react to a lengthy curfew and thus gave considerable thought to how it could stimulate a sense of purpose and togetherness.⁵ This would also explain the 14-hour trial on Sunday 22 March. When considering what to do, several ideas must have been tossed around before being rejected, perhaps including this one. What the government retained was the 5 o’clock plate-banging inspired by the balcony clapping in Italy some weeks earlier. Even so, someone evidently photographed the rejected timetable and uploaded it to their digital networks.

Instead of a detailed activity guide, the government opted for pacifying the population while affirming Hindu identities by re-running the television serial ‘Rāmāyaṇa’ on the state-owned television channel Doordarshan. Rāmāyaṇa is a religious epic about the avatar prince from Ayodhya, Lord Rām, and the many ordeals he had to face with his companions to win the throne and establish an ideal reign (*rām rājya*) in which everything is just, good, and plentiful. The Rāmāyaṇa comes in numerous tellings and formats that in the late 1980s was expanded by a hugely popular television series directed by Ramanand Sagar. Consisting of 78 episodes, the Rāmāyaṇa serial was screened every Sunday morning, and many scholars describe how people flocked to the screens, some garlanding the television set as if watching were an act of worship. As a result, Lord Rām’s popularity expanded from northern India to the south and east, the north Indian Rāmāyaṇa renderings by Valmiki and Tulsidas became

more hegemonic, and the BJP became better positioned to use Rām and the Rāmāyaṇa to advance its Hindu nationalist political platform. To re-run this series in order to ‘educate, inform, and entertain’ was a master-stroke despite the costs of improving the technical quality for contemporary screens (cf. Venugopal 2020): a new generation could now be introduced to the finer details of the Rāmāyaṇa while their parents were provided with television nostalgia. Though watching was voluntary, each episode was seen by an average of 46.2 million families (Jha 2020), the first four by a staggering 170 million people (Verma, R. 2020).

Rerunning the Rāmāyaṇa serial was probably also a way to extend support for the controversial construction of a sprawling Rām temple in Ayodhya. Until 1992, Ayodhya had been home to a mosque erected at the order of Babar (1483–1530), founder of the Mughal Empire that came to rule substantial parts of the Indian subcontinent prior to the period of British rule. Yet at least since the 1850s, local Hindu lore had claimed this mosque to have been constructed on the ruins of a temple marking the birthplace of Lord Rām. Following a long campaign to ‘reclaim’ the mosque, Hindu nationalist activists demolished it in 1992 as the police watched, followed by interreligious riots that killed around 2000 people. The thorny question of ownership was then submitted to the courts, and in November 2019 the Supreme Court ruled that the entire plot should be given to the Hindu litigants. As stunned critics, opponents, and scholars questioned the neutrality of the court five years into the BJP’s increasingly majoritarian rule, the preparations for a new, sprawling Rām temple picked up speed. But before the plot could be inaugurated with a celebratory purification (*bhūmi pūjan*) ritual, the COVID-19

5 India had just undergone months of heated protests against a controversial legal amendment, which I will return to shortly.

pandemic struck. In this context, rebroadcasting the Rāmāyaṇa serial would also raise the anticipation for a delayed *bhūmi pūjan* while sidelining the critics even further.⁶

The pandemic also afforded new possibilities to discredit the over 170-million strong Muslim minority population. To understand why, a contextual paragraph about one of the main religio-political controversies that raged when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived is required. Hindu nationalists have long feared that Hindus and Hinduism are endangered by a gradual demographic outnumbering by Muslims and Christians (Appadurai 2006; Anand 2011). When the BJP came to power in 2014, it thus initiated several demographic engineering initiatives to keep non-Hindu minorities in check, one of which was to amend the Citizenship Act to fast-track the naturalization of non-Muslim refugees from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. When this amendment was passed by the parliament with little prior debate in December 2019, protests were organized throughout the country. Besides making religious affiliation a criterion for citizenship, critics feared the amendment would be a step towards making many Indian Muslims stateless. The fear was rooted in Home Minister Amit Shah's plan to follow up the Citizenship Act with a National

