

COMMUNALISM

'We Weren't Even Tested': Mystery Over Saharanpur Police's List of COVID-19 Patients Deepens

Police have claimed the list was a 'mistake'. Yet those mentioned in it suspect that they have been made an example of because of their ties to the Tablighi Jamaat.



Representative image of Tablighi Jamaat members walking to get tested for COVID-19. Photo: PTI



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10/APR/2020

New Delhi: On April 4, Saharanpur Police released what it initially claimed was a list of 20 patients of COVID-19, along with their phone numbers.

Among other things, the letter said, “The listed people have been found Corona positive after their tests done in Lucknow... (*sic*)”

The people in the list, however, claim that they have not been tested for coronavirus at all.

When The Wire spoke to Rajiv Kumar, the public relations officer of the Saharanpur SSP, he said, “We have already clarified that it was a mistake on our part. The letter got leaked and some people have unnecessarily made this letter go viral. These are not coronavirus positive cases...they are just close contacts of positive cases.”

But few among these “close contacts” claim that they are being targeted because of a different reason: their close links to the Tablighi Jamaat.

Tausif Irfan, who works as an imam at a mosque in Chandigarh said, “There are 20 names in the list. One name is published twice, so actually it’s a list of 19 people. Out of the 19 people, not one has been tested. However, the letter claims that they have been tested positive in Lucknow. Most people in the list are not even in Uttar Pradesh. I am in Chandigarh, two people are in Kerala, one is in Himachal Pradesh.”

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Tausif's father is a member of the Tablighi Jamat. Tausif says that from Saharanpur, more than 10 people had gone for a Jamaat gathering in Lucknow, including his father.

“In Lucknow, he was taken for testing. Even though he tested negative for the coronavirus, the media showed that these 12 people were “positive cases.” This is not true. My father has been in quarantine since then. I think the names on this list are of the people who have spoken to these 12 people in Lucknow over the phone,” he said.

Tausif points out that a ‘mistake,’ as police has claimed it is, would mean that one or two names in a list had not been tested or tested positive. “How can an entire list be a ‘mistake’?” he asks.

“We are being targeted. They are just trying to defame us and our community. What can we do, the entire country's politics is along religious lines. The police are constantly calling my brother, who is using my old number. Even though he has been in Himachal for over a month now, they are putting pressure on him to confess that he was in Delhi at the Tablighi Jamaat conference, which he wasn't,” he adds.

Nafis Irfan, Tausif's brother, works at a furniture shop in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh. He got a call at 10 pm on the same night when the letter was released. “I got a call from police saying that I have tested positive for coronavirus. They said, ‘You must have contracted it during the Tablighi Jamaat event in Delhi's Nizamuddin.’ I told them, ‘I haven't gone to Delhi, I have been in Himachal for the past 1.5 months.’ They started using abusive language, saying, ‘You'll tell us when the blows rain on you’.”

Nafis's employer is his lone line of recourse now. “The store owner knows that I have been here for the past month. My attendance is marked in his register. The police even

misbehaved with my boss. They said, 'You will also go down with him'. I couldn't sleep the entire night, I was so distressed. My relatives were worried. I was getting too many calls. My father, who went to the congregation in Lucknow, I haven't even met him in nearly 1.5 months."

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Kaleem Ahmad Akhtar, who had returned from pilgrimage to Mecca on March 15, and had been screened at the airport for symptoms, had been cleared by the medical team and sent home. He said, "On April 4, a relative called from Adampur said his name, along with mine, has come out in a list of positive coronavirus cases. He said he is in Dehradun, and has not been tested. Same with me. I was in my village, Tapri, and hadn't been tested in Lucknow as the letter claimed."

He added, "I started getting tonnes of calls from people I knew. People started being scared of me. Because of this fake letter, the milk that went to Saharanpur city from my village has stopped. People aren't buying anything from the village because they think we are infected."

Akhtar has been an active member of Tablighi Jamaat and often joins them in their annual meetings.

Nitin Janak is the only Non-Muslim name that appears on the list. He said, “Our local police station has made it clear to us that it is a mistake. I think my ID card has been misused at the Tablighi Jamaat, and that’s why my name is on that list. Once this COVID-19 is over, we must have an inquiry and find out how my name came in that list.”



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