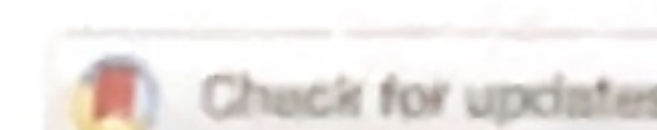ARTICLE

OPEN

Stigma and fear during COVID-19: essentializing religion in an Indian context

Debajyoti Biswas [1✉], Sanjukta Chatterjee [2] & Parvin Sultana [3]

A cursory inquest into the effects of SARS-CoV-2 exposes how easily the ramification of the pandemic has moved over from the physio-social to the psychosocial state of humans all over the world. Derogatory nomenclatures such as 'Chinese-virus' or 'Corona-jihad' can be seen as a part of a disjunctive politics of 'representation' as opposed to 'representing' with a metonymic effect. Such politics violates the protocol on naming new human infectious diseases set by World Health Organization. It also insinuates a long-term socio-political impression on the mental state of an individual or a social group, which may have an emasculating effect on the global solidarity to fight the virus. This calls for a nuanced psychosocial investigation with a specific analysis of how the ensuing stigmatization and fear can aggravate the contagion. With specific reference to the Indian sub-continent, this paper explains the socio-political orientation behind the essentialisation of a religious group that has led to the indictment of the minority community. By using Wagner's theory of essentialisation and Critical Race Theory, this article shall endeavor to explore how media may play a crucial role in stigmatizing communities. Secondly, the paper also argues that the spiraling effect of such ostracisation leads to stigma and fear within the group which is not only dehumanizing but also detrimental to the concerted effort to contain the pandemic.

[1] Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, India. [2] Raiganj University, Raiganj, India. [3] Pramathesh Barua College, Gauhati University, Guwahati, India.
✉email: deb61594@gmail.com

Introduction

Social groups often define and redefine themselves vis-a-vis other groups owing to changing political, economic, and cultural situations (Stangor, 2014). While doing so, groups attribute characters to themselves, as well as to other groups, and believe that these characters are defining (ibid). While this may be seen as a part of socialization, it becomes problematic when negative characters are portrayed as essential attributes of certain groups. The negative portrayal is then used to dehumanize the groups by putting them in an inferior position. Essentialisation however goes on simultaneously at multiple levels according to Wagner and Semati (Holtz et al., 2009; Semati, 2010). Right-wing politics have essentialized such characters of the majority community and differentiated them from others by essentializing certain characters of the 'other' community (Holtz and Wagner, 2008). This differentiation has been reflected in political discourse as well. It has been internalized by certain social groups and also by the larger Indian society to some extent. Social cleavage, be it in lines of religion, caste, or gender, is not new in India. It stays dormant under normal circumstances but becomes prominent at times of social conflicts. During social conflicts, individuals identify themselves with groups they have their affinity with. For example language, religion, caste, and even gender may become a basis of their affinity. Although associations based on identity remains dormant during peacetime, it may take a violent form during the conflict of interest situations. It was witnessed in India during the religious riots, Babri Masjid demolition, Nellie Massacre, Kashmiri Pandit's exodus, and so forth. This fragmentation came to the forefront again during the COVID-19 crisis. Whereas viral diseases are not community-centric, it has been witnessed that by using majoritarian rhetoric, people belonging to lower-income groups, castes, and minority religions are either treated unequally or are implicated as super-spreader of the virus. This prejudice can be understood through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) which reads into the form of hierarchization that enables a hegemonic process to subjugate weaker citizens. Critical Race Theory (CRT) "holds that race and races are products of social thoughts and relations. Not objective, inherent or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2016). Although the phrase "race" is not concurrent in Indian discourse on religious discrimination[1], yet we can deconstruct the inter-community relations through CRT. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the social hierarchies once again, and it became more pronounced in the news aired by print and electronic media on one hand and the narrative generated by politicized groups on the other hand. The caste system (Varna), which was once encoded in the ancient Indian social system based on the vocation of the individual, has gradually become entrenched in the social life of present times. Although the Constitution of India safeguards an individual against all forms of discrimination theoretically, in everyday practice the discriminatory approaches betray its presence in the collective memory. Under such circumstances, the constitutional framework cannot help in changing the belief system that exists in one's mind. It will be interesting to see how that collective memory is revisited again and again through the essentialisation process in conjunction with the role played by the media houses in aggravating the same. India is a country where multiple races have mingled and multiple languages and religions have flourished. Therefore to have a majoritarian view in a democratic country is not only unsettling for the religious minorities but may also have long-term social ramifications.