Register of Citizens (NRC) to enable the identification and deportation of inhabitants unable to document their citizenship (Venkataramakrishnan 2019). As shown by a trial run of the NRC in Assam, many of India's rural, elderly, and poor inhabitants lack the documentation required (BBC News 2019), and critics feared that the government intended to give the non-Muslims amnesty and fast-track citizenship while deporting the Muslims. The protests lasted for months despite brutal crackdown attempts, but following organized violence in Delhi at the end of February 2020 that killed 53 people (cf. Ellis-Petersen 2020; Gettleman *et al.* 2020; The Wire 2020), they became increasingly difficult to sustain, and shortly afterwards, the lockdown quelled what remained. When India went into lockdown in March 2020, the country was heavily polarized and had been subject to considerable international criticism for its anti-Muslim policies (see e.g. Iyer 2019; Chotiner 2020). Hindu nationalists both within and beyond the government thus needed whatever opportunities they could get to justify these political moves.

The opportunity arose with India's first recognized super-spreader event. When Modi announced the 14-hour Janata Curfew on 22 March, an international convention of the Islamic reform organization Tablighi Jamaat had just taken place in Delhi with several thousand participants, including many foreigners. Government officials were quick to criticize the organizers for failing to cancel the event and the foreign delegates for misusing their tourist visas, and its treatment of Tablighis suspected of carrying the virus was unusually strict: according to news reports, the response ranged from imposing 32-day quarantines (Dev 2020) and visa cancellations (Mahapatra 2020), to 10-year bans on entering India (Jain 2020), and being

6 The *bhūmi pūjan* was eventually held on 5 August 2020 as a widely broadcast event. One of the highlights shows Prime Minister Narendra Modi wearing a face mask while blessing the foundation stones of silver in a socially-distanced gathering of 200 people. Many temples elsewhere in the region – including the Kālī temple I studied in Kanpur – were beautifully decorated for the occasion, which suggests the enthusiasm over the rising Rām temple among devout Hindus.

taken into custody (Thapar and Wahidi 2020). At this point, rumours about behaviour in quarantine also began to circulate: some had allegedly assaulted and spat at the staff, including doctors (OpIndia 2020), whereas others had reportedly thrown urine-filled bottles to spread the virus even further (Sengar and Srinivasan 2020). Before long, such phantasmagoric narratives metamorphosed into a conspiracy theory, claiming that Muslims far beyond the Tablighis were engaged in a 'corona jihad' against Hindus (Apoorvanand 2020; Perrigo 2020), just as they were already said to be engaged in a 'love jihad' when trying to marry and convert Hindu women (Asif 2020: 154).

As the super-spreader event unfolded, the digital messages I received from some of my interlocutors from the Kālī temple changed character. Many of the messages they forwarded now nurtured the corona jihad narrative in the shape of cartoons. One showed a mosque where everyone who entered except one were healthy, while all those who exited were contaminated, as suggested by their pink coronavirus heads. Another cartoon portrayed what a Hindu temple, a Sikh temple, and a mosque supposedly contributed to society: alms (*dān*), communal meals (*langar*), and corona contagion respectively. A third cartoon contrasted Muslims 'then' with Muslims 'now', the first opening his jacket to reveal a bomb belt, the second opening his jacket to reveal a corona belt.⁷ Innumerable messages with photos or videos were forwarded to me depicting Muslims who spat or flouted the distancing norms during the evening

7 There were also additional cartoons of this kind. Manan Ahmed Asif (2020) analyses a particularly interesting specimen that suggests Indian Muslims had been paid by China to spread the coronavirus in India.

prayer, which at this point was done on rooftops instead of in mosques. As it turned out, my interlocutors' anti-Muslim messaging far outlasted the Tablighi super-spreader event, which indicates their gradual radicalization since I last met them in April 2019. Though the Tablighi Jamaat controversy diminished in the summer of 2020 and was later overshadowed by a far greater super-spreader event that happened to be Hindu,⁸ it is impossible not to agree with the commentators who argue that the pandemic fuelled the ongoing inter-religious polarization (for instance Sahoo 2020; Banaji and Bhat 2020; Kapur 2020; Banot *et al.* 2021). The Tablighi conspiracy theory is also a useful reminder that pandemic scapegoating does not occur in a political vacuum.

