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Indian sub-continent

# Authoritarianism & Lockdown Time in Occupied Kashmir and India

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**Pandemics generate their own vocabularies, and the "novel coronavirus" is no exception. In the United States the vocabulary of COVID-19 of "sheltering-in-place" and "lockdowns" resonates with Cold War era anxieties about nuclear war and more recent fears about gun violence.**

In India the context involves growing Hindu majoritarianism materialized in a national-security state intent on demonizing Muslims and stripping them of citizenship. It is also a state determined to crush Kashmiri aspirations to sovereignty.

On March 24, 2020 Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a lockdown of 21 days for India's 1.3 billion population as a critical public health intervention to strengthen India's "war" against COVID-19. Giving four hours notice before the order would go into effect, Modi's abrupt decision to "ban" Indians from leaving their homes, and to "put every state, every district, every lane, every village" "under lockdown," bore striking parallels with his earlier crisis management measures, which have garnered considerable criticism across international print and media outlets. [\[1\]](#)

Among them are Modi's perilous policy of demonetization (e.g. pulling more than 50% of the country's currency out of circulation) and the attendant decimation of the Indian economy at the greatest cost to the poor and marginal, along with the abrogation of Kashmir's quasi-autonomous status, which has intensified Indian military repression of Kashmiri Muslims and legally sanctioned India's Hindu settler colonial project in the region. What might seem like Modi's thoughtless or sudden string of decisions over the past seven years since his ascent to India's prime ministership have moved India closer to the reality of an authoritarian Hindu Rashtra [Hindu Nation] — one crisis at a time.

We perceive authoritarianism through its spatial effects — the shrinking of space for free speech, activism, and public dissent; the retreat of unionizing and labor protests; and the expansion of carceral spaces through prisons, detention centers, and policing and surveillance infrastructure.

But so too is time marked under authoritarianism. Our essay explores how the Indian state manipulates three simultaneous and competing notions of time to popularize and naturalize Hindu majoritarianism: authoritarian time (compressed historical time), Hindu nationalist time (elongated mythic sacred time), and Kashmiri time (militarized lockdown time).

## “Efficient” Compression of Time

As suggested by the brief period between when Modi first announced a COVID-19 lockdown and its implementation a mere four hours later, authoritarian time is compressed time. Authoritarian time does not allow for a lag between decree and implementation. It eschews the time needed for democratic deliberation, which is perceived as an impediment to efficient governance, or worse still, as a threat to the social and political order.

Under the guise of crises, authoritarian governments can compress time, manipulating it in ways to render decisions that are long in the making seem like spur-of-the-moment measures taken to protect the public interest.

In India, Hindu zealots have attempted to rid India's body politic of Muslims through pogroms, massacres, detentions and public lynchings. They have been encouraged by several political parties which have manufactured socio-political and economic crises over the years.

In the last seven years in particular, each crisis has demanded an exceptional response that upends democratic time, which is by virtue of its process and character, slow and deliberate. In its place, we have the compressed time of a crisis legitimizing quick and sudden decisions. The compression of time becomes an expression of dictatorial agency and sovereign power.

When Modi placed India in a complete lockdown, he brought the entire country to a halt, snatching away people's fundamental rights to secure food, a livelihood, medicine and healthcare. He criminalized those who were unable to comply with his orders.

Deprived of daily wages in the metropolitan cities they helped build, migrant workers were forced to walk hundreds of miles to reach their homes in the many villages and towns across India. Devastating images of hungry and broken migrants revealed the disproportionate burden of Modi's dictatorial will on the country's most vulnerable populations.

Since the big Indian lockdown — ostensibly meant to protect human life — hunger, thirst, sickness, and road and train accidents have brutally killed hundreds of migrant workers.

## Manipulating Mythic Time

Insofar as the compression of historical time occurs against the elongation of mythic sacred time, a fundamental contradiction informs Modi's exercise of power.

