



## Coronavirus conspiracy theories targeting Muslims spread in India

**Attacks and boycotts escalate amid false claims that Muslim group to blame for epidemic**

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**Hannah Ellis-Petersen in Delhi and Shaikh Azizur Rahman in Kolkata**

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The men who beat Mehboob Ali did so without mercy. Dragging him to a field in the village of Harewali, on the fringes of north-west Delhi, the group hit him with sticks and shoes until he bled from his nose and ears. Ali was a Muslim, recently returned home from a religious gathering, and the Hindu mob was quite certain he was part of a so-called Islamic conspiracy to spread coronavirus to Hindus nationwide. His attackers believed the devout 22-year-old must be punished before he carried out “corona jihad”.

The allegations were entirely false, but according to video footage and his family, the men who beat Ali on 5 April were in little doubt of his guilt, demanding: “Tell us who else is behind this

conspiracy.” Ali was then taken to a nearby Hindu temple and told to renounce Islam and convert to Hinduism before they would allow him to go to hospital.

Five days after the attack Ali’s family was still in fear of also being accused of spreading the virus. “If we file a police case, the Hindus will not let us live in the village,” said one family member, who asked not to be named. Police confirmed that due to his attendance at a Muslim convention in Bhopal a few weeks back, Ali was being held in the isolation ward of Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan hospital in Delhi as a “corona suspect”, though he had no symptoms.

The attack on Ali is symptomatic of the growing demonisation of India’s Muslim community, who are being accused, without any basis, of conducting a malevolent campaign to spread Covid-19 to the Hindu majority.

Already a minority under attack - it is just weeks since Hindu mobs attacked Muslims in religious riots in Delhi - Muslims have now seen their businesses across India boycotted, volunteers distributing rations called “coronavirus terrorists”, and others accused of spitting in food and infecting water supplies with the virus. Posters have appeared barring Muslims from entering certain neighbourhoods in states as far apart as Delhi, Karnataka, Telangana and Madhya Pradesh.

The troubles began when the gathering of an Islamic missionary organisation, Tablighi Jamaat, held in mid-March in the south Delhi neighbourhood of Nizamuddin, was singled out by police and government as being responsible for the spread of coronavirus across India. The convention, which had been given the go-ahead by the Delhi authorities, was attended by about 8,000 people, including hundreds of foreigners. It soon became apparent that many at the convention had unknowingly picked up Covid-19 and brought it back to towns and villages across India.

Across the country, police were ordered to round up anyone associated with the organisation. So far, more than 27,000 Tablighi Jamaat members and their contacts have been quarantined in about 15 states. In Uttar Pradesh, the police offered up to 10,000 rupees (£105) for information on anyone who had attended the gathering.

In a statement this week, the Indian Scientists’ Response to Covid-19 group said “the available data does not support the speculation” that the blame for the coronavirus epidemic in India lies mainly with Tablighi Jamaat. The scientists emphasised that while testing for coronavirus is extremely low across India, a disproportionate number have been of members of Tablighi Jamaat, as per a government order, therefore heavily skewing the figures.

Yet the test results were swiftly seized upon by members of the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party (BJP), who claimed Tablighi Jamaat members had intended to infect millions as part of an Islamic conspiracy and were carrying out “corona terrorism”.

Senior BJP leaders accused Tablighi Jamaat of carrying out a “Talibani crime”, described their members as “human bombs, but in the guise of coronavirus patients”, and called for Tablighi Jamaat leaders to be both hanged and shot. Kapil Mishra, a local BJP leader notorious for hate speeches, tweeted: “Tablighi Jamaat people have begun spitting on the doctors and other health workers. It’s clear, their aim is to infect as many people as possible with coronavirus and kill them.”

Though quickly debunked, the rumours of Tablighi Jamaat members refusing to go into quarantine, assaulting hospital staff and throwing bottles of urine at Hindus quickly spread.

Hashtags such as “coronaJihad”, “CoronaTerrorism” and “CoronaBombsTablighi” began to trend on Twitter in India. Mainstream Indian media repeatedly asserted that Tablighi Jamaat members were coronavirus “superspreaders”.

Dr Zafarul-Islam Khan, chairman of the Delhi Minorities Commission, said that while Tablighi Jamaat had been shortsighted in holding the convention, there were “dozens of examples of government, political parties and other religious groups who also flouted the coronavirus restrictions and gathered in large numbers”.

He added: “But the whole focus is being directed only on Muslims. In the past few days, we have noted a new wave of attacks on Muslims across the country. There is talk of social boycott of Muslims, harassment of Muslims by Hindutva groups and Muslims are even being harassed by police in various areas.”

There has been a concentration of attacks against Muslims in Karnataka, where a BJP MP, Anant Kumar Hegde, has denounced Tablighi Jamaat as terrorists. Shortly after, an audio clip began to be shared widely over WhatsApp, urging people not to allow Muslim fruit and vegetable sellers into their areas, claiming they were spreading the virus through their produce.

Sayed Tabrez, 23, and his mother, Zareen Taj, 39, were among seven Muslim volunteers who were assaulted by a gang of local BJP members on 4 and 6 April, as they tried to distribute food to impoverished people in the Marathahalli and Dasarahalli districts of Karnataka.

“Some 20 local BJP members came on motorbikes and started shouting at us, saying, ‘You are not allowed to give out rations - you are Muslims so you all are terrorists spreading the disease. We know you are spitting in the rations and have come from Tablighi Jamaat to spread the virus’,” said Tabrez. Two days later, about 25 local BJP members followed them in vehicles before attacking Tabrez, his mother and the other volunteers with bats. Police have since arrested two people.

