

A Viral Education: Scientific Lessons from India's WhatsApp University

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By

We know of allopathy, and homeopathy, but how about [cowpathy](#)? The last is [a line of consumer goods](#) that feature the healing properties of the sacred “Hindu” cow – its urine, dung, and milk. As we face COVID-19, India has seen a resurgence in “Vedic” science. Members of the All India Hindu Mahasabha [symbolically offered](#) a cup of sacred cow urine “gaumutra” to a poster of the coronavirus in order to calm the coronavirus demon. Ceremonies of cow urine drinking as a viral prophylactic ensued, and [some fell seriously ill](#). A government minister, also an oncology surgeon, [promoted cow urine](#) to strengthen immunity. A few weeks earlier, the Department of Science and Technology [called for research proposals](#) for scientific utilization of cow products. The ministry promoting indigenous science and medicine has been very well funded and has itself [been the source of disinformation](#), including the claim that Prince Charles was cured of COVID using Ayurveda. Social media, especially WhatsApp is abuzz with such claims. A deluge of COVID-19 messages with sophisticated infographics traffic with stupendous speed. Many have immersed ourselves in this world, popularly dubbed “WhatsApp University.”

For many, this will seem decidedly anachronistic. But it is grounded in a deep and wide revival of the glories of ancient “Hindu” India, and of “Vedic” sciences as modern sciences. The Prime Minister, [Mr. Modi proclaimed](#) that the presence of the God Ganesha (who has an elephant head) in the Hindu pantheon is proof of plastic surgery in Vedic times. Even Gods need doctors! This seamless blending of the past and present is a striking aspect of contemporary Hindu nationalism. It reveals a deep-seated belief in the lost greatness of an ancient India, a greatness that the Hindutva movement means to reclaim. After all, alongside cowpathy, the nation also boasts a large scientific and technological workforce, an orbiter around Mars, and a nuclear arsenal. To understand India is to understand the contradictions – scientized religion and a religionized science.

This revival of Vedic sciences as modern science is significant. Standard medical knowledge circulates alongside ancient remedies and dangerous pseudoscientific advice – all couched as “scientific.” One sees a widespread and dangerous cohering of Hindu nationalism – from the high

seats of power down to the individual. To illustrate the momentum of Hindu nationalism to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, we focus on two recent speeches by the Prime Minister. When Mr. Modi asked the nation to observe a tactically named one-day “Janata Curfew” (People’s Curfew) on March 22, 2020, he implored Indians to stay home all day, and gather in their balconies and windows at 5 p.m. in order to “Taali, Thali Bajao,” (clap hands and bang metal plates). A relatively innocuous call took a sciento-religious turn on WhatsApp. One popular message discussed its scientific “logic” – since the coronavirus could live only 12 hours in a spot, a 14-hour curfew would break the virus (Figure 1).

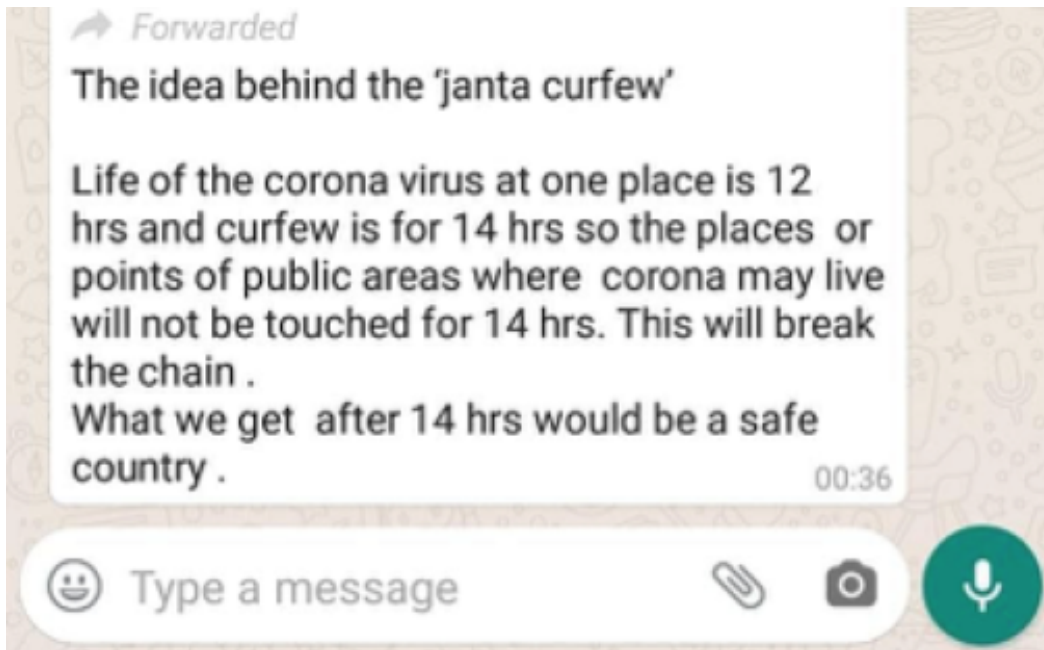


Figure 1: WhatsApp screenshot capture.

