

# Indian media coverage of Nizamuddin Markaz event during COVID-19 pandemic

Parth Sharma<sup>1</sup> | Abhijit Anand<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Law, University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, Dehradun, India

<sup>2</sup>School of Law, Glocal University, Saharanpur, India

**Correspondence:** Parth Sharma, School of Law, University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, Dehradun, India.

Email: parth.anshu@gmail.com

The corona virus pandemic, apart from being an economic and human tragedy, has affected the socio-fabric of India by increasing hate, xenophobia, and prejudices against minorities. Thus, an analysis of Indian media, with respect to COVID-19 spread, becomes important.

A religious congregation organized by Jammāt e Islami, a global religious organization in Delhi, between March 1 and 21, brought more than 5,000 people from various countries to India's capital. This event led to a major spike in corona cases in India. This gathering was dubbed as potential hotspot by mainstream media in India. The widespread reporting of this news had major implications for inter-communal relations (Hindu–Muslim relations) in India. Given the background, the present paper tries to analyze the media coverage of this mega event and its implications on Indian society. During our review, we analyzed various mainstream newspapers such as *Times of India*, *Indian Express*, *Business Standard*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Hindu*, *The Wire*, and *The Print*.

The “Markaz event” was dubbed by Indian media as a coronavirus hotspot. They reported that the Tablighi Jamaat congregation held in Nizamuddin West, New Delhi from March 1 to 21 has emerged as the epicenter for the spread of coronavirus to different parts of the country. Gupta (2020) writes that the congregation at the Jamaat headquarters in Delhi has been single largest source of infection in Delhi and responsible for two-thirds of COVID-19 cases (total 1,080 out of 1,561 cases) that are being treated. The highest number of COVID-19 cases linked to Jamaat was 325 out of 351 cases. As the *Outlook* reported on April 3, 2020, the total cases linked to Jamaat was 647 in 14 states of India. There were 4291 (29.8%) cases were linked to Jamaat out of 14,378 total cases in India, including that of Tamil Nadu (84%) and Telangana (79%) (Business Standard, 2020; Chandna, 2020; India Today, 2020; NDTV, 2020).

However, there is an issue on “sampling bias.” Daniyal (2020) and Jain (2020) writes that a large proportion of Tablighi attendees were positives because they were tested, whereas overall testing for the rest of India is low. People from other gatherings were neither tested nor traced by authorities, whereas those that went to Tablighi people were visible and vilified.

Here, one needs to ponder if it is justified to label one religious' community as behind the spread of this pandemic. Was the media equally critical of other political and religious congregations held during the same period? Were the lapses of the state in controlling the pandemic were equally highlighted by the media?

Jigeesh (2020) writes that various Muslim scholars have opined that a vast majority of mosques have abided by the government orders and if a few mosques have refrained from doing so, then, the entire community should not be blamed. Soman (2020) noted that like the way that the state machinery has acted in the Nizamuddin event, similar actions should be taken against other gatherings happening at the same time in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, for example, that of the 4,000 Sikh and other pilgrims that were stranded at Vaishno Devi. Mustafa (2020) wrote that transportation was provided to 1,800 people stranded people at Haridwar but was not extended to those in Nizamuddin.

Ali (2020) wrote that reports on COVID-19 were given a communal color on social media and TV channels, with the “Muslim” community demonized. The editorial in Hindustan Times argued that while actions must be taken on the Tablighi Jamaat leadership for violating social distancing rules, blaming Muslim community for this whole episode must be resisted (Hindustan Times, 2020).

The State's handling of the Markaz issue have been quite apparent but was not covered well in the mainstream media, especially on the inability of both Delhi and the central government to prevent the emergence of a coronavirus hotspot (Talukdar, 2020; Yamunan, 2020). There were media reports (Beg, 2020; Bose, 2020; Kaur, 2020) that supported that view. For example, even until March 13, the Ministry of Health had said the coronavirus was “not a health emergency.” India had 81 COVID-19 positive cases at the time and multiple ministries had cautioned the country against panicking.

The ruling party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the its close affiliates, Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS) criticized the organizers of Markaz event while the state filed the First Information Report (FIR) against the head of Tablighi Jamaat, Maulana Saad. The general secretary of RSS, Manmohan Vaidya, criticized Saad for not canceling the Markaz event but hailed RSS for showing responsible and sensible conduct by canceling all its programs till June. A case against the Tablighi Jamaat head Maulana Saad has been registered under The Epidemic Act, 1897 and some other sections of Indian Penal Code, for violating lockdown and organizing social, political, or religious gathering at Nizamuddin (Firstpost, 2020; Kashyap, 2020; Lakhani, 2020; Rashid, 2020; The Tribune, 2020).

It is also important to note that the Delhi government said that hosting a gathering of thousands of people at Nizamuddin Markaz is a criminal act because the Delhi government has already forbidden meetings of more than 200 people (Financial Express, 2020; The Hindu, 2020).

The heightened media coverage of the event had serious ramifications for intercommunal relations in India and could result in increased prejudices against India's largest minorities. Fake news and videos happened to be the most important vehicles of the spread of hate. Sebastian (2020) wrote many old video clips were being circulated that portrayed Muslims spreading coronavirus in India. Among them was a message that reads, “Be careful everyone.... These are some people who are preparing to spread Corona Virus...Please be far from people...Please.”

Various fake news related to Tablighi Jamaat were also reported in the media. Chattopadhyay (2020) gave an account of fake news like Tablighi Jamaat members defecating in open in Uttar Pradesh, a video clip showing a group of people in white robes and skull caps licking the leftovers from plates and spoons, Muslim men sneezing at public places and Muslim workers in Muslim owned restaurants spitting on food that is to be served. This fraudulent news was widely circulated through various social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. According to BOOM, a fact checking website, the entire April was flooded with communally charged fake news (The Indian Express, 2020).

A plea was filed by Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind in the Supreme Court seeking directions for the government to stop dissemination of fake news and take action against some sections of the media to stop spreading communal hatred in relation to the Nizamuddin Markaz issue (News18, 2020; The Times of India, 2020).

To conclude, the media coverage of the Markaz event in Nizamuddin area in New Delhi was demonstrably biased. It put the blame on a religious minority. While indeed the Islamic sect (Tablighi Jamaat) showed their negligence in organizing the event during the pandemic, the administrative failure of the



government was not equally highlighted by the media. This kind of media coverage could help to construct a narrative which portrays Muslims in India in a bad light.

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