Modi belongs to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose socio-political vision is inspired by its parent organization, the Hindu militant group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Since its inception almost a century ago, the RSS has demonized Muslims and Christians in India as bloodthirsty invaders and rapists.

Like fascist movements in general, the RSS's temporal orientation is toward a mythic distant past. Their members look with nostalgia to an era represented in the Hindu epic the Ramayana, which dates to 1400 BCE. That epic ends with the restoration of Ram's throne and a kingdom kept in line through bodily surveillance. Female chastity, as represented in the fate of Sita, Ram's wife, is exalted even though it comes at the expense of her life.

For members of the RSS, governance modeled on Ram's rule ("Ram Rajya," in popular parlance) is highly desirable. Such a government is based ostensibly on the Hindu virtues of honesty and morality led by a revered king in the mold of the God Ram.

Indeed, Prime Minister Modi explicitly invoked the Ramayana in his appeal to Indians to think of the COVID-19 lockdown as a "Lakshman Rekha." He warned them that a "single step outside" their homes could "bring a dangerous pandemic like Corona inside." [2] His choice of vocabulary referenced the famous scene in the epic in which Sita defies her brother-in-law's orders to stay indoors, and consequently is abducted by the demon Ravana for her intransigence.

With one phrase, Modi simultaneously injected a sectarian note in the discourse of public health and managed to

reinforce patriarchal norms that restrict women to their homes. Predictably, following the Prime Minister's lockdown order, DD National, India's state-owned television station, began broadcasting reruns of the serial adaptation of the Ramayana, contributing to the effort of making Hinduism even more ubiquitous. [3]

The television serial's first run in 1987-1988, according to media scholar Arvind Rajagopal, "violated a decades-old taboo on religious partisanship, and Hindu nationalists made the most of the opportunity. What resulted was perhaps the largest campaign in post-Independence times, irrevocably changing the complexion of Indian politics. The telecast of a religious epic to popular acclaim created the sense of a nation coming together, seeming to confirm the idea of a Hindu awakening." [4]

In 1992, when a Hindu mob destroyed the Babri Masjid, a 13th century mosque rumored to have been built on Ram's birthplace, many of the religious fanatics were dressed like characters from the televised Ramayana.(5) Today Modi and his Minister of Home Affairs Amit Shah are sometimes respectively described in the idiom of the epic as Ram and his brother Lakshman. [5]

In Modi's and the BJP's vision of Ram Rajya, Muslims are the perpetual outsiders who must come to terms with their newfound status as India's non-citizens. In 2019, the BJP government passed two parliamentary acts, the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which could render two million of India's 200 million Muslims stateless. [6]

Apart from its constitutional provisions, Ram Rajya is also instituted through strict cultural sanctions, which include among other things proscriptions against beef eating. Muslims are now routinely lynched publicly by self-appointed gau rakshaks, protectors of Hinduism's sacred cows.

Cow protection is a constitutive aspect of patriarchal authority and a defining feature of a robust Hindu state. Both of these, Hindu ideologues believe, are critical to India's transformation into a Ram Rajya. [7]

Modi's lockdown order in March 2020 appears engineered to break the massive sit-in protests against CAA, which started in early December 2019. Then hundreds of Muslim women from the Shaheen Bagh locality of North Delhi defiantly took over the streets, emphatically opposing the prime minister's persistent attempts to portray them as victims of Muslim patriarchy.

Even the brutality of an anti-Muslim pogrom that killed at least 53 people and injured hundreds of others in Delhi, in February 2020 during President Donald Trump's visit, failed to end the longest protest in India's history.

But in March 2020, after Modi announced a ban on public gatherings, hundreds of police in riot gear forced protestors to empty the streets, destroying their tents and defacing their posters and billboards.

In addition, the police detained and jailed many protestors. The lockdown served as a lakshman rekha — meant to contain the unruly bodies of Muslim women who had dared to challenge a tyrant.

At the same time, the lines of surveillance were drawn even closer to home for many Indians when the government made it mandatory to download a COVID-19 contact-tracing mobile application, called Aarogya Setu. That name evokes the Hindu philosophical tradition of yoga.

