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# Will get uglier when the lockdown opens: Muslims in Haryana targeted due to COVID-19 rumours

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contact tracing was put in place in several districts across the country. On 3 April, health officials in Ahmedabad isolated a few men who had reportedly attended the Jamaat and placed them in a quarantine facility. The news of the Jamaat cluster has sparked a wave of fake news, misinformation and Islamophobic content across social-media platforms and traditional media. AMIT DAVE/REUTERS

**COVID-19**



(/covid-19)

Around 11 pm on 7 April, Gayur Hasan woke up to the sound of a ruckus outside his house. The 60-year-old man is a resident of Keorak village in the Kaithal district of Haryana, and has an iron and welding workshop, his ancestral trade. He was yet to get his bearings when his son, Ehsaan, told him that their shop was on fire. “My house is 200–250 metres away from my shop,” Hasan told me, and added that by the time he reached there, a lot of his goods had already burned down. It took a while for the fire to be extinguished. Hasan said that on that day, “Under the influence of rumours, some of the younger people of the village set fire to my shop.”

Hasan was referring to the fake news (<https://caravanmagazine.in/media/after-covid-19-outbreak-at-tablighi-jamaat-conference-fake-news-targetting-muslims-abounds>), rumours and conspiracy theories that have been circulating on the internet and in media since 30 March, when news broke out about the cluster of COVID-19 cases linked to the Tablighi Jamaat—an Islamic religious gathering in Delhi’s Nizamuddin locality. As the fake news targeting Muslims for the pandemic spread, there have been an increasing number of attacks on the Muslim community in Haryana. Meet Mann, a social activist with the Zamindara League, an organisation that works on issues of communal harmony among farmers, told me, “If you look at the social-media accounts and WhatsApp of the youth of Haryana, you will see hate messages against Muslims floating everywhere.” In some cases, the local media and politicians have been complicit in the creation or spread of Islamophobic content.

Hasan told me that in all his life he “had never witnessed an incident like this in our village.” He said that he had the full support of the village, and “the parents of the young people who set the fire came to meet me and apologised to me too.” He added that the parents were upset that their “children fell for this hatred.” He told me he believed that the villages of the countryside are peace-loving and share a “spirit of brotherhood.” The support he received from the elders in his village made him feel more secure. As he spoke to me, he kept reiterating the need for trust among the

residents of the village. “Nowadays, because of phones and all the news on them, children fall prey to the hatred spread by the news. I worry about this new generation.” He added, “The people of my generation are still sensible and they are the only reason why I am still here.”

Just a day before the attack on Hasan’s shop, four Muslim men of the Dhatrath village in the state’s Jind district were attacked by their Hindu neighbours. The four men, all brothers— Bashir Khan, Sadiq Khan, Nazir Khan, and Sandeep Khan—were severely injured in the attack and had to be admitted to the Civil Hospital in Jind. Sandeep, the youngest brother, had to be shifted to the Pandit Bhagwat Dayal Sharma Post Graduate Institute of Medical Sciences in the neighbouring district of Rohtak, as his injuries were the worst.

The apparent reason for the attack was that the men had not extinguished the lights in their house at 9 pm the previous night—Prime Minister Narendra Modi had called for all lights to be turned out and candles and diyas to be lit on the night of 5 April, as an act of solidarity in the fight against COVID-19. Bashir told me, “On the night of the fifth, we also lit lamps on our terrace, but only the light outside our house, which is always on at night, was still on.” He added, “Using this as an excuse, some of our neighbours attacked us with weapons in the morning saying, ‘The whole village’s lights were off but these *gaadon*’s lights were on.’” *Gaade* is a derogatory term for the Muslim community. Bashir told me that till date, no one in the village had ever used this slur for them.

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The village panchayat held a meeting on the issue on 11 April. “Whatever happened, it happened,” Bashir said. “The village gathered and assured us that it will never happen again.” He said the attackers also “apologised in front of the whole panchayat and we have also forgiven them.” Bashir told me that since they all live in the village, there was no point to extending the hostilities. “Anyway, we are masons. All our work comes from the village itself, so we have settled on the advice of the village.”

Mann, the activist, told me, “In Haryana, instead of telling people to see corona as a threat, they are being told to see Muslims as a threat. This is why there are continuous attacks on Muslims.” He added, “The people of Haryana should understand that these communal attacks are against the same people who were asked to stay back by our ancestors during Partition, for our own benefit.” Mann explained, “In 1947, when the Muslims were going to Pakistan, our ancestors got together and pleaded with the families not to leave, so that the villages’ social and economic balance could be maintained. All the Muslims were expert craftsmen and every villager needs them all the time. From farming equipment to kitchen utensils, all essential items for households to the farms, is made by their hands.”

“Today, only one or two houses in our villages belong to Muslims, and they are here because our ancestors asked them to stay,” Mann said. “They mostly consist of working castes like blacksmiths, washermen, weavers and oil traders. They are the ones who supply the entire village with tools to harvest crops, they are the masons, they are the ones who dye and wash our clothes, and they are the ones who are engaged in all the technical work. But now we are bent on destroying them after believing rumours.”