The recent polarization in India has been supplemented by an assertive religiosity of Muslims, who comprise almost 14% of the population. Here religion became a defining marker of Muslims, who as a community is marked by internal and at times conflicting differences. The negligence of a small group of Muslims, who came together for a religious congregation at New Delhi's Markaz during the last week of February 2020 (Yamunan, 2020; Biswas and Sultana, 2020), was misconstrued into a conspiracy theory. They have been accused of 'Corona-jihad', and as such were reprimanded for spreading the highly contagious disease among the Indians. The ignorance and religious conservatism of *Tablighi Jamaats*, who is also staunchly criticized by other Muslims, was conflated with conspiracy. As a result, the entire community was accused of plotting against the nation. As media continued stressing that the Tablighis comprised 30% of the cases at that level, the entire focus was shifted on criminalizing potentially sick persons. Therefore this paper argues that a nexus of a section of media and some political groups communalized the spread of COVID-19. As a result, crucial aspects of the crisis like medical management, economic relief, and migrant labourers' need were not given enough emphasis. The paper also looks at how media emphasized so much on the religious identity of infected persons that it created an atmosphere of stigma and fear and discouraged many people from disclosing their travel history to Markaz thereby aggravating the contagion further. This diversion, miscommunication, and mistrust amongst stakeholders have worsened the COVID-19 situation. Whereas the need of the hour was to show solidarity amongst nations and communities, there was instead a distrust, politicization, and vilification of communities at a micro and macro level. At a micro level, the inter-community relation within the country was strained, and on a macro level, the relationship between nations was affected. This analytical paper can help in understanding how social groups are essentialized during pandemics by the media and competing groups through news items published in print/electronic media. As essentialisation leads to the rise in stigma and fear among communities, a nuanced approach in deciphering the causes can help us in handling the crisis efficiently in the future. For this purpose, the paper engages theoretical concepts on essentialisation propounded by Wagner and Semati, and Critical Race Theory to analyze social relations and conflicts during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. Although substantial works on how caste and religious politics operate in a majoritarian state have been addressed in works like *On Nationalism* by Romila Thapar, A.G. Noorani and Sadanand Menon, *What the Nation Really Needs to Know: The JNU Nationalism Lectures* edited by Rohit Azad, Janaki Nair, Mohinder Singh, and Mallarika Sinha Roy, *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India* edited by Angana P. Chatterjee, Thomas Blom Hansen and Christopher Jaffrelot, *The Doctor and the Saint* by Arundhati Roy, *Hindutva as Political Monotheism* by Anustup Basu to name a few, yet how the society and media respond to religious politics during pandemics in Indian society has not been addressed systematically. It would help researchers in understanding the function and responsible role of media during pandemics in India. When freedom of the press is extolled in every civilized society, an attempt to use media as an essentializing tool may prove disastrous. This paper takes a look at how media and political groups have used essence during COVID-19 Pandemics. However, the paper is limited to addressing only the news in electronic/Print media. Future researchers may look up how a similar process has taken place in social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter. The paper is divided into five sections: Introduction, Essentialisation of Social Groups, Role of Media in Essentialising Religion, Stigma and Fear during Pandemic, and Conclusion.

Essentialization of social groups

Essentialism is a philosophical premise that entails the theory of 'universals'. Based on Plato's notion of 'ousia', 'essentia' or essence