"Aarogya Setu" in Sanskrit means a bridge to health (or freedom from disease). For many critics, the app is a "sophisticated surveillance system," which can be retooled for targeted discrimination by monitoring, regulating, and

containing the movement of some groups more than others, and forcibly quarantining unwanted social elements. [8]

The Sanskrit-Hindu naming of a health-surveillance app advances the BJP's overall mission to portray India as an entrepreneurial mix of Hindu modernity and ancient Vedic wisdom. In the middle of the lockdown, during one of his television and radio addresses, Mann ki Baat, Modi reminded India's youth of the perils of forgetting India's "strengths and glorious traditions." Modi urged them to return to Ayurvedic practices, popular among some Hindus, to strengthen their immunity against the virus.

## Scapegoating Muslims

The Hinduization of the vocabulary of COVID-19 is also evident in the scapegoating of Muslims as vectors of infection for the virus and the creation of terms such as "corona jihad," "bio jihad," and "thook jihad (spit jihad)." [9]

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai explains that "One of the key features of anti-Muslim sentiment in India for quite a long time has been the idea that Muslims themselves are a kind of infection in the body politic. So there's a kind of affinity between this long-standing image and the new anxieties surrounding coronavirus." [10]

An Islamic convention held in mid March 2020, which had previously been authorized by the Indian government, provided a convenient origin story among police and senior BJP officials for the spread of the pandemic.

Some 8000 members of the Tablighi Jamaat, including several hundred people from abroad, gathered in Delhi for their annual conference. When it emerged that the virus had taken root among attendees, the ruling BJP moved swiftly to quarantine members and their contacts in 15 states. A cash reward was even offered for people to report information on suspected conference goers. . " [11]

Although the ruling party had also authorized other large religious gatherings, BJP political rallies, and conferences in this period, it singled out the Tablighi Jamaat as a source of infection. Notwithstanding the pathetically low rates of testing for the virus, Tablighi Jamaat conference goers were administered the test and results announced in the government's daily briefings, giving the impression that Muslims were the source for the majority of infections.

As economist Saugato Datta points out, "This is basically sampling bias: Since people from this one cluster have been tested at very high rates, and overall testing is low, it is hardly surprising that a large proportion of overall positives is attributed to this cluster." [12]

Sampling bias thus provided false evidence for BJP and government officials to make irresponsible and incendiary pronouncements, claiming the existence of an "Islamic conspiracy" determined to enact "corona terrorism." [13] Senior BJP officials accused members of the Tablighi Jamaat of committing a "Talibani crime," which consisted of launching its membership as "human bombs" in "the guise of coronavirus patients." [14] Some party members even called for Tablighi Jamaat leaders to be shot and hanged as punishment. [15]

In a now familiar routine, social media enthusiastically began spreading hatred; vile hashtags such as "#biojihad," "#coronajihad," and "#TablighiJamaatVirus" began to proliferate on twitter. This was augmented by the circulation of the usual bogus doctored footage of Muslims purporting to spit and sneeze on others in order to spread the virus. [16]

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The Islamophobic social media barrage was accompanied by physical attacks on Muslims rumored to have attended the Tablighi Jamaat Convention, by social and consumer boycotts of Muslim merchants, and by violence directed against Muslims attempting to deliver food aid.

# Kashmir: Militarized Lockdown Time

Since Prime Minister Modi ordered a lockdown of the entire country, the English-language press has laudably published a significant number of articles critiquing this move as an expression of his authoritarianism. These articles have emphasized his exploitation of the pandemic to further marginalize and rid the country of Muslims.

In their critiques, Indian commentators link Modi's lockdown to the BJP's actions in Kashmir last summer. For them, the BJP's strategic experiments have perhaps revealed the illiberalism of India's democracy. Many of these Indians subscribe to what we might call "liberal national time" and track the emergence of Hindu nationalism and the BJP to the 1980s.