Mann told me that some of his friends in the Muslim community, from across villages, have told him that they intend to migrate. He said that he suspects that after this lockdown, most of the Muslim families living in the village will leave and move to smaller towns. Mann said this is also because the anti-Muslim propaganda is being amplified by political voices, too. He mentioned the Bharatiya Janata Party leader, Babita Phogat, who contested the state assembly elections of 2019 from Charkhi Dadri but lost. Phogat, a wrestler who has represented India at the international level, shot to fame as the true-life inspiration for the hugely successful Bollywood film, *Dangal*. Mann said that Phogat’s Twitter timeline is filled with “toxic Islamophobic content.”

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On 2 April

(<https://www.facebook.com/News18Haryana/videos/302040657440414/>),

a few days after the news about the Tablighi Jamaat broke, Phogat took to Twitter and wrote, “*Phaila hoga chamagaadad se tumhare vahaan. Hamaare Hindustaan mein to jaahil suaron se phair raha hai. #nizamuddinidiots*” — Bats may have spread it at yours [China]. But here in Hindustan, ignorant pigs are spreading it. Phogat’s Twitter account has more than four lakh followers. Phogat later defended her Tweet and said, “I have written this tweet only against the attackers on corona fighters and will continue to write.” Twitter later suspended Phogat’s account and she was allowed to come back only after the 2 April tweet was deleted.

However, on 9 April, Phogat once again defended her previous tweet. She tweeted about an [article \(https://bit.ly/3eOL1Lg\)](https://bit.ly/3eOL1Lg) in a local newspaper named *Haribhumi*, along with a clip of the article. The article insinuated that the only positive case in the Charkhi Dadri area was a Muslim man who hid his travel and contact history with the Jamaat, and deliberately infected other villagers. Phogat claimed that this was proof that Muslims were responsible for the pandemic, and that she had been right all along.

The article was soon disproven when the targeted Muslim man tested negative for the virus. The man, whose identity is being withheld for his protection, said he was scared after Phogat’s tweet and refused to say anything further. He has not stepped out of his house in days for fear of getting attacked. Repeated attempts to contact Phogat were rebuffed. On one occasion, her husband, Vivek Suhag, who is also a wrestler, picked up her phone and said, “She cannot talk now.”

Mann told me, “This type of poisoning by Phogat has caused a lot of fear among Muslims living in villages. And because of this fear, now the Muslims are being forced to consider abandoning their birthplaces and uprooting themselves.” Mann was afraid that this would have a dire impact on Haryanvi society.

Inderjeet Sangwan, a social activist from Charkhi Dadri, told me that the Muslim man being targeted by Phogat is “being described as a *Jamaati* and a participant in the conspiracy to spread corona.” He said that the newspaper *Haribhuni*, which is owned by a BJP leader, Abhimanyu Singh Sandhu, is also responsible for spreading this narrative. Sandhu served as a cabinet minister in the previous BJP government in the state. “Journalists are also helping BJP leaders in creating an atmosphere against Muslims,” Sangwan said.

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Sangwan’s allegations against journalists seemed to echo in the nearby district of Rohtak. Sunil Khan, a resident of Rohtak’s Maham town has lodged a case against a journalist named Karmu who works for a digital news channel called Sanskar Kranti ([https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCj\\_ishoiL\\_vmB6y9qVvoXLg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCj_ishoiL_vmB6y9qVvoXLg)). Sunil said that on 8 April, Karmu “went live (<https://www.facebook.com/sansarkranti.in/videos/253464026048420/?sfnsn=wiwspwa&extid=IJVD7oSIIRo8xASs&d=w&vh=e>) on Facebook and told the people that there are *Jamaatis* hiding in my house.” He added, “He also forced the SHO of Maham to search my house.”

Sunil said that after the search was done and the police found nothing, he lodged a complaint against the journalist for “rumour-mongering” that day itself. The police has accepted his complaint and filed a first information report. “I got scared after seeing the comments underneath that video,” Sunil told me. “In the comments, people were talking of teaching a lesson to Muslims. My family members are scared that we will be attacked by a mob.” Sunil, too, said that the people of the area were supporting him. “The Kisan Sabha also issued a statement in my favour.” Karmu told me that his lawyers have prohibited him from speaking to the media about the case.

Sukhwant Singh, a social activist of Maham, told me that “hate-messages against Muslims are continuously being sent on WhatsApp to the youth all

over Haryana.” He added, “Based on these rumours, sometimes there is talk of teaching the Muslims a lesson, sometimes it’s about boycotting the community.” He said that a lot of Muslim families across villages were facing hardships because of the rumours.

He narrated an incident that happened in the Panchkula district, where on 12 April, a Muslim health-worker and her husband were attacked when she was on her way back from work. According to a news report (<https://www.bhaskar.com/local/chandigarh/panchkula/news/staff-nurse-returning-home-after-duty-assaulted-prevented-from-going-to-village-127150958.html>) in *Dainik Bhaskar*, the crowd attacking them asked them to “go to Pakistan,” fight the outbreak there, and refused to let the couple enter their village. Singh said that “despite the lockdown, Muslims were being attacked. When the lockdown is lifted, this hatred is going to show an even uglier face.”

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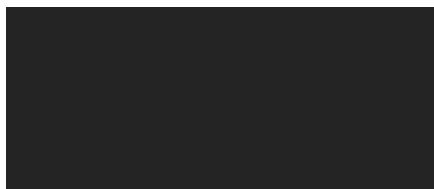
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