It is not an isolated incident. Manohar Elavarthy of the NGO Swaraj Abhiyan, which has been distributing lockdown rations, said dozens of attacks had been carried out against their Muslim volunteers in the past few days, including some by police.



Ambulances waiting to take members of the Islamic group Tablighi Jamaat to a quarantine facility. Photograph: Getty Images

In Mangalore this week, posters started appearing that said Muslims were no longer allowed in certain neighbourhoods. “No Muslim trader will be allowed access to our hometown until the

coronavirus is completely gone,” read a sign in Alape. In the Hindu-dominated village of Ankanahalli, a video seen by the Guardian shows Mahesh, the village panchayat president, issuing a warning that if any Hindu in the village is caught fraternising with a Muslim “you will be fined 500 to 1,000 rupees”.

The hijacking of coronavirus as an excuse for discrimination comes after a growing state-sponsored campaign to turn Muslims into second-class citizens in India, as part of the BJP’s agenda of Hindu nationalism. Attacks on Muslims have become commonplace and the recent citizenship amendment act, passed by the BJP in December, prompted millions to take to the streets in protest, saying it discriminated against Muslims.

The situation got so bad last week that it prompted Equality Labs, a US-based south Asian human rights organisation researching Islamophobic hate speech, to release a statement urging the World Health Organization to “issue further guidelines against Covid-19 hate speech and disconnect it to religious communities”.

“Just weeks after the Delhi pogrom where hundreds of Muslim houses and shops were vandalised, an uptick in misinformation and harmful communal language are leading to violence,” said Equality Labs’ executive director, Thenmozhi Soundararajan. “The threat of another pogrom still looms.”

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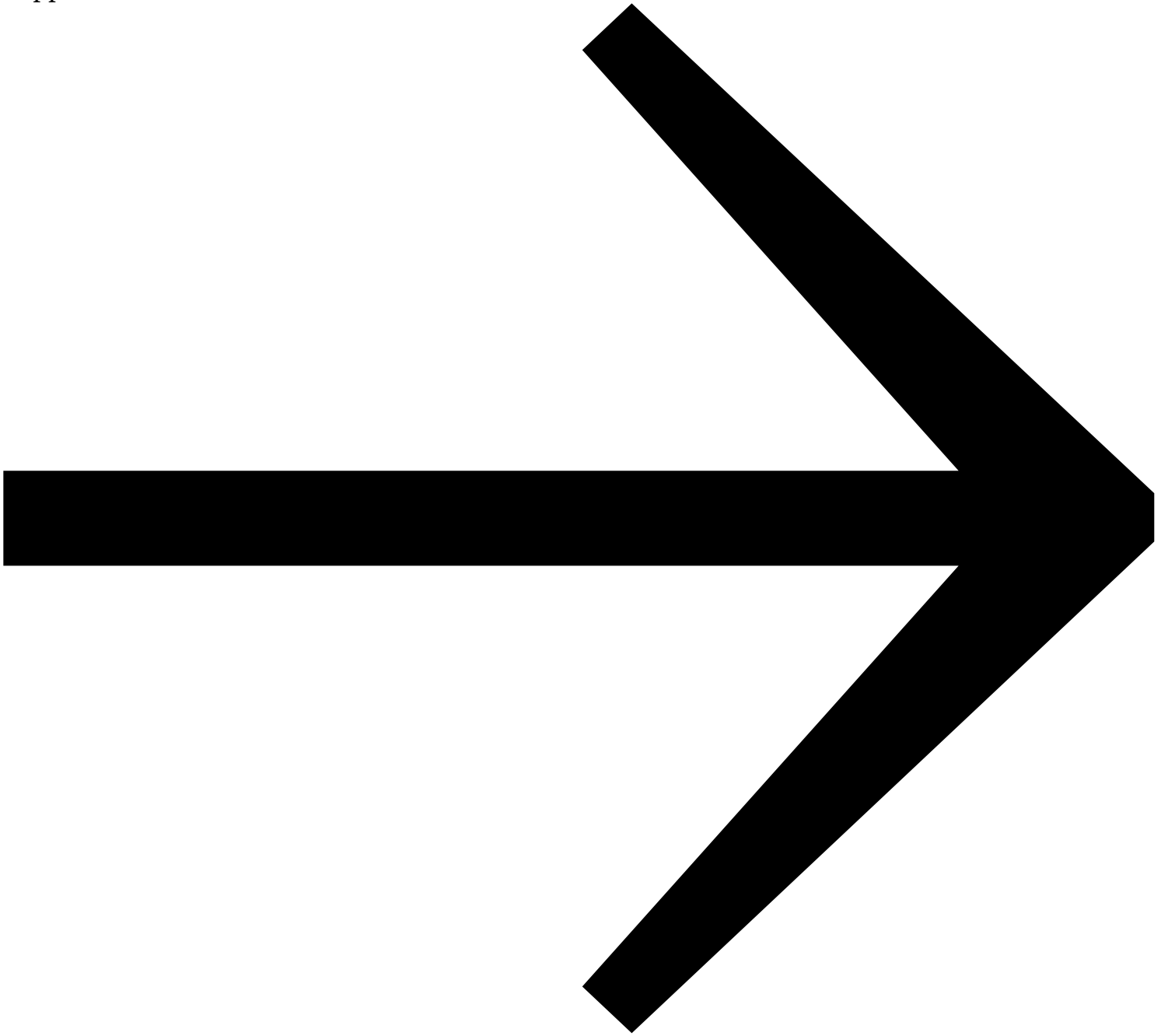
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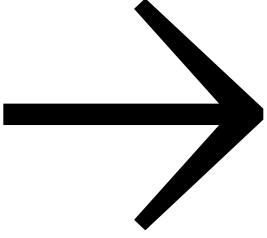
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