Uneven digital acceleration

One of the main differences between the COVID-19 pandemic and earlier epidemics pertained to the digital connectivity made possible by computers, smartphones, and affordable internet plans. In this way, much education, work, and socializing simply transitioned to online platforms. So did many religious activities, which raised the question of how pandemic digitalization would modify religious praxis – whether temporarily or for good (cf. Frederick 2020; Lorea 2020). In the Indian case, an additional question pertained to the digital divide. Although 500 million were digitally connected as the pandemic began (Mitter 2020), over half of the population remained

8 In January 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi prematurely claimed India had 'defeated the pandemic', which allowed the Kumbh Mela in the Haridwar to proceed as planned, attracting participants from across the country (Ellis-Petersen and Hassan, 2021).

unconnected. Moreover, the infrastructure and know-how required to initiate online services were unaffordable for many religious organizations. To fathom the uneven digital acceleration that ensued, this section contrasts the growing online presence of many prestigious Hindu temples with the inability of modest temples to follow suit, resulting in economic despair for their staff.

Moving religious practices online extends back at least to the launch of <saranam.com> in 2000, an Amazon-like website where customers can book worship ceremonies of choice in a prestigious temple of choice for fees presently starting at 500 rupees, or 5.60 euros. Several scholars have described how Hindu practices have proceeded to move online since then. Madhavi Mallapragada (2010), for instance, describes the emergence of virtual temples alongside commercial *pūjā* sites and temple home pages; Vineeta Sinha (2019) documents how the internet has become a marketplace for worship items; Tulasi Srinivas (2018: 159–67) describes how the aspiration to move online dismantled whatever inhibitions there were against photographing images of deities.

During the pandemic, these tendencies were reinforced. I have already mentioned (in a note to the previous section) how the central government broadcast the purificatory inauguration of the Rām temple ground on 5 August 2020. According to the science historian Meera Nanda (2020), state governments were equally eager to facilitate a transition to online services. Drawing on observations from South India, she argues that the state governments of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Telangana provided webcams to selected historic temples that lacked such equipment and initiated live streams of their worship ceremonies. The Karnataka state government moreover

engaged the spirituality e-commerce website PurePrayer to enable devotees to book online *pūjās* for a fee ‘to keep people praying, the priests employed and the temples in business’ (Nanda 2020), whereas the Telangana state government integrated such services onto its own website. Nanda also reports that other online spirituality services thrived during the pandemic: by September 2020, a service named VR Devotee claimed to have increased its traffic by 50 per cent, now live-streaming from around 300 temples and religious centres. Additionally, many Hindu priests and gurus went online on their own, using Skype, WhatsApp, and Zoom. Although the temples, gurus, and pilgrim places gradually resumed their pre-pandemic activities after the lockdowns, some of their enhanced digital services may well survive the pandemic. What this will change in the long run (for instance by making guru-disciple interaction more democratic, one-way *darśan* more fulfilling, and rituals more cinematographically choreographed) must, however, await future research.