Others argued that the “Taali, Thali Bajao,” by over one billion people would create a “sonic effect” to chase the virus. The next day, countless videos joyously chronicled the nationalist spirit. We saw social distancing advisories ignored as people gathered on rooftops and streets. Government ministers [were filmed chanting](#) “Carona Go! Go Carona,” and “Chinese Virus go back.” Hindu chants like the *gayatri mantra* [were broadcast](#) on local sound systems.

The second speech came midway through the 21-day nationwide lockdown, when Mr. Modi addressed the nation again on April 3rd at 9 a.m. for 9 minutes. He asked citizens to show solidarity by turning off all their lights for 9 minutes at 9 p.m. on April 5, and “diya jalao,” i.e., light a lamp (or candle or flashlight). Again, in his address Modi made no allusion the significance of this action. WhatsApp University began churning again, and went to work. Religio-scientific explanations proliferated. These

included claims that Mr. Modi [was following astrology and numerology](#) for the good of the country. He was invoking the ‘Hindu’ spiritual strength of the number 9. The former President of the Indian Medical Association [explained](#) that Mr. Modi was mobilizing the scientific “principle of collective consciousness” to strengthen the ACE2 receptors of the lung.

Enthusiastic use of fireworks [released considerable pollution](#), a curious response to a respiratory viral pandemic. Shutting off the national power grid for 9 minutes [necessitated unprecedented and drastic action](#) by personnel behind the scenes. Following this event, fake images of an India ablaze with lights circulated as authentic “NASA” maps (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Fake/altered satellite image attributed to NASA

Mr. Modi’s cult of personality and his media savviness, and the ruling party’s sophisticated IT cell have created an immense network of enthusiastic and willing citizens. [The willing audience](#) includes the working poor, the rural population as well as affluent and educated elites. In each case above, it is significant that Mr. Modi does not promote any claim himself. Mr. Modi’s speeches are rousing and motivational, but often [opaque and evasive on important details](#) regarding the government’s preparedness and response. Yet an eager public enthusiastically interpreted and circulated his calls into a celebration of Hindu nationalism. The government succeeds through precisely what it does *not* say. It does *not* overtly promote Hinduism, but its vast infrastructure of willing citizens do. It also does *not* overtly denounce sectarianism or anti-minority bigotry, but turns a blind eye to the increase in violence against minorities, especially Muslims and Dalits.

We are fighting a viral pandemic of multiple fronts. The rumor mills and hatred spewed are dangerous and divisive. Science and technology are

being mobilized towards an increasingly authoritarian state – fueling sectarian violence, crushing dissent, arresting writers, and rousing a public in the false security of rampant rumors, disinformation, fake news, and dangerous pseudoscience. Early decisions by the government [have been top-down](#). Mr. Modi imposed a three-week national curfew with a 4-hour notice, leaving millions of migrant workers in India’s informal labor market (80% of India’s workforce) stranded in major cities. For them, [social distancing means “hunger.”](#) The curfew has sometimes been enforced [with great brutality](#). Rather than uniting the country, Hindu nationalists are solidifying their agenda. We have seen a rise in [violence against health care workers](#), frightening [rumors about Muslim businesses](#), [dangers of meat eating](#), and “scientific” cures such as [drinking hot water every 15 minutes](#), [using blow dryers to kill the virus](#), avoiding certain drugs, and [the scarcity of food](#). On April 20, we heard of [a chilling scene](#) of ambulance workers and fellow doctors beaten during the funeral of a colleague because of COVID rumors.

Despite the religio-scientific turn, we have thus far seen little innovation from India’s scientific infrastructure – Western or Vedic. The government has completely towed the line of western epidemiological models – a restrictive lockdown, repressively enforced despite alternate models from epidemiologists and activists from the Global South (including India) that support life *and* livelihood.

There is widespread hope that these months of quarantine will provide quiet reflection for a better future. We take no such comfort. If anything, COVID-19 is consolidating Hindu nationalism in strengthening an authoritarian state and its networks of a willing public.

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