However, the history of Hindu authoritarianism in Kashmir is much older. It dates back to 1846 when the British sold Kashmir to Hindu Dogra kings for 7.5 million dollars. In 1947 the Hindu King Hari Singh provisionally acceded the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir to India. Since then India has tried all means possible to deny Kashmiris their right to self-determination, granted to them through several United Nations Security Council resolutions.

Kashmiris realized long ago that India's democratic experiment was from its inception a colossal failure. But the darkest phase of India's rule in Kashmir was inaugurated on August 5, 2019, when India revoked Kashmir's semi-autonomous status.

The Indian COVID-19 lockdown was preceded by the longest ever known military lockdown and communications blackout in Kashmir. During this period people had no access to telephones or internet. They struggled to buy basic medical supplies and stay connected with their family and friends.

Hundreds of mainstream politicians were imprisoned and thousands of Kashmiris, often young boys, were tortured and illegally detained in prisons across India.

While India restored cellular phones and 2G internet connectivity on January 25, 2020, six months after the beginning of the clampdown, Kashmiris continue to be denied high-speed internet. This makes it difficult for medical professionals in Kashmir to tackle the pandemic.

For Kashmiris, in other words, India's big lockdown is neither spectacular nor out of the ordinary; nor is it sudden nor immediate. This lockdown too, like the others preceding it, is experienced as a continuum that merges and fuses with previous moments of curfews and shutdowns.

Just as the virus can be superimposed on other preexisting conditions, making some people more vulnerable than others, so too is the COVID-19 lockdown superimposed on the Indian military's lockdown. As a result Kashmiris are even more at risk of injury and harm. These superimposed lockdowns lose their distinctive characteristics, in part because the regulations and conditions of a military occupation never cease to operate. Their violence too continues unabated.

Kashmiri journalists have tirelessly documented how India's big lockdown has expanded the scale of police and military operations against Kashmiri civilians. Umar, Rauf, and Haroon report that the police's powers have intensified because of the pandemic, with many Kashmiris now being arrested for flouting stay-at-home orders.

The police use a militarized surveillance mechanism to track "Covid Suspects,"(18) while the military has escalated its cordon and search operations in which Indian soldiers drag people out of their homes in routine night raids, destroy their fields, and burn down their houses, rendering many Kashmiri families homeless. [17]

Pandemic lockdowns typically construct homes as safe spaces (a debatable proposition), yet under military occupation the home can become a frightening place.

Violence enters the home through the bullets that penetrate its walls, the soldiers who break down its doors, and the bombs that flatten its rooms, maiming and killing those inside. The proclamation of lockdowns and curfews in the name of maintaining law and order becomes one more way for states to enact terror on those who oppose their presence.

How then do we understand a lockdown order issued by the Indian government in the name of public health in a context like Kashmir where the state's agenda revolves around terrorizing the population rather than protecting it? For Kashmiris, there are no safe spaces under the Indian occupation.

Whether in the streets or in the home, they are targets of state violence manifest in both deliberate acts and apparently accidental ones (such as stray bullets that injure and kill). Such is the character of daily life in a militarized zone with the highest density of troops in the world.

## Time in Stasis

Against the backdrop of authoritarian time (compressed historical time) and Hindu nationalist time (elongated mythic sacred time), Kashmiris continue to live in "lockdown time." Confined to their homes, they experience time as a perpetual present. One day blurs into the next with little to distinguish yesterday from today and from tomorrow.

Lockdown time is time in stasis. Even before the current lockdown, visual representations of time in Kashmir depicted the future as blocked. As cultural critic Deepti Misri points out, Kashmiris experience time as a "listless passage" with "temporal stasis" shaping their daily lives under conditions of military oppression. [18]

In the current lockdown as the occupying regime has scaled up its violent infrastructure, static time makes it even harder to imagine alternative futures. Yet grounds for optimism remain, existing in the very real possibility of an autocratic, occupying state brought down by a virus and its own hubris. The hope for dignity and democracy in Kashmir and India might very well depend on it.

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