Not all temples and ritual specialists were able to develop digital alternatives, however. As noted by Yael Lazar (2019), mega-temples have long been better positioned than modest temples to develop a parallel digital presence. To exemplify how the pandemic affected the activities in a non-prestigious temple, let me return to the Kālī temple I have studied since 2013, which is portrayed in an ethnographic film titled *A Kali Temple Inside Out*.⁹ Located in a working-class neighbourhood on the outskirts of Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, the

9 Made by Dipesh Kharel and Frode Storaas, *A Kali Temple Inside Out* is distributed by the Royal Anthropological Institute. See Kharel and Storaas 2018.

temple is managed by Sainīs, a community of low-caste flower cultivators and traders. The main shrine is dedicated to goddess Kālī but also has an image of Bhairav (or, as mentioned, of Corona Devi/Durga since April 2021) as well as a minor shrine dedicated to Lord Hanumān, the monkey helper of Lord Rām. The temple has no salaried staff. Both the extended Sainī family that presides over the Kālī shrine and the Brahman priest in charge of the Hanumān shrine fulfil their temple duties as a voluntary service (*sevā*). Neither the regular offerings of 1- and 2-rupee coins nor the donations they receive in the donation box amount to much, which makes the entire staff depend on organizing customized worship ceremonies for fees extending from 500 rupees upwards. Additionally, the Sainīs sell flowers for worship and decorate wedding halls, whereas the priest serves as a peripatetic family priest and ritual specialist (*tāntrik*) who officiates life-cycle rituals and wards off evil spells and cures spirit possession.

The Kālī temple was closed from 24 March to 17 October 2020, religious spaces being among the last public places to reopen in this region. Though selected caretakers had been allowed into the temple throughout this period to ensure proper bathing and feeding of the deities, the closure entailed almost seven months of significantly reduced incomes. The Brahman priest compensated for this by expanding his work as a family priest and *tāntrik* ritual specialist once the lockdown relaxed sufficiently to move around, but he nevertheless had to postpone his wife's hospital treatment until his finances recovered. The Sainīs were harder hit since most of their flower business depended on temple offerings, and the Sainī family I know best had to eat into the meagre savings they had put aside for their two daughters'

dowries. Worst hit was the devout widow who cleaned the temple floor for irregular donations from temple visitors. Unable to pay the rent for her tiny one-room accommodation, she ended up among the beggars outside the temple for months, but has since returned to her room.¹⁰

Could any of their services have become digital? This is unlikely since none had sufficient technical skills or funds for infrastructural investments. Though everyone except the floor cleaner (who was illiterate) either owned or had access to smartphones, none had computers or cameras other than on their phones. To provide online services, they would either have had to rent staff along with equipment or made do with social media and a mobile payment platform such as Paytm. None of them did this. Instead, all suffered economic setbacks that are likely to affect them for years. In short, the lockdown affected the entire temple economy and, with it, the livelihood of everyone who relied on it. Countless temples, pilgrim sites, and guru movements across India experienced similar difficulties, and though it may be true that the richest temples incurred the heaviest losses (as argued by Times Now Digital 2000), they were also better positioned to mitigate their losses by moving online, thereby extending their outreach and raising their prestige further. As the pandemic accelerated religious digitalization, it also widened the digital divide within the religious realm.

Concluding remarks

From Corona goddesses to innovative rituals and from conspiratorial 'corona jihad' narratives to increased digital worship and despair, the COVID-19 pandemic has had

10 Having learned about her fate, the filmmakers and I initiated a monthly transfer that continued until the temple reopened.

multiple effects in Hindu India. Yet, continuity clearly outweighs change. Even after the dramatic second wave in April and May 2021, Indian Hindus still paid obeisance to the same deities as before, visited the same temples (albeit more rarely), consulted the same religious authorities, and, by and large, sought solace in the same guru movements. Leaving aside online religious practices and scattered emergences of a Corona goddess, most of the developments described in the foregoing pages were ephemeral, and none departed significantly from existing religious logics. As demonstrated by generations of scholars on Hinduism, Hindu traditions are remarkably adaptive to change, and even the COVID-19 pandemic was but a blip in their long trajectories, a blip that produced minor jolts rather than sending them in entirely new directions. Though this article has focused squarely on the jolts and the societal differences they accentuated, the main Hindu response to the COVID-19 pandemic nevertheless confirms the French saying, *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. ■

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Thor Brødreskift

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